Many individuals who lived in Austin during December of 1920 may remember the grim Rubedo murders that began in a ranch on the western floodplains. The crimes committed were still in the shadows of the Wall Street bombings that took place a few months earlier.

A time of great uncertainty and paranoia emerged in America, a feeling that was heavily bolstered by the aforementioned crimes. Although the public may be aware of events that took place, I believed that it might be worth recording exactly what occurred and the involvement of Mr. Charles Morris as well as the more generally known investigation of Detective John Portsman.

For many months then, I had taken an early morning walk with Charles several blocks to the south of his apartment, spending time together as I pointed out the rolling landscape of the hilly area. On the fateful day of December 14th, Charles and I strolled along a rough path set besides several simple wooden settlements near the sycamore trees. They naturally provided shade but given the piercing chill of the weather, they only served to impede the sun's attempts to warm us. Although there would normally have been conversation between us, the cold had oddly robbed any motivation to speak. Morris moved purposefully along the path, his rhythmic footsteps matched by the crunching of his walking stick through dried earth as his sable jacket fought to ward off the bitter wind. He appeared to be deep in thought, as always.

"Charles," I said, finally breaking the silence. "I had always wondered why you seek respite from austerity with such fervor. I understand that your loss of fortunes up north resulted in your arrival here, but you are extremely capable. You could have sought new mental stimulation for yourself anywhere else; why here, of all places?

Morris cast a ruminating look before responding.

"It's an excellent question you ask, Bill. As you are aware, I lost my sight under, needless to say, caustic circumstances."

Morris almost seemed to wince although it could have been a trick of the light.

"If I may be frank, Bill," Morris said, crossing his hands on his walking stick.

"I know I can be honest with you as you have proven reliable time and time again, something which I appreciate, so I will be honest with you once more. Losing one's sight is a terrible experience, although you would hardly think otherwise. It was devastating to one such as myself, I had suddenly become extremely handicapped and caught unawares. Before I knew it, my investments had vanished due to poor luck, and I was left desolate and disabled. I no longer had access to the resources or influence I once possessed and as I had not adapted yet, I was left extremely vulnerable. There was nothing for me there anymore besides perhaps the occasional enemy and hopelessness. I felt utterly helpless, needing to rely upon countless methods to even be capable of operating at the most basic level, entirely at the mercy of others. I simply could not tolerate it. My whole life I had ventured forward, but now… now I could not pursue anything. Or so I thought. I believed a change of place might bring a change of fortune and give me more time to contemplate. The rural nature of the south was attractive to me given that it was the antithesis of the bustling city I had left behind and I decided that from then on I would continue my journey forward, a mindset which has borne fruit more than once."

I considered Morris's statement in silence before speaking up.

"I am very sorry you had felt that way, Charles."

Morris stopped and raised his hand in protest.

“Nonsense. Once again, you refuse to take credit. I was a man adrift in fog, but at least I am no longer alone.”

His face cracked into a familiar smile.

“Thank you, Charles.”

Morris nodded his head jauntily.

“It’s quite alright, Bill.”

“If it is any consolation, you have clearer sight than most.”

“Perhaps. But I only hope I have maintained my skill in surprising you. That is what keeps indolence at bay, after all.”

“Well, you have been successful thus far.”

“Then let us see if I can amaze you once again during our next adventure,” Morris said, stepping forward.

We continued for some time, passing nearby a ranch which stood atop the grassy knoll. It was a lavishly decorated building, clearly constructed by a wealthy individual wishing to avoid the routine flooding that pervaded the area. A well dressed man stood by the front door with his arms akimbo, clearly not prepared for the morning chill. Could he have been waiting for someone? But if he was, why would he not stay inside?

“That’s odd, there appears to be someone waiting outside the ranch. He is most definitely underdressed given the temperature.”

“Ah, so there is a ranch on this hill. I had always imagined that it would be a lovely place to construct one. Probably a well to do man owns the structure. I find it interesting that you mentioned ‘the ranch’ as if to suggest it had been there for a long time. That eliminates the possibility of it still being constructed. In addition, its proximity to the city and the fact that it is a weekday, I doubt it is being modified currently as we would surely be able to hear laborers at work.”

“You never cease to impress me, Charles.”

Morris bent his neck forward.

“That means more to me than you know, Bill.”

“So it does. Do you have any further observations you would like to share?”

Morris laughed.

“You know me too well, Bill. I have several. It is suggestive that you said he was underdressed. I find it unlikely that he was sent to the ranch for a task as he would have prepared beforehand for the temperature and even if he lacked time to, he would be frantically knocking on the door or seeking proper cover to get out of the frigid temperature. Even if he were a sentry, why would he be outside without proper protection from the weather? Furthermore, you have never mentioned a person in front of the ranch during our walks. He cannot be simply going out for a smoking break as you found it odd that he was ‘waiting’ outside as opposed to smoking. You would have made the connection that he went out to smoke and would have said that it was odd that he was smoking without a jacket. My conclusion is that he was ejected from the ranch or stormed out to clear his mind. If it was not in the heat of the moment, he likely would not have forgotten his jacket. There are several reasons why he might have left such as a domestic dispute or disagreement or even an investigation so my speculation must conclude there.”

“Fascinating. But I do wonder what he is truly doing there.”

“It is not as if we are incapable of discovering the answer to that question,” Morris said, turning to me with an expression of subtle amusement. ”Sometimes speculation must step aside for action. Would you please lead the way?”

“Certainly.”

We made our way up the hill overlooking the path, the grass oscillating like waves at sea due to the ravaging winds. Upon arriving at the summit of the squat mound, I got a closer look at the gentleman in the wind. He was a corpulent man with a bursting barrel chest, his stature being enhanced by his rotund head and dark expression. Clearly agitated, he noticed Morris and I and made his way over.

“What are you doing here?” he said brusquely. ”I don't need any more officers crawling over the premises. I've had enough for a lifetime. Really, the nerve to tell me to leave my own house!”

He seemed to almost speak those last words to himself. Morris stepped forward and held out his hand.

“Charles Morris, at your service. We were simply wondering why you were outside in the cold.”

The man glanced at Morris's hand and gingerly grasped it.

“James White. These blasted detectives invaded my house after the body of my brother-in-law was found, stone dead this morning. No great loss, if you ask me. My wife and I arrived this morning an hour ago after spending a night at my friend’s abode.”

I stepped forward.

“Who was your brother-in-law?”

James eyed me suspiciously, as if I might leap at him. He shook his head before answering.

“A blighter if I’ve ever met one. Oliver Saxon, all nice-like until you actually get to know him. Possibly the most arrogant and insufferable man I’ve ever been unfortunate enough to come across. He actually had this ranch built although since his thankfully untimely demise, I’m the de facto owner.”

“With all due respect, Mr. White, that seems to be a very cavalier way to speak of a murdered man when there are detectives out and about your house as we speak.”

He sighed dramatically, heaving a warm breath outwards.

“I’m not going to pretend like there wasn’t bad blood between us. We never got along. A quick talk with the maid or butler would have revealed that detail. What I’m saying may seem black against me, but I’ve already been questioned and let off. As much as I would’ve loved to stick that knife into him, somebody got to him first.”

“He was stabbed?” Morris interjected.

“Yes. The weapon wasn’t found though. Some sort of inference the detective made. That Portsman may be bothersome as a tack but he’s twice as sharp.”

At that moment a burly man in uniform stepped out the door of the ranch.

“Detective Portsman would like to see you again, Mr. White.”

James grumbled and lumbered onto the patio, the wooden deck creaking underfoot. The officer turned his attention to us.

“You gentlemen are…?”

“I am William Hopkins and this is my companion Charles Morris. We were curious as to what transpired.”

The officer paused and raised his eyes as if organizing his mind.

“Cryptic business. We cleared out the first floor so if Mr. White allows it, I suppose we could let you two take a look.”

James didn’t bother pausing as he passed his frame through the portal.

“Come in if you like. Doesn’t make a difference to me,” he hollered.

“Well then, Bill. It appears we have something to do after all.”

We walked across the threshold together, revealing a grotesque contrast that had been present in the structure. A wide glance would reveal lavish furnishing, from silken shades to mahogany dressers and desks, almost ubiquitous across what appeared to be the living room. The ceiling was adorned with a glimmering crystal chandelier contrasting the dry bookcase against the wall abounding with various tomes. A burnt out fireplace sat near a Persian rug and a generously stuffed armchair. Clashing horribly with the scene was a middle aged corpse splayed on the ground, blood having pooled into a variety of crevices present in the wooden tiling. He was dressed remarkably well, wearing a thick coat and bowtie. The crimson stain on his breast was easily discernible as the cause of his death. Morris wrinkled his nose, clearly more sensitive to the smell of the body.

Suddenly, a tall man with lanky limbs limped out from behind us. He had a stormy expression upon his chiseled face, like a sea bluff having become animate. He stopped before James White and murmured to him. White briskly made his way through another door as the tall man turned to us with an intrigued look. The officer went beside him.

“These are William Hopkins and Charles Morris,” he said, his hand outstretched as he presented us. The man’s face softened, but only slightly.

“Ah, hello. I am Detective John Portsman. Have you come to look at the murder? You saw Mr. White standing outside I would assume.”

I was only slightly surprised to hear that he had inferred our intentions.

“Correct. But why would you assume we were simply here for the murder?”

“As my men and I searched the building, we noted that nothing was damaged. You cannot be here to repair something as a result. You are decidedly not salesmen as this area is generally remote; it would be a poor choice to peddle one’s wares here. Your companion is also blind. Granted, he walks with significant fluidity for an unseeing man but several details suggest to me that he is not simply a high class man with sensitive eyes. His clothing is a bit rough around the edges. Unless he was an aristocrat who experienced a loss of fortunes and wishes to emulate better times, I do not see why he would carry around a silver topped walking stick besides the fact that he truly requires it or if it is of significance, which I doubt given its dross. This in addition to the fact that tinted glasses are quite uncommon tells me that he is very possibly blind. Blind men do not often perform tasks on their own, or really even have careers. I would say that you are his companion and whilst on a walk, you noticed Mr. White.”

“You remind me very much of my companion, Detective Portsman, and I do mean it as a compliment.”

Detective Portsman raised a knobbly hand to his chin.

“I expected as much. You are evidently of high breeding from your clothing. Your blind compatriot must supply some sort of contribution towards your relationship and given that he is

adept at dissembling, I might suggest something along the lines of gambling? Thievery would be below your standards."

Morris grinned.

"But not below mine, I expect?"

Detective Portsman shook his head.

"Visually…perhaps not. In reality, probably."

"Trust me, Detective Portsman, stealing is the last thing on my mind, especially after meeting you."

Detective Portsman let out a small snort.

"Charming. Well, I do have a problem to attend to," he said, hastily turning towards the body. At first he took out a stencil, rapidly sketching the scene on a scrap or paper and pushed it into his breast pocket with his forefinger. He knelt next to the body and flexed one of the limbs after prodding it.

"He has been dead for less than twelve hours. That is consistent with my questioning of Mr. White where he stated that he and his wife left last night and arrived in the morning. Initially, I had looked over the body to determine the cause of death before clearing the area. As you may be able to tell, the man died of a stab wound, specifically from a dagger," he said, pointing towards the wound on the man's chest. "Notice how there is a clean cut of the tissue on both sides of the gash which tells us that the blade was sharp on both sides. The weapon also had a hilt guard, which can be seen as the slight rectangular indent in the skin. Using this, we can estimate the blade to be around six inches as it pierced his heart."

"I might add that the blade was either kept in relatively well condition or may have been recently purchased. You did not mention any signs of rust particles," Morris said, rapping the tip of his walking stick.

I looked down at the wound, then the arms of the man.

"Was there a struggle? There is no blood under his nails."

Detective Portsman turned to Morris.

"I can see why you are fond of him. He is just sharp enough."

Morris spoke up.

"It is an excellent point, however, remember that the murder was very recent. The weather outside was cold, meaning the murderer, assuming he was an outsider, likely wore a thick coat. This would have hampered any attempts from poor Oliver to scratch at him, even assuming he was not caught completely by surprise."

Detective Portsman materialized a notepad and furiously scribbled with a short pen. He bent his legs downward, looked over the front of the body when he reached a hand beneath the corpse's dark jacket, taking up a piece of parchment into his hand.

"How bizarre! There is something written here. I will read it aloud."

For his disrespect to our Lords, Mr. Saxon has been executed. His essence will make a fine offering.

V.R.

"...Then there is an illustration of some sort of jug. Is that…blood?"

Detective Portsman's eyes narrowed at the paper. He delicately prodded the paper with a long finger before examining it.

"It could certainly be. It seems as though the illustration has been partially shaded in with blood. Very…strange."

Had we stumbled upon some sort of ritual? What was the meaning of the letter?

Morris was still as a statue, evidently in some deep meditation before quickly looking up.

"*Rubedo*," he said, still pointing his head upwards. "The final stage in the creation of the *magnum opus* in classical alchemy. The bottle is symbolic of the general process and the blood of the literal 'reddening' that was presumed to occur. Based on the syntax of the note, I would suggest that it belongs to a group with a sort of esoteric framework regarding multiple beings, denoted by the use of the plural 'lords'. It is possible that Mr. Saxon was part of this group before leaving or disregarding them given the use of 'disrespect', a personal term."

Detective Portsman looked on with skepticism.

"I do not deal with the occult, Mr. Morris."

"Neither do I, but I am still familiar with *Pretiosissimum Donum Dei*. It could indeed be that there is some more depth to this conundrum than was previously thought."

Detective Portsman brooded whilst scratching his chin with his pale hand.

"They are clearly a capable group despite their ridiculous views," Detective Portsman said, standing upwards. "The man who killed Mr. Saxon was most definitely a professional assassin. The lock was actually forced in, implying that he was not a friend. Not only did he easily overpower a grown man without any signs of environmental struggle, but he cleanly killed him with only a strike to his heart without bruising him anywhere else."

I lowered myself to get a better look at the body. Something bothered me about the circumstances of his death. I turned to Detective Portsman.

"Suppose he was a part of this group before breaking off. Unless this was an extreme member, I do not see why Mr. Saxon would not have anticipated his own death or at least an attack upon his person. Why would he not at least call upon the police or even flee?"

Morris answered for Detective Portsman, stepping between us.

"This question is tied to an even larger issue: why is there a note at all? It could be to make an example of Mr. Saxon, but if his betrayal was well known, then his treachery would obviously be correlated with his sudden death. I am inclined to think that his betrayal was not common knowledge, or even hidden from the other members. If he rapidly left then it would be suspicious to the other members and notifying the police could result in his own arrest, as we have established that this group is predisposed to violence."

Detective Portsman gritted his teeth and scurrilously inscribed black text into his notebook and looked closer at the note, raising it to the light of a nearby window, allowing the shining rays to pass through it.

"Regrettably, not much more information can be gleaned from the text. It's written in block writing to disguise its author's handwriting, yet it was probably written with a soft tipped pencil. You can see the smudging of the letters. Even though there is no mark of his outer palm, the indentations go from left to right, so our culprit is likely right handed. The initials 'V.R.' at the end cannot be a personal signature, it defeats the purpose of veiling one's handwriting, so it could be the cult's abbreviation. The paper itself is of a common variety that can be acquired from a newsstand, although it was folded before being written on, the distinct utensil markings

being above and permeating into the creases. There are no other stains besides the one bloodstain. I already checked outside for footprints before I entered, but due to the hardness of the earth from the cold, there are none which are particularly striking."

Detective Portsman carefully folded the paper and put it into a fresh envelope before sealing it. He beckoned to the officer who greeted us at the door and handed it to him.

"Send this down to the station. Put it in a new pigeonhole labeled '*rubedo*', I will stop by later to drop off the rest of my compiled evidence and conclusions."

"I must say that your methodicalness is refreshing, Detective Portsman," Morris said. "Although I am agog to hear your reasoning for Mr. White's innocence."

Detective Portsman's face broke into a morbid smile for an instant.

"Ah, so he told you about our little interview. I let him off for a few reasons. Namely, based on my impression of Mr. Saxon, he was an unpopular person. He worked as a broker and his dealings were not always…up to par. Mr White was definitely not the only man to have a grudge against him. Not only that, but the fact that he has an additional benefit from Mr. Saxon's death ironically makes it less plausible that he is the culprit. Such an argument that why would he be foolish enough to hire someone to kill his own brother-in-law when the point that they despised each other was well known could be used effectively in court. It would be a waste of time to arrest him, even an incompetent lawyer could get him out of such a charge. This whole business with a cult involved makes it even less likely that he would actually get convicted, this could always be brought up as counter evidence. Reasonably restraining a person for murder is very tricky. Of course, all this could be a blind on his part, but there is practically no evidence of such right now. I will issue an officer to watch him until the details of the investigation are finalized so as to preclude any such intrigue."

Morris bounced one of his legs against the wooden floor while considering Detective Portsman's conclusion.

"We could look at the case from several angles. Let us suppose that Mr. White or any other individual did indeed fabricate the entire 'cult' letter. If so, then we can still determine that the killer was probably a professional. Given our available data, I am not sure how Mr. Saxon would have a personal connection to a trained assassin, so our working hypothesis must be that he was hired by another person. There is no explicit gain from Mr. Saxon's death besides what I must assume is shock from his sister or monetary benefit from his inheritance. Under this branch, the culprit would have to be someone within the household. We also must consider that a financial rival may have something to gain from his death. The theory that the killer was sent from within would be consistent with the detail that the murderer knew when he would be alone, although this could also be perceived through surveillance. On the other hand, if the motive is purely vengeance, such as if he wronged someone else in the past, the case becomes considerably more vague. If we continue down this line of reasoning, we come to a compelling conclusion: any misdirection such as this must have more depth so it does not fall apart as soon as proper investigations begin. In other words, you, Detective Portsman, will likely discover evidence pointing towards the existence of this cult, whether it is the truth or not, so as to sustain this illusion. But this leads to an even deeper question: What is the endgame?"

Detective Portsman seemed taken aback by Morris's chain of reasoning and he appraised him with new eyes.

“You are more attentive than I had initially thought, Mr. Morris,” He said, taking down yet another note. He snapped his fingers briskly, the hearty noise being swiftly followed by a flurry of footsteps as another, shorter officer emerged from a side chamber. Detective Portsman walked over to him and handed over his notepad.

“Let the medical examiner know that we can remove the body. Have him get a particular room in the morgue for it in the event that further analysis becomes necessary. After that is done, take this down to my office. I will interrogate the rest of the household.”

Detective Portsman beckoned for us to come with him down the wide hall, ornate wooden carvings arching over the entire medium. He stopped in front of a patterned door with various elaborate gilt depictions, slowly opening it to reveal a proper dining room. A rectangular table with gnarled legs sat cleanly in the center of the room, chairs slid into it like pegs into mortise holes. Fine cutlery and shimmering platters were sprinkled over it, if only to complement the magnificent luster. In the corner of the room there were three people upon a couch of pelts. One of them was a burly old man with drooping features but with formal attire and air. Next to him was a maid with a white front blouse, her hair modestly concealed in a bun behind a silk frill. She looked frightened, if a bit tired, as if she had been waiting days for Detective Portsman to come back. The last person was another woman who had clearly been weeping when she had been interrupted by our arrival. She was, with all likelihood, the brother of the deceased man. She had her hands folded conservatively on her cyan dress which flowed beneath her. She raised her tear streaked face towards us with an expression of concealed anguish. Detective Portsman motioned for the older man to come, this time removing a gray scratch pad. The man awkwardly loped over to the door and traversed the doorstep, closing the door behind him with a liver spotted hand. He stood in front of us with a compliant expression, matching my eyes despite his aging stature.

“What is your name?”

The old man shifted his weight as his eyes unfocused.

“Philip Anderson,” he responded in a meek voice.

“I see. What role do you play in this household?

Mr. Anderson straightened up a miniscule amount.

“I have been the butler here for over a decade, sir.”

“Hmm. So tell me, has Mr. Saxon displayed any sort of unusual behavior in the last few weeks?”

Mr. Anderson looked up to the ceiling and scratched his chin.

“I do not believe so, although I could be mistaken.”

“Noted. Now, please describe the events that took place last night and this morning, as you experienced them.”

Mr. Anderson sat there for some time, muttering a great many indecipherable expressions before responding.

“From what I can recall, Mr. White and his spouse made an appointment to attend a show last night. Some sort of play at the local theater before staying at a companion’s house. They left at around eight o’clock. Alice and I were dismissed at night, leaving Mr. Saxon to his own devices. He did not seem to be distressed by being left alone. I arrived in the morning at around seven only to discover that Mr. Saxon had died. I knocked on the door before opening it, and a real shock greeted me,” he said, shuddering. “I sent Alice ahead to the station right away,

I didn't want the poor girl to see what had happened. I stood in the living room until the authorities arrived and was placed in the dining room to wait."

"Understood. Now, how would you describe the late Mr. Saxon?"

Mr. Anderson coughed into his fist.

"I do not like to speak ill of the dead, but he was not renowned for his kindness. He often degraded people he would meet, especially Mr. White. Although I never would have accused him of it, I do think that Mr. Saxon never really accepted Mr. White into the family. They were always at each other's throats. Mr. Saxon always wanted to start debates, launching into arguments over matters of little substance, whether it be the quality of Mr. White's smoking jacket or his diet choice. Of course, he would always handle his sister with considerable grace."

"How would you say he treated you or the staff?"

Mr. Anderson raised himself again.

"He generally treated the staff with reasonable respect. When I first came here, he shot several jabs regarding my age and figure, although had since become more reserved, usually acting as though we simply did not exist."

"Did Mr. Saxon have any enemies in particular that you know of?"

"Besides Mr. White, I do not know of many others. Mr. Saxon did not leave the house very often, even to work, and when he did, he would never discuss what happened that day."

Detective Portsman sighed, absentmindedly sliding his fingers across his notebook.

"Very well. You may go now, Mr. Anderson. If you have any more information you would like to share with me, you may stop by the station and ask for me."

Suddenly, Morris spoke up with his fingers bent beneath his chin.

"Mr. Anderson, did Mr. Saxon strike you as being overly protective of his sister?"

Mr. Anderson seemed to be taken aback by the question, raising his arms as if to deflect the words directed at him.

"Well…now that you mention it, I suppose he must have been. He had an uncommon dislike towards Mr. White, perhaps that was because he had married his only sibling."

"What was Mr. Saxon's familial status?"

"He never spoke of it, however, I do know that he was actually Irish. He immigrated to America when Ellis Island opened in 1892 with his sister. They were destitute when they arrived, but he had exceptional skill as a broker and as such quickly built wealth. It was strange for someone so young, he was just eighteen when he got here and Mrs. White was ten years his junior. Twenty-five years later, Mrs. White left the ranch one night and came back with Mr. White, much to Mr. Saxon's chagrin. For the last three years, they have done nothing but bicker whenever they were within the other's presence."

Morris smiled gently at Mr. Anderson.

"It is always incredible when a person has loyalty such as yourself."

Mr. Anderson's forehead creased as his cavernous mouth quivered.

"Pardon?"

"Your tone of voice. Your speech had highs during your talk of working here. You were proud of working here despite how you were treated, which could denote one of two evident conclusions: You were closer to Mr. White than you let on, or…could I suggest that you were allied with his sister? I suspect the latter as even if you were in his confidence, you would have balked at remembering him as, to be frank, an odious man. Another indicator is that you did not

point out his history which pointedly involves his sister, hastening to outline his relationship with Mr. White instead."

Mr. Anderson paled, rubbing his brow in distress. Detective Portsman appeared awkward, maintaining his position with his hands against his jacket.

"It…is true. Mrs. White was the only tolerable person in this entire domestic disaster. Mr. White is a fair bit better than his brother-in-law was, but he is still by no means pleasant. Do not mistake my motives romantically, I am a moral man."

Morris stepped towards Mr. Anderson, reaching out his arm until he located his shoulder, leaning in close to him.

"Do not fret, Mr. Anderson. I am confident your intentions were pure. You clearly have a strong sense of right and wrong as well as when to hide the truth. You were hesitant to disparage your master notwithstanding his scorn. You never lied outright yet simply tried to divert attention. You confessed immediately upon being confronted. You spared the maid from the bloody scene. Those are all marks of noble character."

Mr. Anderson calmed himself with a few deep, rattling breaths.

"I was concerned…"

"That she would be accused?"

"Precisely."

"Mr. Anderson, if I may ask, why would she be accused?"

Mr. Anderson looked at me with an inquisitive expression. Morris took his hand off his shoulder and gyrated the metallic top of his walking stick in a hypnotic manner.

"I expect that my good Mr. Anderson was afraid that we would come to the conclusion that Mrs. White may have killed her own brother for the sake of being free to roam with her husband. Mr. Saxon indeed seemed to be a smotheringly defensive man."

I was stunned.

"Perish the thought, Mr. Anderson! Would a woman kill her own brother?"

"I… do not know," Mr. Anderson replied. "For most men, I would think it was improbable, but Mr. Saxon was not like most men. It was possible given the circumstances that perhaps after all these years she had finally come to her wits end…"

Detective Portsman clapped shut his notebook with a startling sound.

"I think that is enough, Mr. Anderson. I am sure your information will be invaluable in our investigation. You may depart."

Mr. Anderson nodded and stepped towards the door with a lumbering gait as Detective Portsman focused on Morris once more. A chill grasped us for a brief moment when Mr. Anderson opened the door.

"What an interesting methodology."

Morris motioned with his hand.

"I find it to be easier to gather information if they truly believe you are their ally. Empathy is often a better incentive than bluntness."

"I suppose the questioning did bear information regardless. Let us move on," Detective Portsman responded. He went back to the sigiled door and gesticulated, this time summoning the maid. She stepped out and shut the door behind her with a gloved hand before crossing them against her chest. Detective Portsman cracked open his notebook and began the questioning.

“What is your name?”

She cleared her throat.

“My name is Alice O’Hare,” she said, her voice tinged with a European accent.

“What role do you play in this household?”

“Oh, I’ve been the maid for about six years. I started when I was nineteen and haven’t stopped since.”

“Has Mr. Saxon been acting strange as of late?”

“Well, he’s always been a bit off an odd one. Constantly rude as if it were his life’s mission. Obsessed with his social position, I reckon.”

“That is a singular detail. Could you describe what you mean?”

She glanced around with her brown eyes as if she was being closely monitored.

“If you ask me, I think Mr. Saxon was a man with remarkably low self esteem,” she whispered. “His sister would never hear of it, but I’ll be damned if I’m wrong about this little tidbit.”

“Could it be that you believe that his blunt nature is a sort of compensation?” Morris asked.

“Most definitely,” she said. “He treated Mr. Anderson and I with… grudging silence. Though his tongue has dulled in the last few years, he still reminds me of those browbeaters who must substitute brashness for conviction.”

“Riveting! It seems consistent, Detective Portsman, no? A man of low class who arrives with his sister. He uses nothing but his wits to build himself up, but he is still not accepted into the social hierarchy. If we assume that he did indeed think little of himself, does it not become all the more compelling? He built a ranch in an isolated area as if to separate himself, yet flaunts his status. He both identifies with the upper class, yet cannot breach it. He never speaks of his dealings with others. He cannot stand outsiders, but cherishes the one artifact of his youth: his sister. Very intriguing.”

Ms. O’Hare’s eyes widened as Morris delivered his discourse.

“Mr. Morris, to be honest, I believe this may be too early for certain assumptions,” Detective Portsman said, pursing his lips.

“Naturally. I was simply pointing out how such an inferential structure might be consistent with our current facts, but you are correct; sometimes a line of reasoning appears to fit only to self-destruct under the weight of further information.”

“Understood.”

“Now, judging by your last name and accent, Ms. O’Hare, I expect you are Irish as well?”

“I am. I came here when I was sixteen.”

“Why do you think Mr. Saxon hired you?”

“I am not sure…,” she said, rubbing her fingers. “One moment, are you implying that he may have wished for me to work for him because of our shared origin?”

Morris leaned forward on his walking stick, placing pressure on his knuckles until they blanched.

“Perhaps. From Mr. Anderson’s account, he was not as rude with his staff as with others, at least within recent history. This is a fact which you corroborated with your previous statement. It is possible that he desired a kindred soul, but given that you did not mention any further action, this could be a moot point.”

“You are a perceptive man.”

Morris let out a short laugh.

“If only I was.”

Detective Portsman scratched the side of his head.

“Ms. O’Hare, to continue our interview, may I ask if Mr. Saxon had any adversaries?”

Ms. O’Hare looked down as she adjusted her white frill.

“Besides, of course, Mr. White, I don’t know of any others. Mr. Saxon was a secretive man,” she said, looking back up at Detective Portsman.

Detective Portsman’s chest rose before he released his breath in a gradual exhale.

“What were your impressions of Mr. and Mrs. White?”

A thin smile materialized on her face.

“Mrs. White was most definitely the highlight of the entire household. A nice and proper woman by all respects. Usually confident and independent. She actually used to work in theater, although she left for some unknown reason. It was well before my time anyway. You have likely heard enough of Mr. White already, a bullish man by most accounts.”

Detective Portsman finished transcribing her statement and put the back of his pen against his chin.

“Any other statements you wish to make?”

“That is all.”

“I see. You may go, Ms. O’Hare.”

She stood up and made a small bow towards us before heading to the front door. I felt a familiar draft come over us only to be swiftly cut off, mirroring her exit and closing of the door. A grim anticipation settled over me at the moment that Detective Portsman retrieved Ms. White. From all the accounts we had heard so far, she seemed to be at the heart of the issue or adjacent to it, although supposing the evidence left at the horrific scene of the crime, there could be a direct alternative which may present itself. Whatever the case, Mrs. White stepped out from the door, her shoes clacking against the wooden floor. She walked with all the grace and elegance of a monarch, though this impression clashed with her tear streaked face. She turned sharply to each of us, her bright eyes dancing over our figures. Detective Portsman was the first to speak.

“What is your full name?”

“My name is Dolores White, though if you mean my maiden name, it was Dolores Saxon,” she said, her voice strong and resonant.

“What was your role in the household?”

“In a sense, I operated as the medium between my husband and my brother. I would like to think that each only tolerated the other’s presence because of me.”

“Had Mr. Saxon behaved strangely within recent memory?”

Mrs. White interlocked her fingers.

“No, I do not believe so.”

“How would you describe Mr. Saxon?”

“Well, that is a loaded question, detective. Mr. Saxon was a broker. Insecure in my opinion, hence explaining his protective view of myself as well as his reluctance to deal with those of high status. Even this building enunciates how he dealt with his struggle, gaudy but misplaced. I am aware that my brother was often an unpleasant man to spend time with, but

trust me when I tell you that he was fond of his sister. I truly think he would have gone to the ends of the Earth and back for me. He always defended me… however I… pre-presume that will not be the case from now on," she replied, her voice cracking before recovering near the end.

Morris extended his arm, cupping his hand. Mrs. White looked down at it and nestled her hand in his. Morris leaned forward and kissed her gloved hand.

"My sincere apologies, Mrs. White. I cannot imagine what such a tragedy has done to you. Unfortunately, this interview is a necessary aspect of solving the case, but if you feel any questions are too extreme, please let us know."

Mrs. White removed her hand as Morris straightened himself. Some color returned to her face.

"Thank you. Now where were we?"

"Did Mr. Saxon have any known foes?"

"I think he made a foe of most people he met, but if you mean a foe who would actually take action, none come to mind."

Detective Portsman raised an eyebrow.

"Not even your husband?"

"Oh, please. Mr. White is a discourteous man, but despite his roughness, I doubt he actually would have the will to kill his own brother-in-law. They may have fought with words, but as far as I know, they never came to blows."

"Very well. Now, as you likely knew Mr. Saxon better than most, I was curious if you had ever heard him mention the occult or the letters 'V.R.'?"

"I have never heard him mention such a subject or that pair of letters, although he was generally unforthcoming with information."

Detective Portsman sighed.

"I see. If you would like to share more information, please come down to the station. You may go as this is still a crime scene."

"Farewell, detective," she said, moving quickly to the front door. She passed through the portal to the frigid outside, giving us one last flash of the rolling hills until the door closed once more.