

Greadeburn

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Part I

Rain pounded Greaveburn.

Rivulets coursed across acres of slate and through labyrinths of ornate stonework. Gurgling along gutters and rusty pipes, the torrent spewed into the narrow streets below, watched over by a tribe of gargoyles.

A cathedral to the Gods of despair and misery, the Citadel stood with its talons buried into the ancient cobbles. Water surged over its buttresses like the tendrils of a beast rising from the deep. Light spilled into the night from the great stained glass eye in its forehead, casting shadows across the square. Around the plaza, other buildings stood in the dark; slender demons with brickwork scales that watched the men below as if they were a meal wriggling on a platter.

Three guards in dripping uniforms stood over their prisoner as he knelt in the rising water, shivering from the cold and gnawing agony. Bruises blossomed across his face and neck like oil drops in water. More were visible through his cotton shirt, drenched through by the rain. His fair hair was streaked with blood and dirt. His breaths came in shudders.

Steadfast stood close behind his prisoner.

Rainwater cascaded from the rim of his high-browed helmet, obscuring his features. He cupped the prisoner's forehead with one rough palm; a mother checking her child for fever. Lowering his mouth to the prisoner's ear, he whispered:

"Can you hear me, Darrant?"

A groan of confirmation, or agony, came from the prisoner. "I'm sorry, my friend, but The Duty comes first."

His sword scraped from its sheath. The prisoner tensed as its cold tip pressed against his back. Turning his head, Darrant rested his burning cheek against the damp material of Steadfast's uniform and gave another groan.

"I'll look after Greaveburn for you, and the girl, when I can. I'm going to release you and I don't want you to make a sound. Don't give them the satisfaction. Goodbye, my friend."

Steadfast's hand lowered from Darrant's brow to cover his mouth with tenderness.

"Not a sound now."

Darrant's body spasmed as the cold blade tore through flesh. His jaw dropped open, but no sound came. The rain rinsed dark crimson from the blade in gory streaks.

Darrant hit the cobbles, shallow breaths making bubbles in the rising water.

"Get rid of him."

With a sound like the scraping of tomb lids, a sewer cover was dragged aside.

Tipped head first into the abyss, Darrant's body disappeared into darkness. The following boom echoed through the sewers like the hoof beat of Death's steed.

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Professor Loosestrife stood behind the lectern like a worm trapped in a jar. When he was finished decorating the chalk board with sweeping characters, he ran a hand over his high, polished head and down the lank white curtain that sprouted from behind his ears. Spinning on his heel, he presented himself to the audience.

“It can be *proven*,” said Loosestrife, scratching the knuckle-like protrusion of his chin, “that the body consists of several base elements which, when separated from one another, are essentially useless. However, by combining said elements into a consumable form, it is conceivable that the medicinal benefits could far outweigh anything we have previously imagined.”

And by *we*, he meant *them*. There was nothing that he couldn’t imagine, no notion beyond his comprehension or objective too lofty for him to achieve.

He looked up into the gallery through eyebrows resembling ivy-encrusted balconies. Row upon row of alabaster faces stared back at him. Some of the audience shuffled under his gaze, averting the glowing

discs of their spectacles. Starched collars were tugged at and neck ties were loosened, as if Loosestrife's eyes gave off heat.

"My friends," he continued, "if we could manufacture such an elixir, we would hold the very essence of life in the palm of our hands."

Raising his own hand, light reflected from the glove's rubber as if it were wet. Loosestrife ground the fingers closed and a high-pitched squeak escaped the fist.

No one seemed to notice.

"Such horrific—"

And perfect.

"—diseases such as The Ague, would be a thing of ancient history. Disease would be reduced to a tale to scare children before bedtime, a Bogeyman, a Boggle beneath the bed. Colleagues, we could turn this city of Greaveburn into a place of such splendour and perfection that the Gods themselves will sit up and take notice."

The last echoes of his voice drifted back to him and died. It had been a long lecture and many of the audience had ceased to pay attention hours ago. Loosestrife thought this could be the stuff of nightmares; row after row of pale faces staring down, emotionless.

"Thank you," he said, turning away from the lectern.

Bodies clambered toward the exit.

Loosestrife had already forgotten about them.

He stepped into the corridor that led to his office, his body visibly expanding as if shedding rusty manacles. Flicking hair from his shoulder, he stretched with a pop and crunch from his spine. His mind returned to the elixir.

Soon, he thought, soon.

Loosestrife ignored the door to his office. Instead, he prodded the corridor's wall with practiced certainty.

From somewhere inside came a hiss of compressed air. The wood panelling slid away.

The familiar musk of mouldering plaster made his nostrils flare.

Hanging his pristine lab coat on its hook inside the opening, he took down another covered with curious stains and smudges. Cobwebs stuck to his body like gossamer tattoos as he strode along the narrow corridor. Tugging off the long black glove on his right hand revealed a marvel; a cylindrical cage of brass rods replaced his forearm, the inner workings of which shifted as Loosestrife flexed his artificial hand. A series of amber plates made up his palm; fingers ended in tapered metal teardrops. He worked the fingers for a moment, basking in the perfection of his design.

The corridor's downward slope ended in an opening visible only as a darker rectangle in the gloom.

Loosestrife's shoes *pinged* and *doinged* as he moved out into the laboratory, and crossed its gridded metal floor. Six further levels extended into the abyss below, the lowest suspended over impenetrable darkness by wide chains which creaked under the tension.

The immense circular pit which held the laboratory had once been part of Greaveburn's ancient sewer system. Light drained from gratings above, turning green as it passed through mildew and mould. Weak shafts lit the room's contents sparingly so that the eye could never be entirely sure if shapes in the murk were of mechanism or organism; connected or separate. The sound of steam escaping in short, controlled bursts came from somewhere in the junkyard of creation. Loosestrife twisted and turned through the maze of machinery without looking. Occasionally he slowed to step over something unseen in the dark.

Somewhere, a steam whistle hooted.

At the furthest wall, an air-locked door gave way to gentle pressure. In contrast to the laboratory, the light from inside was blinding. Loosestrife scrambled beside

the door, squeezing closed his tiny, bloodshot eyes. Finally, he found a pair of tinted goggles and slid the thick straps over his head.

The room was no wider than fifteen feet but seemed to extend into infinity. Hundreds of crystal cylinders lined the walls, each to its own niche, capped at either end with brass. Loosestrife slid his fingers along one of the pods. Something thrashed inside the fluid, slimy coils whipping back and forth inside the cell.

A steel table at the room's center displayed all but the organic component of a broken cell. Loosestrife prodded at it with no real goal in mind. Rather, his attention was on a long steel ladder which stood against one wall. The Professor's assistant teetered atop it, feeding the eels from a satchel. Wheldrake, engrossed in his task, took some time to realise that the Professor had entered. All the while, Loosestrife observed him.

After years of silent plotting, Loosestrife had replaced his predecessor, Dr. Ragwort, by tipping him into a vat of liquid flame, only to have his right hand destroyed by the incredible heat. He intended no such end for himself, and so he watched Wheldrake every chance he had.

Wheldrake descended the ladder. Tall, wearing a threadbare brown suit, he looked somewhat like a mongoose. Especially the eyes; golden brown from edge to edge with tiny black pupils.

Loosestrife smothered a shudder.

"Professor," said Wheldrake, and bowed slightly at the waist. His ears, resting too far up the side of his head, twitched.

"My pets are doing well," said Loosestrife.

"Certainly, Professor. The charge of each cell is registering at a steady one hundred volts. After agitation, I have measured an increase of four hundred volts," said Wheldrake. "They're going swimmingly."

The assistant's lips spread into a tight-lipped smile.

Loosestrife's face soured in return.

He left the blinding light of the battery room without a word, drawing Wheldrake into his wake. Master and assistant waited for their eyes to adjust to the greenish gloom.

"The elixir is nearly ready, Professor. Another few hours and the distillation will be complete."

"I will check it for myself," said Loosestrife.

"Of course, Professor."

Loosestrife weaved his way toward a bank of heavy, reed-shaped levers set into the wall. Gripping the first with his mechanical hand, he dropped the switch. Banks of flickering bulbs blossomed orange in a cascade above them.

"The cold glow of New Light," said Loosestrife to himself.

"Greaveburn will be the brighter for it," said Wheldrake, nodding.

"Genius of this nature, Wheldrake, isn't for the likes of Greaveburn. Or you, for that matter. Keep your limited thoughts to yourself."

Wheldrake smiled and bowed.

Professor and assistant crossed the lab. In the light, the mechanical contraptions seemed no less macabre. Now that they could be seen, the mind cried out for explanations to their uses, and that was no healthy thing to ponder. Metal-ringed cables ran between hulks of metal and glass. Steam leaked from manufactured orifices in boiling sighs. The air was damp and crisp with moisture and heat.

Ping tang gong tong. Their boots drummed as they descended the steps.

Another sound met them as they reached the lower level.

Gyyung gyyung gyyung.

Loosestrife adjusted his goggles.

Shifting spectrums of colour filled the air as light refracted through a city of glass. Liquids of differing

colours and consistencies decanted between the alembic apparatus. It was like standing inside the head of an insane glassblower; each canister, flask and vial twisted and bloated, depicting a different facet of his psychosis. Complicated glass corkscrews, loops and spouts connected the containers like fragile intestines. They all ended at one point.

The machine in the centre of the room captured distilled liquids like a steel goblin beneath a beer tap. Its innards churned with irritating regularity.

Gyyyung gyyyung gyyyung.

Loosestrife observed a trio of dials in the receptacle's surface, their needles slowly gliding to the right.

"Wheldrake, locate Misters Lynch and Schism. We require a subject."