

Edgar

a dark fantasy

There: the ground moved. Grey mud shifted and a tiny pair of black eyes appeared amidst the slop. Edgar scooped up the crab, ignoring the ineffectual protestations of its claws and placed it into a hessian sack.

A few steps away, the sea blustered and sprayed foam against the rocks. Edgar bowed his head, his eyes protected from the brine by the low ridge of his brow and his long, unwashed curls of black hair. He examined the mud, seeking more crabs.

In the sack, some of the crabs struggled against the coarse cloth. Others fell docile as soon as they descended into that suffocating darkness. Pincers and shell struck out at each other, spiked legs were broken in the desperation for escape.

But the crabs could not escape any more than Edgar could leave this beach. Walls of bleak, grey rock rose as far as the eye could see; black pebble beaches and winding, labyrinthine paths of ashen sand. And, of course, the vast grey sea that gushed back and forth from here to the very ends of the earth.

Edgar went on scooping crabs out of the primordial sludge in which they lay—not asleep, not awake, simply waiting. Sometimes a sharp edge of shell would prick his skin, but Edgar’s skin had grown rough and he did not bleed. When the sack was full he slung it across one broad shoulder and made his way home, towards the darkly folding cliffs.

The cave was set back from the beach, angled in such a way that the wind could not find its way inside. The fire had burnt low but not gone out. Edgar placed the sack against the wall, ignoring the crabs that scrambled out of it and lurched uncertainly across the floor, utterly devoid of direction or sense.

Fastened to the walls and roof of the cave was a complex arrangement of metal tubes which tinkled musically as they conveyed water down into an abundance of empty vessels arranged on every spare surface. Edgar emptied some of them into a pot and then he placed the pot onto a grate above the fire.

He stoked the flames and watched those few crabs that were still seeking freedom. The fire bristled and the water began to bubble as it rose to a boil.

Edgar rose to his feet and fetched a jar of red pigment from a chest in the corner. He applied the pigment to his face and down the front of his chest. His skin was ruddy and marred with dozens of scars.

Returning to the sack he dragged it closer to the fire. He ignored the crabs that had gotten free, knocking them aside with the well-worn toe of his boot. Lifting the sack with both hands he emptied the crabs that remained into the pot of boiling water.

The water hissed and splashed as the crabs tumbled in. Some were dead in seconds, or had already been clawed to death by their own kind; but others yet lived—one of them clung steadfastly to the side of the pot with three legs, even as its flesh began to boil.

Edgar sat down beside the fire, crossed his legs and closed his eyes. He did not need to watch the crabs dying, for the mystery in that was obvious and fleeting. Instead, he listened.

Amidst the bubbling and boiling of the water he could hear them—a rapid staccato of chittering clacks—the sounds of armoured legs striking metal and shell. The noises that the crabs made in death, it seemed, were remarkably similar to those that they made in life.

He sat, unmoving, as he was assailed by simple-minded sensations: escape, pain, kill. There was a rudimentary obscenity to such creatures, something simple and stunted. All of this the necromancer sensed with a growing sense of disquiet and disgust.

The next day, storms rolled in across the horizon, a merging of dark waves and clouds that surged back and forth, mirroring each other like an inkblot smudged between two pages. The water and the sky roared and thundered at each other in a conversation that Edgar could not understand.

The necromancer sneered at the crabs when he spotted them in the mud, flopping up and down, stabbing at the sky, beady eyes protruding from the sludge. He cared not for what the crabs could see—or what they could not.

He strode the beach, his thoughts as unsettled as the weather. His hair dangled around his face and he affected a lurching gait so as to stay upright on the unsteady footing of the pebbles beneath his feet.

A rocky outcropping rose before him, sealing off the beach except for a narrow path of sand that could only be negotiated in the lowest tide. And there, somewhere between the foam and the stone, he heard a voice calling to him—a voice that spoke not in words, but thoughts.

Edgar called it the *dead-voice*, the psychic ruminations of a fading soul. As the mind attempted to cling to life the soul cried out; and this is what Edgar could hear. The dead-voice was always honest, for in death there is no reason left to hide.

He moved towards the voice and it grew louder with each step. *Help me*, it said. *Please, help me. I'm dying. I'm dying. Help me.* Had a fisherman or sailor washed up on his beach?

The dead-voice was confused, but that was not uncommon. A soul rarely accepts death and, as such, the dead-voices often believed that they were still connected to a living being—that they had a body to which they could return. Like the crabs and their hideous click-clacking, long after their brains had already boiled to mush.

Edgar climbed a ledge and surveyed the beach below, but could see no signs of a body. “Where are you?” he spoke to the dead-voice. “Are you beneath the waves?”

No, it replied. *Help me. Please.*

There, at the edge of his vision, Edgar saw a vibrant smear of red. He stepped down and headed towards it, blinking as the salty spray stung his eyes.

Help me, the dead-voice repeated. *You... must help.* The necromancer was certain that the voice was human, so when he reached that violent redness dashed against the shore he turned away in disgust; for what he saw there, broken against the rocks, was not human at all.

Fleshy tendrils trailed from a knob-shaped body. Branching veins showed through the pale, milky flesh of the creature, which was splayed and torn apart. A gaping wound had spread the brains of the creature across the stones in a pulpy, red mush.

Help me, said the squid and now—up close—Edgar could sense something else in the tone of the creature. A sort of hysteria not born of desperation but of... amusement? Edgar blinked away the sea

spray, but it was long enough for a vision to form in his mind: a vast chasm beneath the sea, a gaping pit from which an eerie, eldritch glow seemed to spread.

Help me. Help me.

Help me, Edgar's eyes snapped open. He had left the thing to rot on the beach, but he could still feel it... that alien consciousness searching for him. Such a creature could not be trusted, for it had spoken with a dead-voice that was not its own. It had lured him; as mermaid lures sailors to a choking death amidst the brine.

Even now, hunched in his cave below the chaotic arrangement of pipes, the memory of the creature made his stomach turn. He ate a few strips of crab meat, but he did not enjoy it. In truth he seldom ate at all, but it was a habit of civilised men that he had not yet managed to wholly abandon.

It was impossible to tell how much time passed, for Edgar's beach was a place beyond time. The waves kept coming, and the storms. His life was a constant wash of bleakness, grey against grey.

Edgar avoided the beach for some time. Instead, he trod the ashen paths up to the grassy clifftops. From there he stood and stared out at the horizon. He was not waiting—although it seemed as though he was. He merely existed, as much a part of the landscape as the cliffs and the rocks and the dead, salt-blasted trees.

One of those days, the necromancer's ruminations were broken by an unusual sound. Not a dead-voice, but one that was very much alive—the bleating of a goat. The goat stood and watched him. It chewed on grass. Edgar ignored it and later, the goat was gone.

The next day, the goat came back and this time it came a little closer. It turned its head to one side and it bleated at him. Then it kicked up its hind legs and bounded away, disappearing below the crest of a hill and once more, Edgar was alone.

Next time, Edgar came prepared. Between his fingers was a length of rope, the end of which was knotted into a noose. He threw the rope and only at the last moment did the goat attempt escape. He hauled back on the rope and the goat came skidding towards him, its legs kicking at the dirt.

“There, there,” Edgar said to the goat as it stood up and looked at him with black, pebble-like eyes. “I will call you Norman,” he said to it. Norman was a name that Edgar had once known well. A friend long lost to the ravages of time.

Edgar gently patted the goat on the head and lead it home with him.

The next day, Edgar left the goat tied to the pipes and returned to the hills. He gathered up flowers and weeds—the sorts of things that he thought Norman would eat. He returned to the cave and crushed the plants up, placing them into a bowl that he offered to the goat.

Norman was interested in the aroma and stickiness of the broken leaves and stems and ate his dinner with relish. Then, growing unsteady on his feet, the goat finally fell asleep in the corner, away from the mouth of the cave and the winds that raged on the beach beyond.

Did another month pass, or a year? Edgar could not tell. But Norman remained and, eventually, Edgar returned to the beach. Searching... seeking. But ever avoiding the rocky outcropping where the squid had called to him.

Edgar traversed the rocks and sandy paths. He criss-crossed up and down the beach, over hills and into caves. Occasionally he found something—an old bottle half-buried in the mud. A piece of driftwood.

In one cave he found a human bone. It was sheared off at one end into a vicious spike. The bone was brown and crumbling and spotted in one section with rot that seemed to have spewed out from the marrow within.

He sat in that cave for a while, listening to the drip-drop of the water and the cajoling hiss of the waves. He held onto the bone and he searched for the dead-voice of its owner. But the voice had departed, another soul lost to the winds and the ages—and all the necromancer heard was an empty roar devoid of meaning.

Suddenly enraged Edgar stomped on the bone. He snarled and crushed it away to dust. And he looked nothing so much as a savage, hair dank and tangled, skin weathered and leathered, chapped lips peeled back in a grimace, teeth bared like the idiot grin of a skeleton.

He returned to Norman and the goat bleated at him. He ignored it and went to the farthest corner of his cave and opened the wooden chest that he kept there. Inside were scrolls of vellum, flasks filled with strange liquids and pages torn from books that contained diagrams and instructions that he had long committed to memory.

Edgar pushed all of these aside and reached for a slender, silvery chain. He held up between his fingers, watching it sway back and forth, glinting in the light. He had forgotten her. He had gone utterly mad. He needed to find a way forward before he slipped away entirely.

Behind him, Norman bleated.

Edgar gathered together his tools. A knife, a bowl, a few sheets of vellum covered in the symbols of a lost language—an altogether different sort of dead-voice, he supposed. He took a few stoppered bottles of water and a rust-spotted chisel.

For a while Edgar stood and watched Norman and the goat stared back at him. Then he untied the rope from the pipes and lead the goat out of the cave and up the winding paths to the hills where he had found him.

There was a suitable spot not far away: a grassy outcropping that extended some way across the water. Below the cliff was a steep plunge down to sharp rocks. At the edge of the cliff Edgar secured the rope to a stick in the ground, making sure that it was short enough that Norman could not fall over the edge of the cliff.

Edgar set up camp, digging a shallow pit in which to start a fire and adding a pinch of firedust to keep it burning. He gathered more sticks like the one that he had tethered Norman to and arranged them around the fire—five, six, seven. He engraved a line in the dirt and then another, linking the sticks by grooves in the earth and then he placed several dark pebbles within the grooves like decorations.

All the while Norman watched on, content to chew on the tall grass.

The sun was little more than a bleary circle beyond the clouds and Edgar waited for it to vanish. Finally, it dipped and dropped, without spectacle. There was no fiery sunset to set the horizon ablaze, just a sudden unequivocal darkening. The fire crackled.

The night was still, but Edgar knew that beyond the ritual circle the wind was raging as ferociously as ever. But here, atop the cliffs, the skies were holding their breath. A heaviness hung in the air.

Edgar knew when it was time—he felt something change within him. He brought Norman into the circle and tied him up again, while he sorted through the tools that he had brought with him. From the sack he took a short-hafted mallet. He tested the weight of it in his hand, finding the correct point of balance where he could swing it most swiftly. Norman blinked at him as he did this and bleated—only once—unafraid.

Edgar struck the goat as hard as he could. The noise echoed out across the beach, a wet crack. Norman’s legs kicked for a moment as the body denied the soul’s release. Edgar waited for the kicking to stop before he reached for the knife.

He opened Norman up. He spread intestines about the magic circle and impaled the heart on a wooden stake above the fire, which spat and turned black as it roasted. Edgar was dripping with guts, his face and hands stained red. Sigils that he had written in blood across his chest had run and smeared into one another so that they could no longer be read.

Edgar waited. When no sign came he was briefly overwhelmed by a sensation not dissimilar to regret. For a while he wept loudly into the night. Then, once the sadness had left him, he merely sat—eyes thin slits—and stared into the fire.

The night passed and the necromancer might have stayed that way, sitting until time stripped the flesh from his bones. But something brought him back to consciousness—the sound of a footstep. And then, remarkably, a voice.

“Ello, mister?”

“We seem to have gotten lost,” another voice. “We was ‘oping you could help a couple of fellas catch our bearings and what-not.”

“Hey Mister, you okay? Is that...”

Edgar’s fist closed around the haft of the mallet.

Edgar did not know if the last thing that the soldiers saw was the dismembered goat strewn about the cliff-top, or his own maniacal face as he rose towards them. He struck the first man across the face and he fell to his knees, searching for his teeth in the bloody grass, connected to the earth by a sinewy string of saliva and blood.

The second man reached—too slowly—for the sabre at his belt and Edgar hit him with a flurry of punches. As he dropped Edgar stood on his neck. Then he rose up behind the first man, who was still on his knees and swung the mallet once more.

As simply as that, the whole bloody job of murder was done. The necromancer stood at the edge of his circle for a few moments, splattered with fresh blood. Then he gathered up his belongings, taking special care to retrieve the black pebbles that he had placed within the concentric lines of the circle.

He dropped the pebbles into a glass jar, leaving a bloody red thumbprint smeared on one side and placed it into the sack with the rest of his tools.

He stripped the weapons from the soldiers and tossed their rucksacks off of the side of the cliff. He worked a length of rope between his hands and tied the men together, fashioning for himself a sort of harness that he could sling across his shoulders to drag them.

The bodies of the soldiers bucked and crunched as he pulled them down the path. Their military uniforms were shredded by the sharply bladed rocks, dead skin bruising. The necromancer did not stop to wonder what such men were doing in a place as remote as this—long ago he had stopped caring for the intrigues of politics and war and other such mortal concerns.

At last, Edgar made it back to his cave. He placed the bodies up against the wall near to where he had kept Norman tied up. As he did so he stepped over the food bowl that the goat had eaten from, but he paid it no heed. A sacrifice had been required, it seemed. And then: two more.

Edgar worked throughout the night, stopping occasionally to consult some of the faded vellum sheets that still remained. He stripped away the shirts from the soldiers' chests and carved symbols into their flesh wherever the rocks had not already ruined his canvas.

When it was done he took out the jar containing the pebbles and prised open the stiffening jaws of the men in order to pour the pebbles in atop their dry, leathery tongues. Then he cut himself deeply across the palm of one hand, obsidian blood spilling freely from the deep, self-inflicted wounds.

He cupped his hand over the mouths of the men in turn, so that the blood would pour down between the pebbles and collect in their throats. Afterwards, he bound his hands with old, stained strips of gauze and he waited.

Beyond the mouth of the cave the wind howled as yet another storm blew in across the sea. Water lashed the shore and rain trickled down the convoluted network of pipes that he had fashioned, long ago.

Nothing happened.

Edgar did not seek out the dead-voices of the men, but waited for them to speak to him. He simply sat and stared at the bodies; the one whose neck he had broken was tilted at a grotesque angle and it stared back at him, utterly lifeless.

And then, in the early hours of the morning, when the worst of the storm had passed and the rain had subsided to little more than a lingering mist, there was a noise that betrayed movement—the slightest tinkle of a belt buckle as one of the dead men twitched.

Edgar looked back and forth between them, trying to discern which of the men was waking up. And where he had previously closed himself off to their dead-voices he now opened his mind and cast his consciousness out at them.

Where am I? I'm lost.

It was the soldier on the right—the one with the broken neck. And then his mouth moved, ever so slightly, as his dead-voice attempted to merge with his live one. But all that came from the dead man's mouth was an exhalation of rotten breath and a rasping half-scream.

“You are dead,” Edgar told the man and then, on the left, the other body also began to twitch. All at once Edgar's senses were drowned by a merging scream of confusion.

We're lost, said the second dead-voice. *Please, help us,* said the first.

Edgar's body thrummed with excitement, such that he was barely able to contain himself. At last he had achieved the unthinkable and now—the way was open. These men were his conduit to the darkness into which he had stared for so long.

He gripped the man with the broken neck by his shoulders and leaned in close. The smell of damp and rot and fear would have been overwhelming had Edgar himself not already reeked of all those things. The body twitched beneath his grip, but was not strong enough to drive him back.

What do you want? Where are we? Help us.

“Tell me,” said Edgar, drool spilling over his bottom lip, tears streaming down his cheeks to drip in muddy, bloody drops from his chin. “Tell me...” he repeated, unable to catch the breath he required to finish his sentence. Outside, the wind was picking up again. It howled.

I don't understand, said the soldier in his dead-voice.

“Tell... me... what... you... see...” said Edgar, breathing the words as a sort of kiss into the soldier's mouth. He stood like that for some time, feeling the bodies grow cold and stiff beneath his hands, feeling nothing so much as the sensation of falling as he began to doubt himself.

But then—dead flesh shifted and with it the terrible sound of stretching, tearing skin as the mouth of the man curled up into an idiot smile. The dead eyes rolled up to look at him, but they were no longer human eyes. Instead they had taken on the appearance of the black pebbles that lined the beach. Hard eyes. Goat eyes.

“Tell me what you see!” screamed Edgar, shaking the corpse between his fists. Except now the dead man's own hands rose up and encircled the necromancer's own wrists and the grip was stronger than he had expected.

“Please,” Edgar spluttered, finally unable to hide the desperation from his voice. “Please. Tell me. What do you see?”

And in response, a hideous sound issued forth from the dead throat, carrying with it the rattling of black pebbles, as the dead man began to laugh.

“Tell me!” Edgar screamed. “Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!”

Then the second corpse joined in, so that both of them were staring back at him with those jet-black eyes. They laughed together in horrendous, echoing unison. They laughed and they laughed and they did not stop.

And they did not tell him what they saw.