Jonathan sat across the desk from the prison warden in silence. There seemed to be nothing more to say. He had crossed an ocean, risked his life and liberty traveling through Napoleon’s France, cast away the sum of his fortune bribing officials for information and opportunities, and now at the last stage of his quest, there was nothing more to be done.

“It is a matter of duty, monsieur.” The warden explained with a condescending smile. He held up his hand as Jonathan prepared to make another offer. “Please, do not continue.” He insisted. “I have had word of your coming. I know very well that you can offer me a considerable sum of money. I know too that the Emperor wants us to extend our kindness to Americans, and, indeed, I’m sure he would not object to what you ask... No, don’t interrupt. I do not refuse out of fear for myself. I refuse in memory of the Revolution. Unless you have a written order from our Emperor to command me, the prisoner will not be released.”

Jonathan twisted in his seat. He passed his hand through his thinning hair and clenched his teeth in frustration.

“This man was never an enemy of the Revolution.” He began. “His crimes have never...”

Again the warden stopped him with a wave of his hand.

“Monsieur, I have been warden here for fifty seven years now. Before the Revolution I was here. After it I was here. And now I am here still. My prison is not as great a fortress as some in France that have earned better reputations. And yet, when the powers of this country convict someone and wish assurance that the condemned shall never escape, they send him here. They do this because in fifty seven years I have never accepted a bribe. Monsieur, in the early days of the Revolution, my little jail was stocked to the brim with gentle folk, and the relatives coming with offers to my door were like a stream of ants. I can think back on several amounts suggested in these meetings that would have made me a fabulously wealthy man. And yet,” he looked about him and gestured at his surroundings, “I do not consider myself a poor man today.”

Jonathan frowned and glanced hopelessly at the posh furnishings of the warden’s office, and at the fine suit he wore. The warden’s point was clear. Any bribe he could offer would not be worth considering to a man his stature. There really seemed nothing left to say. But he had come so far, he hesitated now simply at a loss of what to do next.

And the warden had not finished. He rustled with some papers on his desk, pulled out a particular document and gazed at it with feigned interest. Jonathan suspected that nothing on that sheet surprised him.

“This prisoner of yours has been here a long time, I see. A long time, but not as long as others here I could name.” The warden chuckled slightly. “I, and few others by now. Perhaps not even themselves. But you interest me, Monsieur. What would you expect of this man by now? What is his hold on you? Thirty years he has been with us. I look at you, and I think you could not have been more than a child when he came here. But yet you knew him well?”

“I have never met him.” Jonathan answered absently, barely listening to the warden’s musings as he strove to calm an inner struggle. Half of him told him he had reached a dead-end.
at last at that he should just go home. Another part of him was reluctant to give up. He could see no more possibilities for success, and yet he hesitated to abandon his long hope.

"Indeed?" replied the warden with surprise. "You have put a considerable amount of effort into freeing this man you have never met. Just finding him must have been a long and expensive task. I can see that there could be much discussion about this matter. Perhaps we could continue this. Can you tell me more about your interest in this man?"

Jonathan was startled out of his private thoughts by the slow appearance of a suggestive tone in the warden's voice. He had made it clear that he would not release the man for any price, and yet he seemed to be offering something. Jonathan decided to play along as best as he could.

"He was a doctor." He said hesitantly, not sure what his words would mean to the warden. "He was a well-respected Parisian physician and also an anatomist of great renown. I studied his work. I wanted to meet him."

"Yes! A scientist!" exclaimed the warden with more interest than one might expect. "I have that here. A prominent scientist! Very knowledgeable. I don't doubt one could stand to learn much if they could just find a way to speak with him...even if only for an hour or so."

Jonathan pursed his lips and remained silent. He realized what the warden was offering now. He thought about it. An hour or two. Would it be of any use? Could he expect to get the answers he wanted? If they weren't complex and involved, surely he would have found them for himself by now. But then again, it could be something simple and yet so unexpected that it could only be chanced upon. It could be worth it.

"His journals speak of a method for preserving tissue and organs. If I could learn this method, it could be of great benefit to humanity in surgery and in the treatment of gangrenous limbs."

As he spoke, Jonathan opened his jacket and pulled out a swollen leather wallet. He placed it lightly on the desk before him. The coins inside clinked together slightly as they settled on the surface.

The warden never looked at the leather bag, but he pushed himself away from his desk slightly. He looked upwards and away with a thoughtful expression.

"Your words move me." he said. "Thirty years your man has been here, and I don't recall that he has ever had a visitor. I am not a cruel man. Perhaps you would care to visit him for an hour or so? Yes, as a favor to our friends, the Americans, I believe I could arrange that..."
“These levels, they are natural ones discovered many years after the chateau was made a prison.” the officer said, continuing the friendly conversation they had begun upon leaving the Warden’s office. “During the Revolution, we always needed more cells so we dug out more. In digging we found this.” he waived his hand above him as the passage suddenly widened into a vast chamber.

“Do you see the holes throughout the walls? Each is a passage to smaller chambers. There are hundreds here, and the largest passage,” he pointed to the wall on their left that angled inwards slightly revealing a large opening. “it leads to another room just as this. We shall go that way now.”

The officer started forward again with the smoking box lantern held just over his head. Jonathan followed behind, glancing back and forth while shadows loomed and wobbled up on either side of the cavern as the lantern passed through. As they neared the far wall, he could see that each of the small openings in the rock walls had makeshift bars covering their mouths. As the light of the lantern passed over them he heard a few faint cries and a distant moan. As they walked past one such opening, he saw a long wrinkled arm stretch out between these bars and waive pathetically in the air. Jonathan jumped back in alarm, but the officer seemed to take no notice. Jonathan walked on looking backwards at the opening. The arm waved around for a few more moments, and then slumped dejectedly against the bars. Ahead of him Jonathan heard the officer calling. He glanced back one last time and saw a second gray hand reach out and grip the bars, and then both arms withdrew back into the darkness.

“Now, Monsieur,” the officer began when he had his guest’s attention again. “We near the prisoner you seek. You must so be careful in this next passage. A stream cuts through it that is not so very wide, but is unimaginably deep.”

The officer led him on and into another passageway. The man walked gingerly forward with his lantern extend as far before him as possible. He came to a sudden halt in the midst of the darkness and held his arm out to stop Jonathan’s progress. As the officer’s boots ground to a halt, he could hear small stones skipping into water.

“Here is the stream, Monsieur, and here we must make a little jump. Simply do as I do.” And without a further word, the old man hopped forward and landed less than two feet ahead. He gestured for Jonathan to follow. Because the officer held the lantern towards him, the light kept Jonathan from ever seeing the stream. He simply had to follow the man’s directions and to jump just as he was told. He landed awkwardly on the other side and the officer helped him back to his feet.

“Very near now, Monsieur,” he assured him, and started back down the passage.

Jonathan followed. He could feel the passage angling downward as they went along. Jonathan had noticed immediately after crossing the stream that the air had become more moist, and the further they went along, the more watery the passage became. Soon he could hear water dripping and echoing throughout the hallway. At first he felt an occasional splatter of water on his head and arms, and as they went further down they sometimes passed through light curtains of water that fell from the ceiling, ran along the floor, and then spread out to an unknown subterranean reservoir somewhere beneath their feet. He marveled that prisoners could actually survive in this damp underworld, knowing, as a man of medicine, what infections and diseases were fostered by dank and mildew.
“How many prisoners do you keep down here?” he asked in his halting French. He did not try to hide his disgusted tone from the officer. He had heard of the atrocities of the Revolution, and he was disappointed to see that they had not ceased, but only moved underground.

The officer gave a short laugh in response to Jonathan’s indignation.

“Only your friend is here now, Monsieur. No one else can survive it here long, as you may guess. But this man—he tells us he can survive our worst, and yes, indeed, he has.”

“Then you have spoken to the Doctor?”

“Oh, many times, Monsieur, many times. Ten years ago, I was only a simple guard, and I brought food to the lower levels. I saw your friend every day for almost three years.”

“Did you ever hear what crime it was that brought him to this place?” Jonathan asked. “I have only heard it was conspiracy or treason, but I never heard a more specific charge.”

“And so he is here, you see.” the old man answered. “The more general the charge, the further we keep them from the light of day. Of course,” he continued with some pride, “I know the true story.”

The old man paused, no doubt, expecting his guest to offer him some kind of payment for his story. But Jonathan had given all of his money to the warden and could only receive the officer’s statement with silence. Fortunately, his guide’s desire to tell his story provided enough motivation to continue. With just a small frown of disappointment, he readily started up again.

“He was always a well-respected physician, you know.” he continued. “For years he worked tirelessly among the poor. But one can only do so much good for the poor before the higher classes expect you to perform your good upon them, and by the year of the Revolution he was treating only the richest of our society.”

“Yes, I had heard of his excellent reputation.” Jonathan answered. “That is why I do not understand—”

“Perhaps you don’t know everything about his reputation.” the officer answered with some smugness. “I imagine you never heard what he did with the bodies of his patients that he could not save?”

“Well, no. But he was a man of science. I don’t doubt that his research—”

“Research you say?” said the guard. “Not research. Ritual! Satanic ritual!”

“Oh now, really—”

“Devil worship, I tell you!” the old man insisted. “When they took him, they found him in the middle of the room with twenty heads set on his tables all facing in to him. And the doctor there in the center waiving his arms and dancing.”

“Twenty heads!” Jonathan scoffed. “You cannot expect me to believe—”

“Twenty heads, maybe more. All his patients were going to the guillotine in those days, and he paid the soldiers to leave the bodies with him. It went on for months. It was only when a commander went to inspect a body to make sure a stand-in had not been executed and an enemy let free did anyone learn what the doctor was really doing.

“A misunderstanding.” Jonathan said. “I was aware of his work with the guillotined, but it was never criminal. He was a scientist, I tell you. His methods were not beyond reproach, I grant you, but—”

“The commander later went mad from what he had seen there.” the old man continued, paying no attention to his charge’s protests. “He too joined us some months later. In less than
a year he died in the most terrible agony I have ever witnessed. And my experience with such things is not to be considered small.”

Jonathan did not venture to challenge his guide again. Even in his short career as a surgeon he had been accused of similar crimes by the uneducated classes in their city and did not doubt that many of the children on his block were cowed by parents that threatened them with a visit from the Mad Doctor unless they learned to behave themselves. He did not wish to waste his time arguing with the old man and only thanked God he had been born in a more civilized era and a more peaceable nation.

The guard seemed to understand how poorly his story was received and became sullen and silent. As they turned down a final bend in the passage, he stopped and set down his lantern. Reaching into his jerkin, he fished out a ring full of keys. He did not hand them immediately to Jonathan, but hooked them on his other arm. Reaching again into his vest, he pulled out a pipe, a bag of tobacco, and matches. Cradling these in his arms, he backed up against a wall and lowered himself to the ground, motioning at the same time for Jonathan to follow him down.

When Jonathan was squatting before him, the man held the ring of keys out to the young doctor. He held back slightly as Jonathan reached for them and gave this warning.

“I, myself, have no desire to speak with doctor again, so I shall wait here for you. I do not think you would be foolish enough to try to escape with this man you go to see. Yet, because people can be foolish even when you do not expect it, I do give you this bit of advice. The guards above will not let you return without me, and I will not suffer to let this man leave. I simply warn you to abandon any foolish notions should you hold any.”

Jonathan assured his guide he had no such notions, and he spoke truthfully. Indeed his nerves were stretched to their limit in just preparing himself for an hour or so stay in these caverns. Doing anything that might lead him to spend the rest of his life in this nightmare was the furthest thing from his mind.

The guard seemed convinced by Jonathan’s assurances and handed him the keys at last.

“I will smoke three pipes.” the guard said. “After that time I will call for you. If you do not come, I will not fetch you, but I shall remain no longer. If you wish to ever leave, you will leave when I call. For myself,” he added, “I won’t be surprised if you come sooner. Go now. I will keep the lantern here, but it will be bright enough to light his cell.”

With that he motioned his charge on down the hallway to the iron bars that loomed ahead in the dim illumination of the lantern.

Treading softly for no reason other than an unwillingness to disturb the silence that seemed to frown on his every liberty, Jonathan made his way to the bars. He raised the key before his face and then looked about him for the lock. But at the sound of weak scuffling from the inside, he was gripped with a sudden fear and hesitated. He did not really believe any of the nonsense the guard had told him, but in the environment he found himself, he could not completely reason away baseless fears. Jonathan, lowered the key again and stepped back half a step. In a tremulous voice he whispered: “Docteur Crampon!”

The scuffling sound was heard again. The bars of the cell cast wide shadows in the cell from the distant light of the lantern, and in the dimness, Jonathan could make out little more than moving shapes. He thought he could see a form swaying—perhaps moving to a sitting position against the wall. Then from the form came a loud hacking cough. Then a sound that could only
be described as a mixture of a cough, wheeze, and croak at the same time. Patients undergoing surgery without proper anesthetics had made sounds that reminded Jonathan of what he heard now. The form gathered itself up for a moment, and then released a long series of hacking coughs followed by gasps for air. Finally, the form went silent again. Jonathan was about to speak again, when an unusually high, yet rough and gravelly voice finally came from the cell.

“Je sais que je collerais mon me au diable pour une paule de mouton.”

Jonathan was too startled by the sound of the voice to translate what the form had said. He had never heard such a voice. It was a powerful voice with a firmness that could even be called harsh. But what made it unpleasantly unique was the total lifelessness of its tone—as if each word was an effort to perform because the speaker knew each syllable was waste. In just a few words—words that he had not even understood—Jonathan knew he was listening to a man who had lost all hope in life. Another cough, and the voice began again, speaking, it seemed more to itself, than to the visitor:

“But I have had my food today.” Jonathan translated this time. “This is not my food. Something else. Am I forgetting something? Something else that happens? I eat. I sleep. I eat. No, there is nothing else. This is different.”

The voice stopped. It seemed to be waiting. Jonathan was about to speak again, but the voice began again.

“I hear nothing now. I could just be going mad again. It has been awhile. And it seems I will be called a doctor again. I will enjoy that.”

At the back of the cell the form seemed to be settling down again. Jonathan took a step towards the bars and called out again.

“Doctor Crampon! I wish to speak to you!”

Without any motion that Jonathan could discern, the voice returned: “Of course! And I welcome this madness. What shall we talk about? And must I speak aloud for this? My throat is all but an open sore. It would be easier if you just spoke to my mind.”

“Doctor,” Jonathan replied nervously, unsure of how to respond to these ravings, “I am not an hallucination. I have come to visit you...to speak with you.”

“That is unlikely.” the voice assured him. “I was a pariah when I was free. And I have been here for years and years. No one would come to visit me now.”

“But I have come for information.” Jonathan insisted. “And to talk about your research!”

The voice went silent. The form remained still. Finally, Jonathan heard a cough.

“I don’t think much of this.” the voice said to itself again. “This is what I must think about when I am sane.”

“Doctor, I believe you are sane.” Jonathan responded although even as he said it he realized he did not believe it. His hope of getting anything useful from this poor man seemed altogether remote now. Surely he had gone entirely mad. But having gone this far, Jonathan persisted in his hopes, almost mechanically now.

“Sir, does the name of Father Albert Viellent still mean anything to you?”

The form within stirred slightly, and then froze into what Jonathan thought seemed to suggest a pensive state.
“Father Viellent say you? Yes, I knew Viellent, though not as Father. Father Viellent!” the form exclaimed, and it seemed it almost chuckled as it spoke. “Is there something of him you wish to tell me?”

“He has died.” Jonathan replied.

“Indeed!” the form responded with some interest. “Brave soul! Recently? At what age?”

“They say he was over 100 years old. No one knows for sure.”

“Ah! I would believe them to err on the side of caution, for my part. A stubborn fellow—stubborn and strong, though excitable. At any rate, he spoke of me on his death bed did he?”

“I could not say.” Jonathan replied. “I did not know him. But he was the chancellor of my university for many years. He died twenty years before I came to the school. But after his death his journals were stored in the medical library. I came across them by chance earlier this year.”

The form in the cell was utterly still now.

“Were you not Father Viellent’s pupil, sir?” Jonathan asked.

The form did not speak.

“I read his journals with great skepticism, as you can understand.” Jonathan continued. “But now I have duplicated enough of his findings to hope there is some truth to it. I—”

“His findings?” the voice interrupted with surprising energy. “His findings? What did Viellent ever find but new ways to clean my beakers and wash my linen? Viellent never came to a conclusion until his death, of that I am sure!”

“Your pardon!” Jonathan answered, excited to be drawing the doctor into conversation, although still frightened by the bizarre voice and the unseen figure within the cell. “I did not mean to suggest what you say! Father Viellent gave all credit to you! He offered himself as nothing more than a recorder”

“And what….” The dim shape seemed to stagger upwards and shook with a violent fit of coughing. Then after gasps that sounded like many a dying gasp Jonathan had heard in his medical career, the voice continued.

“And what does Viellent record of me?”

“That you were on the verge of something great when you were stopped by your imprisonment. That in the field of medicine and anatomy you had no rival!”

“Kind words.” the figure gasped, still recovering, still catching its breath. “And what do you say?”

“What Father Viellent wrote intrigued me, though he, not being a true scientist, often strayed from facts and lingered on the philosophical. Still he inspired me to read the research directly from the source, but I found no work of yours in our library. I wrote to a colleague in Paris, and he sent me copies of some manuscripts you had sent to the the National Library years ago. He also informed me that you had never been reported dead and that he did not know where you had gone.”

“And perhaps if I had been proclaimed dead,” the voice answered coldly. “then you would be sure of where I had gone?”

Jonathan did not understand the question and remained silent. But the form in the cell seemed to be waiting for some kind of an answer, so Jonathan replied.

“I wish to ask you questions that could help me in carrying on your good work.” he said.
“So I surmised.” the voice answered with a hint of irony that seemed to give strength to a voice that must have lacked any other source for inspiration. “I should have known someone would come. This wonderful jail can imprison madmen like me, but it cannot hope to keep out all the madmen who wish to come inside. Sit down, then! Sit down and tell me what you know already so I may fill in the missing details for you.”

The form made a shivering motion which Jonathan thought must be a sort of silent laughter. Jonathan looked down the hallway away from the cell and thought he could see the flare of the guard’s pipe. He felt the strongest desire to return to the man and tell him he had seen enough, leave the prison, return to America and try to forget this visit as soon as possible. But now he was too close. The poor doctor seemed to be a completely broken man, but Jonathan thought he might hold on to just enough sanity to provide him with a vital clue. If he could just bear ten minutes of conversation with this sad old man he would know whether he quest had been in vain from the first or if there had ever been any truth to the journals of Father Viellent. He was prepared to accept that he might learn nothing. If so, he would leave and leave the question alone for good and return to home and stop chasing phantoms. But if he could still get a clue from this wreck of humanity… it was surely worth ten minutes.

“The journals I have read said you made great strides in your work when you began to receive the executed bodies of the nobility.”

“Quite so.” the doctor answered. “Their bodies were healthy and for many their decapitation was their first malodorous complaint. As doctor for so many of these unfortunate folk, I was given the care of their remains. Somehow, after several bodies had been sent to my office, as the executions accelerated, the soldiers seemed to think I had become The Republic’s Chief Undertaker. Bodies needed disposing, and I suppose even in those blood-soaked times, the task was not one which people wished to dwell upon. They began to leave cartloads at my door with no instructions or any kind of remuneration.

“At first, I buried some of the bodies I recognized, but the costs were considerable, and more than that, the annoyance of setting into the earth perfect specimens began to weigh more and more on my mind. In the preservation and even the regeneration of organs and tissue, I had begun to make incredible progress with a mixture of phamaldahyde and mercury—”

“Phamaldahyde and mercury!” Jonathan exclaimed, reaching into his breast pocket for a pen to make a note.

“Phamaldahyde and mercury!” the doctor continued. “Of course, on the broken and wasted bodies of the city’s poor, I could not make definitive conclusions on what was healthy tissue and what had been ruined beyond recovery. But on the fine bodies of the gentlefolk that had never seen a day’s labor, it was easy to see the effects of my treatments.”

“And what were these treatments?” Jonathan asked, forgetting his fear and in his excitement not even questioning the doctor’s method of experimentation. He was writing furiously in his notebook now, writing down any detail of the prisoner’s account that could possibly pertain to his research.

“The tissue was treated in the fumes of the mixture. The exact amounts I never could confirm and the effects varied greatly from body to body and by duration of exposure. The vapors themselves were extremely powerful. On one occasion, I made a batch that had a most frightful power and I was overcome by the fumes.”
Jonathan stopped writing.
“Overcome by mercury fumes?” he asked slowly.
“Oh yes.” the doctor continued. “Fortunately, the effects on my own person faded quickly. But my work was never the same from that day.
“You are a practitioner of some experience it seems, so you will not be shocked when I tell you this. You understand that I received the victims of the guillotine sometimes less than ten minutes after their demise. It was not an infrequent event that the heads, which were of far less interest to me than the decapitated bodies, would still show considerable animation as they were taken from the cart and into my lab. The eyes rolled, the lips fluttered, and sometimes the jaws even moved about. The animation was short-lived, of course, and I paid little heed to the effect as I always turned immediately to the more pliable tissue to be found on the body’s other limbs.
“I was working deep into the night on that evening.” the voice said and seemed to drift into a particularly pensive mood. “The vapors in the room were thick and my head was swimming, but only twenty minutes earlier I had made a seven inch incision into the calf of a middle-aged countess, and was watching with the greatest interest as my treatment had caused the wound to fade to a mere scratch in that short time. I was just preparing to make a final note of documentation and then to step out onto the landing for some fresh air, when I heard a most unpleasant gurgling sound behind me.
“I could not locate the sound at first for everything in the lab was unmoving and my vision offered no information. I stepped across the room and found that the sound was louder now. I came to the lab table upon which the most recent bodies had been deposited. I could still discern no movement, but unquestionably the sound came from beneath two arms that had been draped over the head that had once rested between them. I moved the arm aside, and gazed directly into the open eyes of a woman I had known as a patient some years earlier. To my great shock, the eyes moved from side to side searchingly and the lips fluttered, even so much to reveal the perfect teeth of the once-proud countess.
“I, of course, was beyond mere shock. The body and head had sat upon my table for many, many hours. There could be no explanation for this continued animation. No explanation, unless—yes, it dawned on me quickly. The countess’ remains had been placed on the same table where I produced my treatment, and there the fumes were uncommonly strong. It was too fantastic to believe, but the evidence was before me, so I had no choice but to yield to the truth of it. My treatment, in such a potent dosage, had actually gone so far as to revive this poor creature’s motor control, her facial muscles, and, perhaps—almost certainly, for I could see the light of perception in her eyes—her consciousness itself.
“I say poor creature, because the dear lady was certainly in unspeakable pain. If you could have seen the contortions of her face, I think you would say it is the greatest kindness that no one else had ever had the misfortune to survive a beheading. Imagine the agony of those severed nerves each of them crying out for knitting and healing! The impossibility of such repair only being signed out to her newly awakened brain by signals of pain which you and I cannot fathom.
“I do not like to dwell on that picture, but, of course, I have long given up the idea of ever blocking out. I believe it haunts me now so strongly, because, though you may not believe it, I saw nothing of it at the time. I was far too fascinated with the sounds that came from her lips. How she produced them without the aid of lungs and only the barest remnants of a larynx,
I still cannot guess. But for all that, I was sure I could detect the suggestion of words in the murmuring and whispers that came from that mouth.

"Looking back now, I can feel fairly sure that it was at that point I became a madman. Then again, perhaps I have always been mad and it just needed a catalyst to bring it forth. It's difficult to say, and with all the time I have been granted to ponder the question, I am still not sure. Well, sometimes I am very sure, but then, you know, a year or two passes, and then I am not so sure. A few years after that I became quite sure again, but only for the other side.

"But that is all far from the point. Simply put, when first I heard that strange whispering, I simply had to know what she was trying to say. Please don't think ill of me. I am a man of science, of course. I didn't actually think she was going to say something to me from the grave, or give me insight into the world hereafter—or at least if I did hope for that, I didn't recognize that desire at the time. I'm really not sure what I thought. I only knew that this form before me had been lifeless and I had brought her back to life—and this living thing was trying to communicate. That seemed remarkable to me. That seemed important to me. It seemed necessary that I make it possible. I screamed for Vallient who was resting in the rooms below to bring me a clean beaker and he appeared in great confusion from his sleep with the glass I required.

"I quickly turned to my potion and filled the beaker with Vallient staring on in wonder. Knowing of no other way to administer the drug, I gave it as an oral treatment to the countess and awaited the effect. I saw its results immediately. The face became even more livelier, and her speech became much louder. Alas, it never became any clearer for as the wakefulness of her mind increased, so did her response to the pain of her decapitation, and her face and jaw jerked about in torment and her voice gave out only whispered screams and groans. Completely gone was the suggestion of speech and reason. Her contortions reached a fevered pitch and her eyes locked in a stare that still holds me. And then, as quickly as it had come, all light disappeared from those eyes, all movement ceased across her face.

"I stared down at that face and I felt nothing but the bitterest disappointment in my failure. And yet, that feeling was short-lived. You are a man of science, you say. You know the frustration of a failed experiment. But you know as well as I do what separates a scientist from the hobbyist—the excitement of trying again...and again...and again!

I began to plot new treatments, new patients, and new methods. I had no corpses that I could hope to use that night, but I knew more would come. I began to relax slightly and decided to show patience and wait for more material. I was just thinking I would try to rest, when I noticed that Viellent had moved toward my work and that he was weeping bitterly. The scene had upset him in a way far differently than for me, I fear. Indeed, he was never the same after that. He stayed with me, but he was an altered man. I often caught him mumbling prayers or weeping at his work. I think he wanted to leave, but in his own way, the work fascinated him.

"More bodies came, but I will not tire you with the failures I faced. I worked out a methodology that never failed to produce the keenest animation to the corpses, but I eventually had to face the truth that the more life I put into those heads, the more they felt the agony of the severed nerves and that agony prevented any hope of communication. Indeed, it cannot be doubted that in my lab the human form reached the apex of what could be suffered. You have heard people say that death can be a mercy? They are right! But there in my lab, I took back that mercy. For there, the pain that was unbearable was made to be borne by my treatments. O!
the agonies I saw! Well, I say that I saw them, but in truth I saw very little. I was not looking for their suffering; it was of no value to me. I was looking for a sign of consciousness to rise from my work—a spark of recognition. With practice, I learned to draw the moments of tortured animation out for several minutes. On a particularly chilly autumn night I remember enduring the rasping of a young boy of twelve for an entire half hour! I snapped my fingers in front of his eyes, clapped in his ears and pleaded with him to calm down, but I was never able to get these guillotined corpses to ignore that pain the way I did, and so we could never communicate.

“My downfall came when I realized that I could make no progress with those that had been to the guillotine. The trauma of that experience was simply too much for those reawakened brains to overcome. I decided that I needed to reanimate from a less conclusive demise. In the throes of my ambition, I’m afraid I could find no strong moral opposition to harvesting my own corpse. You see, I had determined what I needed. I needed a body that had slipped most calmly into death—a corpse that had just lightly floated from life to lifelessness so that my reanimation process would be a smooth transition. Obviously, the way to bring this about was to let the person drift into a heavy sleep and then on to a most relaxed death. As a family practitioner, I had seen many such deaths. Indeed, I would have taken up my practice again if I thought I could have gained access to such an opportunity, but these quiet deaths are just the sort of thing families wish to preside over and linger over, and for my experiments I needed a body recently deceased. Yes, there was no way around it. I needed to extinguish a life right in my lab.

“O! I will not tire you overmuch with the rationalizations that freed me to this decision! Nothing can be more tiresome than the delusions of a beaten man. I’m sure you can guess them…

The shadow in the cell made another sort of shudder that suggested a pained laughter.

“…Yes! I am sure you can make some sort of guess! ‘For the greater good.’ ‘Not really murder if there is no malice.’ Oh I had a good many! And, of course, I had everything I needed in my lab by way of chemicals that could provide a victim…I never used that word, of course…a most peaceful transition.

My first thought was to take Viellent unawares, but as I have said he was strong and excitable and he might have got the best of me. Plus, although he didn’t have the intellect to help me with my work directly, he did a fair job of note-taking and a fine bit of cleaning, so I spared him. The answer, of course, was some sort of street person that no one would miss. A harlot, an orphan, someone I could lure back to the lab without any great fear of discovery.

“Well, such were my aspirations, and you can imagine that I wasted little time putting my hopes to the test. Indeed, if I had been a bit more patient, I could have waited for the morning and brought back to my work a paper-seller or some such urchin that no one would have looked for again. But once I had made up my mind I was eager to bring my plans to fruition and at that time of night, it meant finding a street-walker.

“That was certainly not difficult, even though I flatter myself that I was more discerning than the average man when it comes to select such a lady. I had to be thorough. I wanted someone young and rather healthy. I had to make sure I wasn’t fooled by paint and corsets. And if at all possible I wanted to find a girl inexperienced enough to not expect foul play before it was too late.
“I found just such a one. She wasn’t particularly pretty, but she was obviously healthy. I suspect she had come in from the countryside and fallen prey to the city early on. She told me her name, but you know in all these years I have sat in this cell, I have never remembered what it was? It hardly matters. It was not long after sunset that she was lying motionless and inert on my table.

“I began applying my treatment to the young lady with the greatest of care, measuring out the dosage and timing the application exactly, as I had learned from previous experience how the slightest deviation could cause the most fierce reactions.

“I had never felt a greater pride in my work when I saw how my treatment performed when worked on a whole corpse. I saw the whole body begin to stir to reanimation, and I saw the eyes fitter open and even the breast rise and receive air once again. Then the jaw dropped open, and I distinctly saw perception and realization spark in my patient’s eyes. I truly believed I was on the verge of a conversation that has defied humanity since the beginning of the race.

“And then...screams. Such screams. In my work with the countless beheaded forms I had dealt with previously, I had never had to consider the effects of working lungs. But this lady, seemed to have taken up the cry for all my previous patients. Her screams echoed from the rafters and could be heard, no doubt, from blocks away. I grabbed her shoulders and tried to find some hope of reason, but from her came nothing but ghastly shrieks of terror and pain. Viellent came running into the room and he understood in a moment what had happened. I remember seeing his look of abject horror and just thinking to myself ‘Why doesn’t this fool hand me something to stuff this girl’s mouth before she wakes the town?’ I had no chance to suggest this action to my servant, however, for within moments there were poundings at my door, and Viellent cried out and ran out the other entrance and out into the night.

“The shrieks continued unabated, and if it is possible, I believe they may have gained strength! Soon the pounding on the door was followed with shouts and demands to be let inside. Then the door was kicked open, and townspeople and a few soldiers passed within to find me standing over the form of a naked, screaming girl. They rushed me and overpowered me in an instant, binding my hands and throwing me to the floor. Then two of them tried to tend to the lady, but already the reanimation was fading, and as I could not continue my treatment, and her screams died away to soft moans.

“The men turned to me with fierce anger and disgust but I gazed only at the nearly lifeless form on the table. As her chest ceased to rise, her head turned to the side and her cheek rested against the stone. I watched as the spark I had seen so many times before began to fade. Then just as it prepared to vanish forever, I saw why she had screamed.”

There was a long silence in the cell and Jonathan swallowed deeply as he stared into the blackness behind the bars.

“And now,” the voice began again after the lengthy pause. “I am here where I have had plenty of time to consider my life and to consider my fate. My fate. Your fate. Everyone’s fate. Do you see it? Viellent saw it. He understood it. That girl had no pain, you see. I had misjudged why they had all screamed. Their beheadings? Nothing! A trifle! No, they were screaming because of where they were before I brought them back! All of them! The very good, the very bad, the young, the old—all screaming. All suffering.
As Jonathan watched, the figure in the cell stepped out of the shadows an into the half-light of the lantern. The figure was completely hairless and naked. There was no sign of muscle and nearly every bone in the human body could be discerned beneath the sagging skin that hung in a dark yellow wrinkles at every joint. The face, the nose shrunken to a socket, the lips gnarled beyond recognition, and teeth long-rotted out, squeezed between the bars like a tortoise moving slowly from its shell. With something that must have been taken for a smile, it spoke.

“But there is no hurry to move on to that fate! Let’s you and I discuss the particulars of my research so you can carry on my good work!”

Jonathan took several steps back in disgust at the sight of the prisoner, and once starting the retreat, he found his legs unable to stop their motion. Moving backwards without turning, he edged against the wall until he stumbled against the old guard in the full light of the lantern. The guard smiled grimly at the terror he read on his charge’s face.

“Did you learn what you wished to know from our doctor?” he asked, mockingly.

“No.” Jonathan answered. “He has gone completely mad.”