



## Black Dog

I had just started in the debt-collecting business when my boss called me to his office. It was December 23rd: there was no one else left in the building. Outside a handful of carollers sang ancient songs in the fog.

‘I’ve heard good things about you, boy,’ said my boss, eyeing me over his polished desk. ‘They say nothing scares you. You can get money off *anyone* without breaking a sweat!’

It was true – I had worked hard to earn my reputation. When people are frightened of you, they hand over their money much faster.

‘That’s exactly what I need for this next job,’ said my boss, leaning back in his chair. ‘It’s a tough one – *very* tough, in fact. Normally I wouldn’t ask someone so new to take it on, but all my best men are gone for the holidays.’ He thumped a fist on the desk. ‘Damn Christmas! You don’t have any plans, do you?’

I was going to spend Christmas Day in my bedsit, poisoning the rats. ‘Nothing I can’t change, sir.’

My boss nodded approvingly. ‘Good to hear it! We’ll put you on the next train up north before the railway shuts down for Christmas. You’ll be on the coast by tomorrow morning!’

I was confused. ‘Coast, sir?’

My boss turned to the window. I could see his face in the reflection, peering out the fog.

‘One of our oldest clients died last year. He owed us *thousands* – we’ve been trying to claim back what we can. We’re selling off all his assets, but we’re having trouble getting rid of one of the islands he owns – goes by the name of Cu Sith. Ever heard of it?’

I shook my head.

‘Of course you haven’t!’ My boss laughed. ‘No one has – thirty miles off the cold north coast and nothing but water on every side as far as the eye can see. No streets, no trees . . . they don’t even have electricity, so far as I can tell. There’s only one family left, but it seems no one wants to buy the island while they’re still on it.’ He shuddered. ‘I’ve seen pictures of that godforsaken place. Why anyone would choose to live there is a mystery to me.’

He started organising some papers.

‘I need you to travel to Cu Sith and evict the family straightaway – threaten them with

some made-up legal action, that sort of thing. Afterwards you'll have to stay on the island for a few days to make sure they don't attempt to sneak back in the house. I'll send a couple more men up on Boxing Day when the trains start running.' He glanced at me. 'Sure you don't mind spending Christmas alone?'

I shook my head. 'I won't let you down, sir.' My boss gave me a look.

'Glad to see such enthusiasm. But be careful, boy – I doubt that family will take kindly to being kicked off their island on Christmas Eve. That far out in the middle of nowhere . . . well, no one will be around to help you if things turn nasty, let me put it that way.'

Within the hour I was on the last train up north. It was deepest midwinter and a chilling fog clawed through the windows, turning the carriage into an icebox. The darkness outside grew thicker and heavier with every mile.



I let the carriage rattle me back and forth and prepared for what was ahead of me. I tried to imagine Cu Sith – was it really as bad as my boss described? Should I have been more afraid?

I clutched the revolver in my pocket. Normally I would never have taken it out of my bedsit – but something about the look on my boss's face when he talked about the family had made me think twice about what I was getting into.



I arrived at the north coast early on Christmas Eve, and headed straight to the harbour. It was a small fishing village, and desperately poor.

*Perfect, I thought. That means more people willing to take me out at a moment's notice. I might even be able to short-change them!*

But I was wrong. No one – absolutely no one – was willing to go to Cu Sith, no matter



how much money I offered. At the first mention of the island the fishermen would stop the conversation.

‘No – we’ve got no business going there. And neither should you, if you know what’s good for you.’

Then they would simply turn away. Nothing I could say would make them start talking to me again – it was like I was already dead.

Finally, just when I was about to give up, a young fisherman came over to me.

‘They say you want to get to Cu Sith,’ he said.

My eyes lit up. ‘Yes! Can you take me?’

The fisherman looked at me warily.

‘What are you wanting with . . . that place?’

I shifted on my feet. Something about the way he said ‘that place’ unnerved me.

‘I have business with the family,’ I

explained. 'I need to get there straightaway. I'll pay you handsomely for it.'

I showed him my full money clip. It was far more than I'd intended to pay, but at this point I was desperate. This young fisherman might well be the only person left who was willing to make the journey. I couldn't let him get away.

The fisherman looked at the money, his face torn. 'I-I'll take you. But we'll have to leave right away. There's a storm coming - I want to be back before it hits.'

'You could always stay on Cu Sith till it passes,' I suggested.

I'll never forget the look on the man's face when I said it. Without another word, he turned round and walked away.

We left immediately. Despite the approaching storm it was a calm morning, and the sea was as flat as glass as we sped out of the harbour. A winter sunrise had filled the sky

behind us, sparkling on the waves like angels. I watched the mainland slip away for what felt like hours, amazed by how beautiful it was.

In fact I was so transfixed that when the fisherman finally spoke it made me jump.

‘Up ahead.’

I turned round – and was shocked by what I saw. The beautiful weather stopped instantly. The sky ahead was as grey as an unmarked gravestone: a blizzard covered the ocean as far as the eye could see. The waves reared up like dogs.

Cu Sith.

I could just make it out through the snow. It was as flat and grey as the sky: a patch of barren rock lashed by sea winds. It looked like the sun had never once shone on it.

‘People *live* here?’ I said in disbelief.

The fisherman nodded gravely and pointed to the only house on the island. It was little

more than a box, the same colour as the stones it stood on, dotted with grim little windows. But bigger than I expected – much bigger. Three whole floors above the ground, with an enormous chimney on the roof.

‘Good grief,’ I said. ‘It looks more like a church.’

The fisherman scuffed his feet beside me. I got the feeling – not for the first time – that there was something he was desperate to ask me. It might well have been the only reason he agreed to take me on the journey in the first place.

‘Sir – forgive me for asking, but what business do you have here? What could you possibly want with those . . . people?’

I sighed. It was time to tell him the truth.

‘You know the family that lives here?’

The fisherman’s eyes darkened. ‘We all know them, sir.’

I picked up my briefcase. ‘Well, I work for a company which owns Cu Sith. I’ve been asked to evict the family – that means ‘kick them out’ – and make sure they stay out. I’ll be staying in the house by myself until my colleagues arrive on Boxing Day morning. In fact – I have another job for you, if you’re interested.’

I pulled another wad of banknotes from my briefcase, even bigger than the last one.

‘I need to get the family off the island as quickly as possible. If you take them back to the mainland for me, I’ll pay you treble what you’ve earned already. So long as you don’t mind waiting here for a little bit, I . . .’

I trailed off. The fisherman had turned ghost-white – he was practically shaking. Without another word he threw the anchor overboard and heaved a plank of sodden wood between the rocks and the boat.

‘No – not interested!’ he cried. ‘You need to go – storm’s coming!’

I was shocked by the sudden change in his manner. ‘I can offer you more if—’

‘NO!’

For a moment, I genuinely thought he was going to strike me. I picked up my things and scurried across the plank as quick as I could. The fisherman sped away without so much as a glance behind him.

I watched him go, stunned. He had been terrified – genuinely terrified. The suggestion of being anywhere *near* that family was enough to send him running.

And now I was alone with them.

I faced the giant house – and felt a clutch at my chest.

They were there, standing outside. Waiting for me.

I had never seen anything quite like them.

There were six in total – a husband, a wife and four children. Clothed in rags, sick and dirty. Above all, they looked hungry – *starving*.

That wasn't the strangest thing about them. Their skin, their clothes, their eyes: they were all the same colour as the island. The dull, grey of ash and decay. The only exception was their lips: they were a bright, vivid red, like a deep slash in the middle of their faces.

I wanted to run. I wanted to swim my way back to the mainland – but I knew I couldn't. The blizzard was coming thick and fast. I had to stand my ground and get the family off the island, quick. I gripped the revolver in my pocket, wrapped my coat and scarf tight around me, and made my way to the house.

Every footstep on the snow was like a gunshot – *crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch* – echoing out around me with impossible

loudness. It seemed like it was the only sound in the world. The family stared at me in blank silence the whole time – no hatred, no curiosity, watching as I drew closer and closer.

Finally I stood in front of them. The father was a giant: twice my size at least. His blood-red mouth hung open. He had no teeth.

‘What do you want?’ he growled.

I cleared my throat. I couldn’t look afraid – not now.

‘I’m from a debt collection agency,’ I said. ‘We own the rights to Cu Sith and all the property on it – including your house. I have all the paperwork right here.’

I considered taking a sheet out of my briefcase to show them – but changed my mind. I had no idea if the family could even read.

‘You need to leave the island immediately,’ I said. ‘You will show me inside the house, hand

over the keys, and never return. From now on, all your property inside it belongs to the agency. Any refusal to leave will result in your immediate arrest, and . . . and . . .’

The idiocy of what I was saying to them suddenly struck me. This family may never even have seen a police officer before – what would they care about a court of law? It was me against six of them – even with the revolver, I wouldn’t stand a chance if they attacked me. No wonder the fisherman had refused to stay – I was clearly in over my head. The handle of the gun felt wet and sticky in my hand.

Then – just like that – the father pushed his youngest boy forward.

‘You heard the man, John. Show him inside.’

I was shocked. I had expected refusal – shouting – violence. Not this.

‘Really? You’re sure you don’t mind leaving so—’

‘Be quick, John,’ said the father, cutting me off. ‘We have to leave before it gets dark.’

John wordlessly took my hand and led me to the door. It was as simple as that – like they *wanted* me to take the island off them. I took one last, confused glance at the family – they stood exactly where I’d left them on the snow, watching me in silence like ghosts.

I let John lead me through the house, room by room. Inside was even worse than I’d expected. The house had been built to withstand sea winds and brutal winters: there was no room for comfort here. The corners of every room were stagnant with filth, and every surface was covered in a film of grimy sea salt.

I gazed at the cramped, dingy rooms in disgust. The thought of spending two days

by myself here was becoming less and less appealing by the second. Just as my boss had said, there was no electricity or running water. They didn't even have a fireplace in the—

I stopped.

'Where's the fireplace?'

The boy blinked. 'We don't have a fireplace.'

I fixed him with a look.

'John – you're lying to me. There's an enormous chimney on the roof. That means there *must* be a fireplace somewhere. Where is it?'

John looked petrified. I grinned – I'd struck gold.

'Are your family hiding something from me, John?'

It all made sense now. No wonder the family had been so unconcerned about leaving – they had everything stashed in a



secret room somewhere! If there *was* anything valuable hidden here, I couldn't let them sneak back in and take it while I slept. Hand a secret stash of riches over to the boss, and a promotion was as good as mine. I knelt down in front of John and pulled a sparkling penny out my pocket.

'John, show me where the fireplace is and this coin is yours.'

The boy's eyes lit up. He glanced over his shoulder – as if he could see his family watching him through the wall.



'There's ... a basement,' he said quietly. 'But we're not supposed to go down there.'

He reached out to take the coin, but I snatched it away.

'Show me.'

John couldn't refuse. He led me to a back room and opened a door. At first, it seemed like an ordinary closet – but as John moved





aside some boxes, I realised that there was another door hidden at the back, locked tight with five massive bolts. John swung the door open, revealing a set of cold stone steps that led down into darkness.

I didn't waste a moment. I pushed John aside and tore down the stairs, expecting to see heaps of shipwrecked riches . . . but there was nothing. The room was an empty square. Nothing but four stone walls and a pounded-dirt floor.



'There's the fireplace,' said John.



As if I could miss it – it took up the entire end wall. It was made of grey stone and decorated with straw figures, hammered into the stone with iron nails.

'Christmas decorations?' I smirked. 'Not exactly the most festive room, is it John?'

I stepped closer to the decorations and pulled one off the wall. It was filthy – like

it'd been made years ago. In fact, the more I looked at it the more it seemed—

I gagged. This was no Christmas decoration – there were human teeth in it. Bits of fingernail, too. I threw it into the fireplace in horror.

‘What the hell are these? Why have you hung them above a fireplace in an empty—’

I stopped. I had just seen the inside of the fireplace. The stone was scorched black. It was covered in nail marks.

‘They’re not for us,’ said John. ‘They’re for Black Dog.’

I blinked. *‘Black Dog?’*

‘Black Dog that comes down the chimney.’

That was it. He just kept staring at me, as if what he said made complete sense. I kept my breath held for what felt like a very long time. I realised that I was afraid to ask the question.

‘John ... are your family *really* the only people on this island?’

‘JOHN!’

The shout came from outside – the father. John turned white and bolted back up the stairs before I could stop him. His family were exactly where we had left them – they hadn’t moved an inch. I caught the boy just before he flew out the front door.

‘John,’ I whispered. ‘What’s going on? What are you hiding from me?’

‘I ... I can’t tell you!’

He was terrified – just like the fisherman. I gripped his arm tight.

‘John, you *have* to tell me what’s going on. Am I safe here tonight?’

The boy swallowed, his eyes darting back outside. ‘You ... you’re really going to stay in the house? By yourself?’

I nodded. John turned to the door, his face

✦

torn. Finally he leaned forward and hissed in my ear.

*'You have to lock the door. Lock it tight so nothing gets in. If you don't, then—'*

'JOHN!'

John flew out without another word. I watched in shock as he rejoined the family and the six of them walked away from the house. They kept their gaze fixed on the wide, grey sea ahead. Only John turned to look back at me – just once. I could see pure terror in the whites of his eyes.

I closed the door . . . and only then allowed myself to become frightened. I had no idea what I had let myself in for – but John's message was clear. I wasn't safe. The family – or someone else – were going to come back in the night and get me. I probably had a few hours of daylight left before the island turned dark. Before then, I had to turn the house into a fortress.



I locked the door, just like John had said, and piled every piece of furniture I could find against it. I broke apart the table and nailed the wood over the windows. I barricaded the bottom of the staircase with wooden chairs, boxes, benches – anything that might work as an obstacle – then holed myself up in the main bedroom at the top of the house.



I chose this room for one reason alone: it had two windows facing in different directions over the island. If anyone approached the house, it was my best chance to see them – I could even fire a warning shot out of the window and scare them away. The rest of the room was as barren and unpleasant as you would expect: a filthy bed piled high with rags in one corner, and a wall covered in great cracks from floor to ceiling. Behind it lay the great chimneypiece which ran from the basement to the roof: I could hear the



wind whine through it as the blizzard grew closer.

I broke apart the bed and hammered the boards over the window frames, so that only the thinnest of grey lights could seep into the room. Before I had finished it, the snow had started to fall, hard. Wrapping myself in every blanket I could find I sank into a corner and watched the last dregs of sunlight die over Cu Sith.

I have no idea how long I sat there, watching and waiting. The room had a clock, but the hands had fallen off long ago – all it gave me was the slow, steady tock of unravelling time. Soon the dull grey of the blizzard faded into a crippling blackness – and when it did, the room became cold. *Deathly* cold.

I set to work lighting candles, sticking them to every surface of the bedroom until it lit up

around me like a lantern. Outside the wind kept screaming madness and sent the window boards rattling. I sank back into the corner, the revolver clutched to my chest. I had never felt more scared in my life.

‘Please God,’ I whispered. ‘Don’t let me die here. Don’t let me die on this miserable island. I’ll give you whatever you want. Just don’t let them get me. Don’t . . .’

I don’t remember falling asleep. I do remember opening my eyes and seeing that all the candles had burned out – that I was surrounded by darkness. The blizzard had finally passed, and the wind had died. The windows weren’t rattling any more.

That was why I could hear it.

*Crunch, crunch. Crunch, crunch.*

Someone was walking towards the house. No – two people. Two sets of footsteps in the snow.

I sat bolt upright, my heart racing. The family had come back for me. They were outside the house.

I ran to the boarded windows and looked outside. It was so dark I couldn't even make out the ground. The only sign of life were the footsteps, getting closer and closer to the house.

I lifted the revolver, ready to send out a warning shot. I only had six bullets. That meant I had to wait until they were right beneath me, right outside the front door. It was the only way I could scare them enough to ensure they'd run away. But leave it too late and— Well, it didn't even bear thinking about.

I silently removed one of the planks of wood over the window and stood in the pitch dark, holding out the revolver in trembling hands. My breath plumed in the frozen air. All I could do was listen.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.*

The footsteps reached the front door.

*Crunch.*

And stopped.

For a long time there was nothing. No talking, no sound of the door being tested. I stood stock-still, trying to silence my heartbeat, trying to keep my nerves quiet and my gun steady and—

BOOM.

The sound came from above me, slamming on the roof.

I cried out in shock. There was something on the roof – and it was big. My brain reeled. The house was three storeys tall – how on earth could any one have jumped up there? And yet I could hear them even now, pounding across the roof tiles to the far corner of the room – two sets of footsteps in a close dance, making their way to the chimney . . .

I gasped. Suddenly all I could see was

John's face in the basement, his face blank and expressionless.

*Black Dog that comes down the chimney.*

Horror rose like a flood inside me. I wasn't hearing two sets of footsteps. It was something on four legs.

I turned to the chimney on the wall – and cried out with a sickening, gut-white fear. The bricks were swelling and splitting right in front of me. Something was forcing its way down the chimney and inside the house. A new sound filled the room – claws scraping against stone. I could hear heavy gasping breaths through the wall, the bricks heaving like a chest as the monster dragged its way to the basement . . .

The basement that was bolted from the outside.

And suddenly there was John's face again, begging me with tears in his eyes.

*You have to lock the door. Lock it tight so nothing can get in.*

He hadn't meant the front door. He'd meant the basement door. The door I had left open.

I had turned the house into a fortress – and I had locked myself inside it with a monster.

The house filled with a howl so loud and terrible that every hair on my body stood on end. The floor shuddered beneath my feet – the shudder of something huge and fast running up stairs.

Black Dog was coming for me.

I cried out in terror and threw the bedroom door shut. It had no lock – but that would make no difference here. The monster had heard me – I could hear it charging out of the basement and tearing through the ground floor to find me. There was nowhere left for me to go but the window.



I tore off the boards as fast as I could – but it wasn't fast enough. I could already hear Black Dog flying up the staircase, tearing apart the obstacles I had left in its path like they were matchsticks. It was already on the first floor, pounding up the second flight of stairs . . .

The last of the boards gave way. I ran my hand around the frame, looking for the handle – but there wasn't any. I gave a great groan of terror. The monster was on the second floor now, the sound of its feet hammering against the steps below me as it grew closer, the howl in its throat getting louder and louder . . .

I stepped back from the window and raised the revolver.

BLAM!

The blast shattered the glass and the room filled with freezing sea air just as the monster



reached the final flight of stairs. I could hear its claws gouging through the wooden steps as it tore towards the bedroom door, its great heaving sides scraping against the walls and splitting the plaster . . .

I threw myself at the window at the exact moment the door exploded inwards. I shouldn't have turned back. I should have flung myself straight out the window and taken my chances with the ground. But I couldn't help myself. I couldn't help turning to see what had come for me from the darkness of Cu Sith – what it was that filled the door frame from edge to edge right now, with its foul black hair and bleeding eyes . . .



It was the worst mistake I ever made. The monster leapt at me in a single bound, its jaws wrenched open wide as I whipped round the gun and pulled the trigger . . .

I remember the pain. I remember the



muffled gunshot that seemed to come from somewhere far away. I remember the sensation of cold as I fell through the window and into the night air. I remember the snow on the ground as I landed, and how for a moment I thought that I could hear the waves themselves crashing on to the island, heaving themselves out of the black north ocean to claim me – until I realised it was footsteps. Running towards me on every side, getting closer.



*It's them, I thought. It's the family, come back for the final part of their sacrifice – to feed me to him, piece by piece.*



And the funny thing was – for a moment, lying there in the snow, staring up at the starless night as the footsteps drew closer – dying wasn't what frightened me the most. What frightened me most was knowing that no matter what the family did to me, no one

would ever find my body. That there had been hundreds before me, and there would be hundreds more after. That I would spend my last living moment on Cu Sith – and then become another ancient myth, lost to the dark waters of time.

And my last thought before the darkness fell completely was – *what will they do to me in that basement?*

*Drybone Creathe fell silent. He remained staring into the fire – no one could see his face.*

*‘And then?’ said the Dean. ‘What happened next?’*

*Creathe didn’t turn round. He kept his back to the table, facing the fire.*

*‘When I woke up, I was in hospital on the mainland. It was New Year’s Day: in front of me were the two men that my boss had sent to meet me.*

‘They explained what had happened: apparently when the young fisherman had returned to the harbour on Christmas Eve, there was uproar – no one could believe that he had taken me to Cu Sith and left me there. A handful of brave fisherman had waited for the storm to pass before coming to get me, right there and then in the middle of the night. They had found me lying on the snow outside the house, covered in blood. If they hadn’t arrived when they did . . . well, who knows what could have happened to me.’

The Dean glanced at the other guests. They looked as confused as he was.

‘And the monster?’ he asked. ‘Black Dog?’

Creathe shook his head, his hand still clutching at his chest.

‘The house was empty – the whole island was empty, in fact. The family had disappeared. There was no explanation for what had

happened – nothing except my story, which sounded like the fantasies of a madman. The company didn't believe me, of course – why would they? Why believe a giant monster had come down the chimney to get me? The two men handed me my termination papers, and I never went back to work again.'

The guests had begun to lose interest in Createh's story. One or two of them turned back to the enormous pudding on the table, searching through it for the missing prize.

'But there were one or two things which no one could explain,' said Createh. 'For example, the state of the house. There was no way I could have torn through the wood of the floorboards like that – as if my hands were made of knives. And of course, how could anyone explain what they found in the centre of the pounded-dirt floor in the basement, surrounded by a ring of dead sea grass and covered in—'

The hall was filled by a high-pitched scream. Everyone spun round. Lady Arabella Dogspit, who had been wolfing the remains of her Christmas pudding, flew back from her seat in terror, flinging something away from her like a red-hot coal.

It was a human hand. It had been torn off at the wrist and stripped to gleaming bone – and clutched in its grip was a black revolver.

Another sound filled the hall now. It was Drybone Creathe, shrieking at the top of his voice. He had turned back to the table, but his face was no longer blank: it was contorted with insane laughter, his eyes wide and howling. He tore his arm from his shirt to show the ragged stump where his hand should be, where something years ago had torn it from him and never given it back.



*A*t first the guests were stunned – but one by one, they joined in with Creathe’s manic laughter. Soon they were pounding the tables and rolling over backwards – after a while even Lady Arabella was shrieking along. The Dean wiped tears from his eyes.

‘Creathe, that’s the first time I’ve seen you smile in forty years! And I do believe it might be the best surprise we’ve seen tonight!’ He raised his glass. ‘Come everyone, another toast! To the most gruesome, horrifying Christmas Dinner of Souls yet!’

Within seconds a flurry of forks and spoons and plates were flying through the air towards Lewis.

*'Serving boy!'*

*'More gin, you miserable bag of filth!'*

*Lewis scrambled for the coffin-shaped cabinet in the corner.*

One more story and I'm out of time, he thought to himself. What are they going to do to me then? I have to find a way out of here! Think, Lewis, think!

*Lewis came to the cabinet – and stopped.*

*The cabinet was empty. There were no bottles of gin left.*

*'What are you waiting for, boy?' bellowed the Dean. 'Refill our glasses, now!'*

*Lewis turned to the table. A sea of cruel and evil faces met him in the firelight. His throat dried up. This was it – this was the moment they killed him.*

*'There's . . . there isn't any more,' he whispered. 'It's all gone.'*

*The effect on the room was cataclysmic. The guests leapt from their chairs like they had been electrocuted.*

*'No more gin?'*

*'The little maggot's guzzled it up for himself!'*

*'Get 'im!'*

*'Skin 'im!'*

*'Rip out his teeth!'*

*'NO!'*

*The Dean smashed his hand onto the table.*

*'Didn't you hear me the first time? No one touches the boy until after the Dinner is finished! We need him!' He turned to Lewis with an evil grin. 'Because we all know what happens to the serving boy at the end of the night, don't we?'*

*The guests broke into maniacal laughter once more. Lewis trembled from head to toe . . .*

*'That's right!' said Drybone Creathe. 'We make him clear up!'*

*Lewis blinked. Clear up?*

*'It'll take him forever,' said Bloodrick Gallant gleefully. 'Look at this place! It's a tip!'*

*'Just mopping the floor will take him most of Christmas morning,' said Ariadne Biter.*

*'And that says nothing for the laundry!' giggled Sir Algernon Thoroughbred-Pilt, grabbing the tablecloth. 'Oooh, these stains are going to be a nightmare!'*

*Lewis's face flooded with relief – that was it? They'd make him tidy up? After all this time, he'd been so worried – and all for nothing. He still had a chance to get out of here and stop these evil people, before they tried to destroy Christmas!*

*The clock struck six.*

*'Come!' said the Dean. 'Our night is not yet over. We still have one more story to hear.'*

He broke the final bauble and held up the name.

*'The last storyteller of the night is . . . myself.'*

*The guests stared at him in confusion.*

*'You?'*

*'But you're the Dean!'*

*'You've never . . .'*

*They trailed off. The Dean was staring at them, steady as a lighthouse. He gestured to their empty chairs.*

*'Well?'*

*One by one, the guests sat down, muttering with confusion. The Dean cleared his throat.*

*'Once upon a—'*

*'What about your course?' cried Retch Wallmanner. 'You're supposed to serve a course with your story!'*

*The Dean waved him quiet. 'Please, Retch, just listen to my story. All will become clear very soon.'*

*The Dean cleared his throat, and began his tale.*