

## Dollakin

Not least of which is the question of what exactly they are paying for.

What the bloody hell is the service they are providing if the purchase was a minimum of 20,000 quarrets?

I can't bear it.

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Lord Stephens says he tracked the beggar-girl, lantern-in, for three days and never found her. She holds the key, I think. I'm not sure.

Lantern-out, we searched (by carriage, thank God) throughout Rhodamkin for a calligrapher who had made the inscribing for the tale, but the entire neighborhood led only to dead ends. Older fellow, retired from the business so he said. The man knew nothing about the story itself. He wrote out what he was told to, and that was an end of it.

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Mr. Davertine is said to be an exaggerator of the first order, but no one disbelieved him when he said the entire elite class had been set afire with fear and anxiety about this Dallakin business.

There were not one gen'lman of the highest rank who had not participated in some fragment of it.

What everyone agreed was, it be excruciatin' not knowing what the devil they were on about.

No one even knew what the *industry* was of which they spoke.

There was not a clue to us in the low steerage of the streets what it was, had all the posh folk in such disarray.

The disappearance of a prized woman?

The arrival and loss of some new pharmacological treasure?

The misplacement of confidential documents for the government or the wealthy?

Wha' was all this turmoil caused by?

It would help had we known what the House Maddic had produced. House Maddic was the top of the heap, as far as the young butler had told us in the pub.

Beneath that was House Dyrranit, which had some kind of wares what were more titilating but dangerous somehow.

Then at least three, perhaps more, other and lesser Houses--and mind you, a capital letter was always implied, along with a capital outlay of hard-earned cash--and these Houses produced inferior but acceptable goods.

Whatever in hell those goods were.

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I cannot take it. I can't stand for it. It's driving me to bloody fits.

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It's not a mystery. It's the mystery of *all* mysteries of *all* time.

I've a better understanding of the damn Sphinx.

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You hear them talking as if it were the message of God given to them somehow. That's what it's bloody like. A message of religious importance.

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You hear them talking about the exorbitant price.

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You hear them say they'd rather die than leave it.

Leave what?

In the name of deity, king and queen, leave *what?*

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Sometimes, they speak as if these are painters--the colors this and the textures that--but at other times, well, I'd swear they're referring to a perfumer: all their senses lit up and tingly, with 'how did he get the scent of lavender in there?' and 'you knew they were having basil soup because of the smell of it...' and all this kind of whatnot.

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Then it's workmanlike, the smoothness of the machinery, the stage mechanism or some such, I can't make head nor tail of it...

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It has to do with women, is what I gather. Beautiful, beautiful women.

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It has to do with some kind of hunting, as in a foxhunt, yes.

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What in the actual hell were they purchasing? For the love of God, what could they be up to?

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Missus, when I arrived at the Manninglong estate, I was put in mind at once that this was an emergency.

So set aside any complaints of my lateness, for I have a tale to tell.

No sooner than I cross the threshhold, right in front of me is Mr. O'Klennis, all cock of the walk with his blue highcoat and six medals.

Seems one Scorrish Yard investigator ain't going to do the trick.

So then comes forth Mr. and Mrs. Manninglong, all sweat and worry into the gaslit parlor, like there been a burglar been about the place. Except it's not a burglar what has them this way.

She already--Mrs. Manninglong, I mean--is murmuring to Mr. O'Klennis and what I catch of it has me right confused.

She says she would trade half her estate to have an understanding of it.

Well, that gots me attention, hasn't it?

And then she says, worse than her and the Mister is their daughter, who to my memory is but the age of 14, and Mrs. Manninglong says she cannot get over the sorrow, the grief of it beyond measure.

Grief of *what* is where I'm going, Missus, have some patience--

Mr. Manninglong offers up that what he remembers of it is looking up at the moon, and seeing that it seemed to have a crack in it.

That's what he says, Missus, just listen--

And I can't make no more out of it than you. So he's grumbling about this, some sort of terrible experience that he has had, and mention of some radiant white cats he's seen in what he calls the brick tunnel.

I looks to Mr. O'Klennis, with his blue highcoat and six medals, and seems to me can't make head nor tail of it, neither.

Both the lady and the gentleman are prattling on at the same time, when I realize there's more noise than what two can generate, and I glance over to see the domestic staff gathered at the hall by the parlor, and they too are prattling on in distress.

I catch one bloke saying, she never should've got on that train-- and the maid says back, what were she to do, the train was the only way, she said-- and yet another says, wasn't anywhere natural that train was going--

So now I've got it in mind, we're talking of an escape of some sort, a missing persons--I'm getting to that, Missus, have some patience--

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"I want to know more about this brick tunnel, why does this keep coming up?"

"It's mentioned by each affected house."

"Yes, and what is it?"

"Tunnel made of brick, sir."

"I can tell that, you dafter! What is its relation to the crime?"

"Crime, sir?"

"Are you people not reporting a crime? Why is there such commotion here? You called for us from Dringsmooth College, said there's all this mystery to put right, what are you calling college students from Dringsmooth here for? From what you

describe, we thought there was a crime of some kind you needed help with. Am I talking for my own good health?"

"No, sir, it's true, sir, there is something amiss but I'm not sure it can be said to be a crime as such. The master thought young people of good minds, as you are, might be of benefit, seeing as our own private house staff has not made much progress..."

"Most of us are engineering students."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you saying this is some damn engineering problem, then?"

"Yes, sir, I reckon it is."

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Lady Erstwood, My Dear Editor:

The reason the story has not been filed yet is *not* due to the incompetence of the typesetters at the newspaper, whatever Mr. Tong has said. He is covering up my lapses.

The reason the story has not been filed is due to the fact we don't know what the story is.

In 12 years of work as a reporter--and I covered the steamgangs incidents in Prennitch and the ensuing government coverup at Whitehall--I have never stumbled on a story so cloaked in mystery, in enigmatic fog.

No one will cooperate.

I am telling you in this letter what I have pieced together but much is needing discovery.

What we have before us is the rumbles of a little army of amateur detectives roaming Mondon from the highwatts to the gutter. Why amateur? Because the wealthy of the city refuse to fully inform the police of what I think is a series of disappearances.

There was a young lady gone missing from a noble home in Naplin Hill.

Now, a second. Ms. Manninglong, barely 17 years of age.

This part of it is simple.

These nobles have pooled their money and hired an eccentric band of college students from an engineering academy to find out where these young women have gone. Leastwise, some of them have done so. Leastwise, this is what I think has happened.

Others have sent out their domestics on a search, and one of the Duke's cousins, who claims some experience if not in detective work then at least knowledge of bloodshed, having been to Jindia in the Imperial Wars.

The first draft of fog and confusion comes in when I try to determine the known facts. I have overheard stable boys and gardeners about the grounds speaking of a series of ruins and artifacts, of wars that I tell you I have never even heard of, of relationships within what I suppose is a nun's convent that are as convoluted as any tale by Trollope or Dickens, and of a recurring image of a brick tunnel, glowing cats and a word that I swear to you no one even understands themselves: Dollakin.

It keeps coming up but I cannot possibly work out the meaning even in context.

I know how all this sounds.

You must at least understand the necessity of more time to fix in place what exactly has transpired.

It appears that the gentlemen involved in the search were experimenting with some kind of service, one which cost them a pretty penny at each go.

It is this service (whatever it is) which is at the heart of the disappearance.

My inclination is to think, forgive the frankness, that they were purchasing some complicated nocturnal displays from fallen women or the like, some sort of sordid pantomime exhibition, and the service houses then took action against them. It's possible they had refused to pay and the daughters were taken as compensation or a threat.

I have to say this is all conjecture.

Please allow me more time to understand.

#### **POSTED SIX DAYS LATER:**

Dearest Editor,

More confusion to whip into the recipe.

The engineering students really are onto some project of machinery which involves the disappearance but I have no intelligence as to how they fit together.

The cousin investigating the Manninglong case has made some sort of progress because he has found someone named S. (a courier?), who is pivotal.

Stand ready for more as I uncover it.

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They did not allow me to connect to the device.

Being new to the household, I was confined to such a degree that no other maid was put in such a pigeonhole.

Some of the staff were allowed to use the instrument alongside the family, owing to the fact, as I understand it, that once you were in the room you could not help but be affected by it.

Mind you, I still to this moment have no clear idea what exactly the machine does.

If you're paying me for my story, though, I'll give it a go: what I observed from the North Hallway, looking into the parlor, was... well, to be honest, the whole goings-on didn't seem like much, sir.

The family was in a circle of chairs around the table. Further out past them, several of the maids was in chairs by the walls, having already served the tea and nighttime sweets and biscuits, and all were gazing sleepily at a glassy lantern on the table.

And that's all there is to it, sir.

It was flickering with life, this lantern, vaguely like flames were dancing in the glass inside of its brass frame, except from my point of view, it was greenish in hue, like a milky bit of absinthe.

They all just kept staring at it like it had hypnotized them, though some closed up their eyes, and there was quite a bit of stirring around the room.

I was too far away to see much more than that.

Is any of this some use to you?

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"I've told these facts to your investigators, Mr. Manninglong, it's all been rather fully addressed. I pay out the funds as you request, and the procedures beyond that are very unclear and purposely veiled in secrecy so that *no one person knows too much about the chain.*"

"Indulge me. Just one more time."

"You want me to repeat to you your very *own* methods of getting the wax?"

"Indulge me."

"Alright. I draft, on your behalf, four bank checks each month. Payment first to the courier to make sure all is done right. Then payment to the calligrapher, who is distinct from the wrapper, who is renumerated as well. The largest disbursal goes to the House. You generally want House Maddic, so the sums are considerable."

"Well, House Maddic is the best."

"So you say, sir."

"What I want is your understanding of what those funds truly are for, and whose hands pass over the merchandise."

"Mr. Manninglong, you are prying at an open box. I've said what there is to know. The courier goes to the House of your choice twice a month, that's all of the commodity that is available, and no one has ever been able to determine where the House is. No one has ever been able to see even the individuals who make the Construction. The courier says the building interior looks rather like a library, and a small slit opens from which is given the Item. So someone gives him the wax coal, and he says--because we pay him for this--it is immediately inscribed upon it by the calligrapher the name of the Experience, and then it's handed to another clerk, who wraps it in that thick parchment paper you're familiar with. Apparently that material is highly important to the affair, and if done improperly, can cause the most serious of issues for the customers."

"You're confident that no one else touches the wax coal?"

"As well as I can be. It's then put into the lantern by you and yours, and then, whatever happens in the Experience...happens."

"Then if there were any... impurities or debasements... in the wax coal..."

"Are you saying it was tainted somehow?"

"I can't say for sure."

"But, Mr. Manninglong, you have me at a complete loss. Your daughter is physically missing, is she not? I mean to say, how could the lantern be responsible for a *physical* disappearance? It's impossible, isn't it?"

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"Not sure it's of any use to you, but I can relate to you the chatter among the household staff and the family--a chatter which Lord Stephens had a tremendous interest in when he took to finding the two young Misses."

"Do tell."

"As a housemaid, I'm privvy to all sorts of discussions. But I can't say as any of them make much sense."

"Perhaps as a trained investigator, I can offer some light."

"Well, after any engagements with the Lantern--a thing of some mystery which I was not allowed to witness--the family tend to gossip intensely about events that do not seem related to our fair city and its folk. Rather they place their attentions on people and scenarios far removed..."

"What sorts of things do you hear them say?"

"They are overwhelmed with curiosity. That's the thing. They cannot possibly believe that they actually saw the Tall Gentleman--which is what they call one of them--and the Graceful Young, which is a lady they know, actually come together in a kiss."

"They discuss a romantic entanglement?"

"No, not only that sir. On other occasions, I hear them say, 'but what could the Changeling Fox know that isn't already known by Barn Owl Clive?' It's as if they've knowledge of talking animals involved in all sorts of whatnot. It's quite silly, I suppose, but *they* don't act like it is. And the maids who've been here longest, like family, they whisper about what the lantern has shown them. 'Cause the owners let them maids participate. I've heard the gals arguing about two Brinnish soldiers they saw kill a man in the Lantern

shows, and about an imposing lady who figures out mysteries, about to catch them. These maids, I tell you, they were close to death with the suspense of how one thing could lead to another--it was like a story, like Dickens, Little Nell, but they way they behaved, it was of such great consequence to them, you would think their own lives was at risk, sir."

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I'm the investigator hired by the Pruett family whose daughter has also gone missing. I don't believe there's much the Manninglong family can add to what we already know.

We were in touch with a man who worked as a calligrapher for one of the Engineering Houses. We found him from the loose tongue of his wife, who spoke to a dress shop clerk, who heardtell of our reward money for anyone hearing about the Experiences or who knew of the disappearance of young Ms. Pruett.

At any rate, when we got to him, the calligrapher could only tell us that he was a simple clerk who inscribed the titles of the Experiences on to these mysterious wax blocks, and that he knew nothing more. The Houses get paid very well, and House Maddic believes patrons expect beautiful work through and through. So the wax is inscribed, wrapped in elegant paper, and hand delivered to the paying residences.

He refuses to disclose how he gets to his place of work.

This is where I believe various inducements can be put to use, and I need permission to go... shall we say, a bit further... so that he might speak... if money is not productive to finding where House Maddic is located.

I believe you know what I am intimating.

Thank you.

That is all that I required.

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Mr. Pruett:

We share a similar problem, one unique in all of Mondon, and perhaps in the world. This alone should induce a fellowship between us.

I understand you are possessed of the notion that joining forces will be fruitless, and that we are doubly productive when working apart. I've heard you have some completely invented suspicion that if one of us prospers, the other may falter somehow. Your perspective is dangerous to both of us.

Let us come together and bring our daughters home.

To that end, let me share some of our collected information.

We now know that we have caused the Houses some consternation. We are not searching alone for our daughters. House Maddic, House Challisworth, and House Jollen have all employed their own search parties. Only House Dyrannit failed to do so. You know of their reputation for dark ideas; one can only assume such inventions come from dark authors, whose moods are inscrutable.

We have found that the wax used by House Maddic for both lanterns was slightly unusual, that it took longer than is typical for them to manufacture, that it smelled differently, but what can be deduced from that is unclear.

We also found that the brick tunnel seen by so many in the Experiences is nothing more than a common vision created as a transition in stories, and there is nothing to be learned from it except that House Maddic is generally impeccably consistent.

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Mr. Manninglong:

I appreciate your continued exchange of ideas in this matter.

Our side has uncovered something this week of great interest.

Perhaps your hires can assist in understanding it all. The investigators we employed stated that in attempting to get a courier's assistance in locating House Maddic, they are now more confounded than ever.

Upon following the courier through Mondon's winding back alleys and chimney-smoked train bridges, there *was* no House Maddic.

The courier himself confessed to being shocked.

He said that each day the path is a different one, as if the House itself moves around in the city and yet when he has business with them, he somehow knows the way. He claims that he doesn't understand how the Houses cloak themselves, but he would try again the next day.

The next day we all did locate House Maddic--but only for a moment. Fog and smoke swept in from the surrounding streets, and the building's business features--signs, window wares of odd machines, double door grand entrance--all were gone, and a worn-out old building stood in its place.

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"As engineering students--"

"I can stop you right there, young man, as we've had this conversation before. Your interest in the machinery itself is understandable but quite beyond what we can provide, and what we are interested in."

"If you'd let me finish: as engineering students, we see things in rather rock-solid terms, and we believe we have a solution as to what happened to your daughters."

"Well, out with it, then."

"There was nothing whatsoever amiss with the Lanterns beyond their existence, which was quite a mystery to us until the girls went missing."

"So, then?"

"So, Mr. Manninglong, Mr. Pruett: we from the college believe that... the search for an answer inside the mindstate of the device, lantern-in as you say, is a complete and total red herring. As you travel through the various lantern-stories, pursuing this person or that person in the narrative in your minds, you may or may not be amused and engaged, but it will not help you find your children."

"What will?"

"What will is this... and it is a delicate matter... but we have surmised that neither the astonishing engineering of the lanterns, nor the wax they consume, are to blame for the girls vanishing. Instead, we believe... Sorry, I need to clear my throat... we believe the girls used the occasion of the lantern use, and the stupor of the crowd in the parlor, to... well, to sneak off and away from the houses. Physically. While everyone was... incapacitated, half-asleep."

They then met up together. And took a train out of Mondon."

"I think the shocked silence in this room conveys the general mood."

"You young gentlemen... you say the daughters met up together..."

"That is our informed view. The girls did not escape the confines of reality. They simply escaped your ability to monitor them. They ran off, sir."

"Why?"

"Because... they wanted to be together."

"Be together? I fail to see why they could not simply... could not just... ah."

"You boys aren't serious with these allegations."

"With all due respect to everyone present, we may be students, but we are scientists, really, and the emotional elements in play here are really not our purview..."

...We believe the girls can be found--together--with a conventional police questioning outside Mondon along the railway line, and we are rather now distracted with the fantastic possibilities of these lanterns heretofore unknown to us...

...Honestly, gentleman, if you really want to expand your fortunes, you could do no better than introduce these devices to every home in the country and perhaps the world. It's all a question of where that wax comes from, and who exactly it is that turns it into an Experience. Hire those chaps away, and you're well on your way to forging your own empire..."

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Mr. Manninglong:

It is a great pleasure to learn of your daughter's return just as I was relieved to find our own beloved Margaret back in the fold.

Their chatter earlier about a train should have been clue enough there was a plot unfolding. I apologize for my lack of acuity. The fractured moon, lantern-in, and the beggar girl were all for naught. The mystery unfolded lantern-out as it so happened. All in front of our noses, really.

Naturally, we will have to take care that the nature of their relationship remain a matter of discretion, though their disappearance into the countryside together cannot go undiscussed.

This letter is meant to address a related but somewhat different concern.

The nature of our quiet evening Experiences is now circulating as a subject of gossip in the city and can no longer, I fear, be restrained from public view.

The engineering students will not relent. They want in to this business.

House Maddic has been contacted.

Whoever runs the establishment has expressed distaste for the notion.

His letter was unsigned.

It is generally observed by the Houses that most of us simply do not understand the expense and difficulty of generating the wax coal, imbuing it with its properties, and getting it to the lanterns, which are, in and of themselves, difficult to manufacture.

I have at least learned that the wax is mined by workers in very remote regions in Chinesse Province and the Basian area of the South. It is done in caves by ethnic laborers with no real understanding of what the wax coal really is, or what danger it poses to those who dig for it.

A question strikes one's mind, that with perhaps two or more investors (of such stature in society as we possess, one modestly points out), could the Houses be made to see the larger public interest?

I await your response.

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**If I were to tell you** that four years ago two young women went missing in Mondon, and the result was this, I do believe you'd throw my miserable self out on the street as a laughingstock.

Ol' Mr. Hollisfrey, enforcer of public order, and absolute madman, that's what you'd say of me.

Yet here we are.

I put it to you that lanterns is the foremost business venture of the Empire.

At this point in time, there's hardly a soul in the city that doesn't depend on it.

Fact of it is, opium was of *less* diversionary value. 'Course, problem there was scarcity, and now, with all Houses operating at full business capacity...scarcity has heretofore not been a problem in the Lantern trade.

Lanterns are the subject of constant con-ver-sa-tion, sir, even when not in use. They obsess all of us, these stories of ours. There's even misinformation sent about, causing all fuss and confusion, political unrest, stuff and nonsense about the stories mirroring reality. Why, there's scarcely a human life on this earth, not been touched by this new engineering entwining itself in our lives, eh?

You got the home Lanterns, you got the cheap pub and cafe Lanterns for the commonfolk, and I don't know if you've seen it, but some of them young fellows go 'round with smaller ones and watch them in the alleways, mobile-like.

It's like an epidemic, what it is.

The city's gone quiet. People stay in their homes, roaming wildly afar, Lantern-in, engaged in this, that, and the other--dark, beautiful, comical, weird--anything you can imagine, the storyweavers at the Houses can find your pleasure. No reason to leave your door anymore, I suppose.

It's entire worlds people enter into. It's characters they fall in love with, people who become like part of their families.

And to be able to speak with those characters, and aid in their adventures and toils and troubles, well, it's rather mind boggling how it's all done, if there were anyone who cared how the magic is put forth, you know?

What I'm driving at it is, it's a thing of measurable monetary value.

And if you're honest with yourself, Mr. Manninglong, you know well that I have made it possible in large part by bringing along those wax miners in the Far Reaches who tried to unionize, modernize, and run riot about your very own livelihood.

Yes, the army did its part. They put down them rioters in the Jindian mines and in Basia. But they did so at my behest and after my careful infiltration of those workers, exposing the rabble-rousers as what they were.

We got the Lanterns lit, as they say--but I was instru-men-tal. Yes, I was, sir.

Now, what we have sparking up around here in Mondon is not so much the unskilled labor but rather the skilled va-rie-ty, if you catch my meaning.

When the waxworks is delivered, the authors do their unknown engineering, all in secret, no one understanding it, no one else knowing the work of it--why, we had to ratchet up the pressure just to get them Artisans to take up apprentices for looking ahead to the future.

Yes, I take your point, that's under control, but I'm not just looking to get myself a raise in wages, sir. Isn't that the malady of the moment in this

town, eh?

No, sir, my point is more targeted and par-ticular, sir.

The difficulty you're about to face in the Lantern trade has to do with them authors in the various Houses doing something never before thought of due to the natural heightened competition in the en-ter-prise. They're considering collab-oratin', sir, and not on a tale of tales to satisfy the audience's appetites.

They're looking to form an Artisan's Union.

They're looking to raise prices sky-high and goodbye, sir.

Every single aspect of our way of life and leisure is threatened now.

Yes, I know you know this, sir, but as I say, my point is targeted and particular: there is but one man who is stoking all this resentment and fire within the Houses' mysterious artistic community.

In specifics: young Mr. Ladamir Vosky, the artist of artists, there in House Dyrannic.

He is a radical, sir.

He is not after higher payments for himself and his like.

He is after control of the industry totally by Artisans alone.

Cut out the middleman, says he, even though you and I both know, he and his type are not out there mining the neural wax on their own coin, are they? They require you and your wealthy patrons. So he's got some nerve.

Nevertheless, I do believe unless we can get him--unless *I* can get him, and at a proper rate for my services--to somehow back off on his challenges to the Houses... well, I fear the worst for all of us.

Yes, lordship, I certainly see the delicacy of the situation.

This Vosky, he is a prized waxmaker. I know that. His stories are... well, a bit more involving, a bit more filled with darkness and wonderment... I understand that, sir. And as an added issue, he has the whole city and soon to be the whole world wrapped up in this current storyline of his, *Train to the Mysterious Mountain*.

No one wants to see that come to an end, unfinished.

But a careful operator, someone who can persuade and cajole, might be able to get Vosky to back down on his worker's rhetoric without angering

him into a worker's strike.

Or worse yet, abandoning his work altogether.

So I say: send me out there to do my work, sir.

It has never been so urgent.

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Artisans:

We few who are gathered in this room understand what few others do.

*We* know the secrets.

We mold the wax.

We sit over our stitching machines and tag the wax, and dream, and invent, and imbue this substance with a... well, I'm willing to say it, a kind of engineering magic, for lack of a better term.

We mold the wax.

Such a humble term for what we are really all about.

We are stage-setters for another world entire.

And yet, do we live well?

Do you have as much leisure as you generate for others?

Do you spend time in the waxworlds of your creation to your own satisfaction?

Or do you labor endlessly, tinkering and tacking about, for others, while some taskmaster cracks his whip above your head?

I am no different than you.

This is me, Ladimir Vosky, the artist of artists so they say, and I'm no different.

I have scarcely a penny more than you, and no time to spend it if

it were in my hand.

What are we going to do about that.

Now--you who are imaginative should above all be able to see what is coming--we can envision together a future in which we are understood to be the godlike beings that we really are.

Do not laugh, comrades, as we have come so far in our secretive profession that perhaps you do not understand what appeal our work holds.

The universal desire to be told a story that mesmerizes, *that* is our gold.

And the armies of this nation have fought fiercer for this than they have for gold.

Opium should have this much strength!

It was for us they went to the Far Reaches and put down the miner's strikes.

It was because of us the miners and Far Reachers began contemplating an invasion of our lands, too. Don't tell me you didn't hear of the Basian plot to addict the people here to Lanternlight so the foreigners could move in and exact revenge for our nation's colonizations?

Even you young ones, Mr. Basslie, Mr. Tomiguez, even you know some old-timers who speak of the Imperial Wars, and they speak of the Far Reach War with just as much fear and worry, do they not?

Fear and worry that was warranted, is it not so?

All of this caused by us--but us in no control of it, and us having no bit of play in the waves of money rolling in for it.

But that's going to change.

That's all going to change, my fellow Artisans.

Right now, tonight, there is a reckoning unfolding across this city.

You are familiar with my famous tale of the enigmatic train and its journey up that mysterious mountain, I am sure. You are

acquainted with its endless odd passageways, the many characters aboard with their romance and skullduggery, and the deliberately-withheld nature of the mountain village... but tonight's Lanternwork is going to take it so much further.

I don't wish to scare you, but to be quite honest, there is something--you've all felt it--quite unnatural and unexplained about the wax, so-called, and since I have worked with it so long, I can tell you with expertise that I do not sleep well knowing its powers are yet unknown.

Do not share this outside this room, but the fact is, my characters, and my world does genuinely seem to be animated in directions not of my making.

It's not that they have a mind of their own.

Of course they do, that's the point. We create them, and off they go.

But some of them, I fear to say, appear to be operated by someone behind the curtain, behind the veil, someone with malicious intentions.

Have you not experienced this?

Why is it all of us know the term Dollakin, but do not know where it came from, or what it means, or why we are compelled to put the word into our work? Will we ever know its origin? Will we ever know why we are gifted with these skills, and then compelled strongly for some reason to seek out a way to use them?

As if someone, or the substance itself, was molding us, rather than the other way 'round?

No one comprehends its power. We are using something no one understands.

This sort of feeling needs investigating, but far be it from the House Lords to give us the time and money to examine what may be motivating us, or our characters, or to do deeper experiments on the waxworks.

They care only about coin. And we get little enough of our share of the quarrets.

But that is going to change.

I am in contact with the other Houses--with the artisans there, the Greats, like Sibellian, Quaaymore, and young Dammanis.

They know already what I am about to tell you, what is about to unfold.

Tonight the people of the city are going to enter our stories and quietly the Lantern is going to be doing new work within them. It will be lacing a kind of opiate into their systems through nothing more than light and shadow.

I have engineered an addiction.

It is now a part of all processes that give the Lantern its power.

My own story will be one of Apocalypse and world destruction, of desperation and heroism, and the loss of all losses, of everything.

Your stories are your own, could be about anything. But they are all chained together now.

And when the stories build--about to come to an end, about to resolve all the questions--then the people will awaken.

They will find they would do most anything to see the ending of the story.

And pay most any price.

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Mr. Vosky walked that night through a dead-quiet Mondon.

He did not know it but he passed a house in which an obsessed young woman reclined in a chaise, sleeping restlessly while the uneasy burning of the Lantern cast the room in flickering absinthe green.

Mr. Vosky continued walking.

In the house, the young woman was deep in the constructed dream, in conversation with a pleasant gent in an imagined train parlor car, all as a result of the Lantern's work.

And thus she had no awareness, nor would she for days, of the infant that in reality had died at her feet from negligence and want, one of perhaps many in that city, that night, that way.

The End.