

Tolemis lowered his gaze demurely. “Thank you, old man,” he said, “for speaking kindly of my father and myself. This man you speak of, whom you say Ulysses’ father is: I wouldn’t know a thing about all that. But a man’s genetics water down through every generation, so that I am not as noble as my father, nor Ulysses as malevolent as his. But enough of that, for I must ask you to dissolve a knot Ulysses tied, which fastens wickedness to your breast, too, old man.”

“A knot?” old Titus asked. “What do you mean?”

But Tolemis, staring gravely into the old man’s sea-blue eyes, replied, “You know exactly what. Tell me the circumstances of your predecessor’s death: Ulysses claims you murdered Eric Lee and stole his gun; but you say that you killed him to deliver him from pain, a man in agony like yourself, and he gave the gun to you in gratitude. Tell me the truth, old man, and I’ll believe you.”

Titus diverted his gaze from the captain to his wounded foot, and held his leg at the thigh, above the knee. “My foot,” he said, and winced: “the passing storm has agitated it.”

“Don’t dodge the question, Titus: answer me,” Tolemis said with eyes unyielding.

The old man turned his head to look outside the threshold. The sky was clouded still, matted with thick gray clouds, but rainless, and bright against the stark blackness of the cavern. He turned again to look at the captain. His eyes shivered, his face groaned. “I’ll tell you,” he said. “The whole story: I’ll leave nothing out. So that, afterwards, you may believe that what I did was right—though your opinion is your own, of course.”

And thus old Titus launched out on his tale: the true account of the last days of Dr. Eric Lee.

“It was in Virginia,” he began. “Arlington, where Eric worked for DARPA. I was stationed at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall at the time; but as a military man with a background in science, I spent much of my time in the Pentagon and in local laboratories funded by DARPA, as a

sort of liaison between the military and its benefactors. I worked closely with Dr. Lee on many of his projects—mostly just trying to keep up, for the speed of his genius was unsurpassable. This is how I came to be acquainted with Eric Lee’s famous weapon system, and with his ways of thinking and his processes of work, to the extent that even after his death I was able to mimic, but not to match, the inimitable man. He had a knack for solving engineering problems, always a unique approach from some direction untraversed—stunning, it was, so that everyone who ever knew the man, from his colleagues on down to the janitor, knew him as a genius. All those years ago...” the old man lowered his gaze: “it pains me to think of the number of years I’ve lost. But Eric Lee lost even more: he lost his life.

“All those years ago, Eric Lee fell in love with a woman. She was a lab technician where he worked. Her name was Deianira, matchless in beauty, with flowing hair and lovely feet and a mind as unique as her name. Eric Lee seduced and won her heart. But another man had an eye for her, as well, another DARPA scientist who worked in an adjacent lab as a biochemist. Dr. Nessus was his name; he was as much a beast as a man, given over as he was to a violent temperament and vile thoughts. He wore a beard that spilled down to his chest as a dark cloud spreads across a sunlit field. He befriended Deianira, always conniving behind Lee’s back to thief away her affection.

“But when Eric Lee and his devoted beauty announced their engagement, Nessus grew desperate. He was a most methodical man, in the lab, in his private life; his tie was always straight, his workbench tidy. But, hear this boy, there is a certain law of entropy in men’s lives: order here must be accompanied by disorder there—so it is, that prim and proper women have their love affairs in secret, that reasonable men will reason out clandestine sins, that something sinister always lurks behind the happiest facades. And so it was, with Dr. Nessus: so well-ordered in appearance, but his mind suffered from some malady of

chaos—mad and brilliant like the luddite Ted Kaczynski—churning dark plots to steal the virtue of the beauty Deianira while he stroked his thick black beard.

“In his capacity as a biochemist, he developed a concoction and gave a vial of it to the woman. When it came to women, he told her, Eric Lee had been known in the past for gallivanting; he told her that his concoction was a love potion, of sorts, a cocktail of pheromones and other chemicals that would ensure, should she ever doubt it, her husband’s fidelity to her. ‘Do not touch it yourself,’ he told her, ‘but soak it into a clean shirt and have your husband wear it when the two of you are both alone together.’ Deianira knew that if anyone could create a potent potion in this vein, it was Nessus; for he was a brilliant biochemist, and as he was her friend, she trusted him. But she was gravely mistaken. Nessus’ little bottle of chemicals contained not a love potion, but a horrifying toxin—a leprous extract of hebenon—that would react with the skin, burning and melting, and curdle the thin and wholesome blood like eager droppings into milk, and which when absorbed would begin to affect the mind.

“But Deianira never used the doubtful potion. She trusted her future husband that far. And it happened that, one evening, when Dr. Nessus and the beauty Deianira were each in the lab late at night, working the long hours when all the rest had retired to their homes and apartments, when the sun had settled and the creatures of the world drifted off into welcome sleep—it happened that the prolonged sexual frustration of Dr. Nessus overcame him. He tore into Dr. Lee’s lab with a wild gleam in his eyes, like a horse that hears a gunshot and, startled, rears back and neighs uncontrollably, throws off its rider, and his eyes flashing furiously with terror—such were Nessus’ eyes, as if in terror of himself. And he galloped across the room and swept a lab bench clean with a wide stroke of one arm—perhaps he thought at first that Deianira, likewise, would be swept away with passion—and he hoisted her onto the table he had cleared and tried to

mount her forcibly, like a stallion charged with pent-up passions in the heat of the mating season.

“But he was unaware that Eric Lee had not yet left, had stayed behind to finish up his work and keep his blushing bride some company. He had stepped out to use equipment in another lab, but now returned to see his wife screaming, struggling beneath the powerful brute, the man, the beast, Nessus prying both her legs apart and laboring to loosen his own belt and pants with one hand, panting, lusting for the beauty fortune had denied him: and she was splotched red in the face and on her upper arms and breast, the way a person looks who has been rolling in the grass; and shrieking for help, frayed hair, frantic, beating her wrists against his monstrous arms and yanking at his thick black beard. Helpless, she was; and she could not but have succumbed, until a terrible peal ripped through the laboratory and Nessus—with his pants halfway down his legs, cock out, hunting like an animal for penetration—fell limp and dead upon her. Eric Lee had fired his prototype weapon, the famous gun that never misses, and therefore it was Nessus who, instead, was penetrated.

“Life went on. Lee and Deianira married, time passed, and they thought less and less of Dr. Nessus and the catastrophe so narrowly avoided. But as Nessus had predicted, as the months passed into years, Lee’s eye began to wander to other women, and salacious rumors went from mouth to ear, and mouth to ear, as rumors will, until they reached the ear of Deianira. She loved my friend Eric Lee, and she did not wish to lose him. Who knows what chain of contests tussled in her mind to make her think of using Nessus’ potion on her lover? But whatever may have been her doubts and fears, her longing for her husband’s fondness overcame them: this was the man she married, whom she loved, who himself had saved her from violent rape—who had killed for her!—and she could not lose him to some tramp, some younger woman.

“So she opened a drawer that had not been opened in a long time, and from it withdrew the dusty vial that had been tucked far back among other, more trivial things. And she bought a nice, clean new shirt and poured the contents of the vial on it, and presented it to Eric Lee as a gift that very night as they prepared for bed. He tried it on, and unbeknownst to both of them the poison seeped into his skin, and when some minutes had passed, he felt the burn. Few men have known such pain as he and I: my foot, boy, his entire body. He tore the shirt off, but the chemicals had bonded it to his skin, so that with the shirt were peeled off tracts of flesh where the poison had been more highly concentrated. Blood everywhere, on his hands, on the bedsheets, and smeared on Deianira too, who tried to hold her husband as he thrashed about in pain—tears in her eyes, fearful whimpers in her throat. ‘What is this?!’ Eric cried, ‘what have you done to me?!’

“But Deianira didn’t know. Her only fault was gullibility. How could she have had an inkling that she’d one day be the vessel by which Dr. Nessus would exact revenge on her husband—reaching from the grave to strangle out her husband’s wits. In the next weeks, my friend began to lose his mind. Doctors could do nothing. Lee himself—he may have been able to come up with something, a hypothesis, but...the man was useless. The poison bled into his brain and altered it irreversibly. Deianira found herself fraught with guilt, regret, sorrow—it was she who had driven her own husband mad! She who had disfigured his chest and back and arms! And, thus despaired, one dreary morning before the fog had lifted off the swift Potomac’s waters, Deianira hung herself in her remorse. Eric Lee was truly lost: everything gone so quickly, a life of toil and hardships come to this: his faithful wife dead, and his mind departing day by day.

“He asked many people: his relatives, his closest friends. But no one else would do it. No one else but me. He wanted death, but could not bear to bring it on himself,” and here a tear slipped down the old man’s cheek, where it mingled in

his beard; and far below the ocean washed the rocks; and the errant cries of gulls along the cliff, among the crevices and clefts, could be heard in the distance from where the two men sat and Private Chorus listened in. The old man went on, trying not to let his voice tremble as it was wont to do: "Men with healthy minds will sometimes nonetheless have fits of madness. But Eric Lee, a man insane, had fits of sanity instead; and so it was that, in one such event, seized with a sudden grip of reason, Eric Lee, my closest friend, asked me to murder him. And I consented to it, boy; I wouldn't hide that from you.

"I drove him deep into the Appalachian mountains, following the course of swift Potomac where it winds upstream toward Harper's Ferry. High up along the river sit the forgotten remnants of an unfinished canal which in the days before railroads, even, had been planned as a means of getting boats across the mountains, with locks built to accommodate the ships to the drastic changes in elevation. But the advent and proliferation of the railroads superseded any need for such a canal, so it was left half-built, a vestige of a time which our progress forgot. And all along the river, likewise, one sees watermills rusting, rotting here and there, foundations, dams, and sluiceways cracking, breaking down with the inevitable flow of time and water—technologies as old as written human history, forgotten like so many names of men.

"Soon enough we found a stretch of river quite secluded from society, in a dense valley among the mountains. It was autumn, and the trees—oaks and hickories, ashes, tulip poplars, red and yellow maples, and gums and sycamores, and beech trees in the valley's deepest corners—had turned colors, all except the spruces and the hemlocks and the tall white pines, and the cedars and the holly trees which ever hold their green. We parked the car and wandered into the wood, towards the river, picked our way between the rhododendron thickets so dense as to be impenetrable by all but the smallest creatures. We reached the river's shore at

length. Great boulders peopled the margins of its course, and a cascade sounded far upriver, to the right; and the leaves of every color fell like quiet rain upon the surface of the water, through which the softest breeze sent ripples out in peace.

“Oh, my boy, I haven’t seen a sight like that in ages...beauty! Terrible beauty! For how bittersweet it must have seemed to Eric Lee, my friend: the last sight his mortal eyes would see. We went to work. By the river’s banks, in a spot of soft ground, I dug the hole which would become his final resting place; while he gathered the wood to pile up for his own funeral pyre. As night rushed on, we built the pyre in the ditch, and Eric Lee lay down upon it, with his head upon a book of his and with a pen clasped in his hand above his chest—for the book was the source of his strength, and the pen the outlet for it, a man of intellect as he was.

“We exchanged close words, which I will not repeat: the last words spoken between friends and brothers are sacred, and personal. But among them, Eric Lee bequeathed his gun and all his research to me; and this, too, he wrote into his final will and testament; and DARPA, who in fact owned his research, did not object, for they respected both of us by then. And all this done, calling upon all the courage within these bones and sinews, mustering all the will within these hands, I administered a lethal dose of sodium pentothal—it is a drug, boy, a barbiturate that is used for lethal injections, or in smaller doses to induce comas, or in smaller doses yet, as a truth serum. In mere seconds, Eric Lee lost consciousness, and shortly after, died. Though the skies were clear, a peal of thunder sounded at the instant of his death—I tell you, boy, it’s true—and a mist like a low cloud crept along the water towards him, enveloped him, and rose as if to take him off to Heaven. I closed his eyelids, paid his rights, and lit the pyre.

“Night came swiftly on as I watched my friend incinerate. High above the Appalachian range, the wind swirled and the cold stars glittered unaffected, and wispy clouds swept by. My heart seemed to tremble, and the trees, too, trembled in the breeze as their leaves departed and fell.

The moon rose and glimmered in the ripples of the water, and the bonfire burned, and still it burns within my wistful memory. Ah, my boy, as I describe it to you now I see my friend as plain as day, charring to ash and dust, from misery to misery—what a poor and pitiable life, for that magnificent man. And often have I seen, in my mind's eye, the windswept waters of the swift Potomac, and longed to follow its course back home to Arlington, to my father, to my home...or was it all a dream?

“So there it is, boy, take it or leave it be: Eric Lee was indeed murdered, but not by me. It was, instead, committed by the villain Dr. Nessus, killed by Eric Lee, who wrought his vengeance for himself in turn. Thus it was that my friend was murdered by a man, an animal, who was himself dead: he killed Eric with a maddening toxin, and Eric's wife with grief, and himself with his own rabid nature. For a time the crackle of the fire and the gurgle of the water vied within my ears. But when the flames dwindled and the embers died away, and all that remained was a pit of dry ash and charred bone beside the river—which ashes were the residue of man and which of wood, it was impossible to tell—I heaped the earth upon his grave, mounded it high and packed the dirt tight. These are the solemn honors owed the dead.

“I left the grave unmarked except for a stone that I alone would recognize. I know exactly where he lies, where my thoughts often linger with nostalgia.” The old man sighed, a long sigh, like a wind that sweeps through a long and empty corridor. “Thus, my boy, concludes the tragic tale of the final days of Dr. Eric Lee, my faithful friend, whom I murdered as a last respect, to deliver him from pain. Right or wrong, my boy, it was his last request: judge of it how you will.”