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ALISTAIR ADAMS
AND THE PHOTOGRAPHER

By
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ACT I

EXPOSITION

CHAPTER 1

Chaos is come againⁱ

I stand in Central Park, the city's one sizable haven from post-holiday humdrum. People trudge about in languor, fading echoes of holiday cheer an unescapable reminder that all the joyous parts of winter have passed. Dreariness infects the air like the type sleet too mild to be worth hoisting an umbrella and the people don their false veneers of jolliness, all whilst undertaking their fresh, annual attempts to forego cigarettes, salty snacks, and liberally sugared beverages. This, coupled with the knowledge that holiday bonuses are spent and gone, not to be seen again until next winter, gives the drifters a melancholy glaze.

After my less than cheery morning of contemplative wandering, I dare not brave the gloomy city proper and I find myself standing on a pedestrian overpass in Central Park, seeking a potential subject to photograph.

That is when I first see her.

The young woman looks at me and smiles, holding a long lens digital camera at chest height, evidently having just taken a picture of me moments before. After a pause, she lifts the camera and takes another.

Warmth churns within me, the smallest bit of amusement enlivening my mood. I smile in return, more instinctual than practiced. Undoubtedly oblivious to my intentions, she lowers the camera, flirtatious grin pulling at her lips, before lifting it once more.

I cannot help finding the woman fanciable. Something about the simple presence of her intrigues me, she like an unexpected breeze or shaft of sunlight in the depths of a forest. But oh, her generous application of makeup, selectively revealing attire, and artlessly alluring expression—I find it just a bit too magnetic to believe the display perchance or unintentional.

Women of this age have become so skilled in presenting themselves, seamlessly fusing seduction with coyness. Indeed, they hang precious gems in a spider's web.

I have long since become adept at safely maneuvering the perils of a woman's seduction, however. Nevertheless, abstaining from danger makes life insufferable. Should I not need to take my life-giving picture, I suppose pursuing and enjoying the woman for a night and photographing her in the morning, might be an option. Nevertheless, the need to prolong my life overshadows lust and I intend to act in favor of the more primal interest; survival trumps intimacy, Maslow might say.

I return my attention to the young woman across the way, she alone, unwitting, and perfect. I lift my camera, look through the viewfinder, adjust the focus, savor the irony, and press the button.

Yet... she does not die.

A shiver of panic overtake me and, despite unexpected fear, a deep, slumbering excitement enlivens me. I lift the camera once more and take another photograph, my movements both more rigid and hasty this time.

She, once more, continues to live.

Anxiety boils as thoughts fly through my mind, adrenaline legitimizing deep, terrible paranoias. I try once more.

And she stands, still alive.

Petrified both in mind and body, fear arrests me, distracting my concentration with lithe, constricting questions. It feels like a cat's-tongue licking the brain. Why does she live? Has my camera broken? What is... *different?*

I look at her and she smiles again, taking another picture.

I glance around, trying to find something—anything—to test the powers of my camera. I see a group of people and decide against them, fearing that the young woman—or whatever she is—might see and act upon it. A single man walks by, but his death would also lack subtlety. Finally, a singing cardinal catches my attention; I snap a picture and the bird tumbles from the branches.

Calm permeates me once more. Indeed, my camera—or more notably that arcane, blue-white crystal within—yet retains its powers. I return my attention to the woman; that smile still arrests her, crinkling her eyes and leaving dimpled cheeks in its wake. Even from here, I see the light glinting in her eyes, they deep, shining pools of amused interest. Then her face is gone again, disappearing behind the camera as she takes another picture.

As the last vestiges of cold terror defuse, a warm fascination replaces it and my body loosens, a sigh of the heart to massage the bones. I grin, the action artlessly unconscious until I feel it distort my face—a soul's grin. Has my life become so dull that I cannot smile without forcing the gesture? A grand mystery? There she stands: a living enigma.

Who—or *what*—was this woman?

I know she might be dangerous—perhaps even deadly if I do not take a picture soon. Then again, I have not indulged myself in a significant risk in almost a decade and, of course, I detested unsolved mysteries.

Better judgment might have me flee, if only to get my hands on some more formidable weaponry. Mjölnir might serve or a versatile defense like my dust cloak; perhaps the Black Rose might—no. I took great strides to keep things subdued in the mortal realm and very much like the idea of keepings things that way. A book I once read called mortal curiosity the nuclear

option of the supernatural world and I doubt I can think of a better metaphor. Open combat might spur fear in the populous—or worse, interest in the press.

Besides, it would be simply rude to out and smite this woman, if indeed one might call her that. Killing her without first investigating her obviously unusual nature does not at all align with my otherwise tolerant practices; it certainly goes against my sense of curiosity.

I look at her presence in the other realms, not going so far as to open the second sight, but still observing. She appears normal—more or less human, as far as I can tell. Ignoring the crystal in my camera, however, is not something “normal humans” do.

Making my decision, I leave the overpass and navigate toward her; one has no business being immortal if one squanders it on the pursuits of a dullard.

Walking, I narrow my suspicions of her. A demon does not possess her, as I have twice encountered such situations, once while painting and again with my camera; neither people lived, though I could not speculate as to the condition of their respective supernatural parasites. I do not suspect an angel either; for one, her skirt seems a tad too short for God’s best and brightest and they rarely visit me outside of our business concerning The Seven.

Could this mysterious woman be a remnant demigoddess? I had heard rumors, but... no. I would have gleaned something—some substantiated evidence in my seventeen hundred years if such beings still roamed. No, the Elder gods, those half hundred semi-divine spirits, still rested in their Egyptian tombs; if that had changed, the world would have noticed.

Nevertheless, what else could she be?

Reaching the woman’s overpass, I climb, approached her, and offer my hand, prepared for combat. When she presents her hand, I bow and kissed it. Surprise or endearment takes her,

the skin beneath my lips tensing. When I look up, a blush has reddened her face; do demigoddesses blush?

“Alistair Adams, should it please you,” I say in the smoothest sample of my lingering English accent, making sure confidence crisps my gaze. “And you are?”

“Kate,” she answers, blushing once more.

I ponder the name: Kate.

Cat Sidhe has a reputation for hunting men of my heritage, though I wonder if heritage is “valid” when one is older than the legend. This Kate’s black hair matches that of the mythological cat, though, and the necklace he wears just happens to promote a pendant of white, polished marble; the iconography is almost insultingly obvious.

I had never met Cat Sidhe, king or queen—or drag queen, perhaps—of the grimalkin, but the ruler of a race of deadly and sly cat-like faeries has reputation enough to fill reams. And, while this could explain the human form, the lack of reaction to my camera would be a first for faeries.

I make a note to ask Titania about this, assuming I get the chance.

I then considered the Katsune, the Japanese fox spirits. All the evidence points to the Katsune being simple demonic possessions, but my knowledge on the subject is somewhat limited. Could Katsune, after all, be a demigoddess? Not an Elder goddess, of course, but a true *Wondering Spirit*?

“Hmm... Kate. What a charming name,” I say, knowing I cannot not delay a response any longer. I need to appear collected and confident, at the very least so I might not seem less than an equal. Then, standing and infusing my words and cadence with a generally effective masculine seduction, I continue, “And your surname, if I may ask?”

Despite the smoothness of my words, Kate laughs, both surprising and confusing me.

“*Surname?*” she asks with an intrigued edge, her question declaring my error.

I tense. The term “surname” must have fallen from vogue during my time of reclusion. This, a small misstep and break though it is, filled me with an inexorable sense of unpreparedness and vulnerability. “My pardon, sometimes I forget my words,” I say with a false and long-polished laugh. “I meant your last name.”

She beams, warm amusement glowing in her eyes. “Eve. Kate Eve.”

I considered the words; surely—oh, surely—she toys with me. “Hmm... Adams and Eve.”

“Hmm, indeed,” she replies, a smooth air of charmed agreement in her tone.

I paused once more, reassessing the situation and my options; I have to know more, uncomfortable vulnerability notwithstanding. Pondering and knowing myself far too well to consider letting the opportunity pass, I embraced the situation. I decided to play the role of one smitten, adding a touch of coy for depth. “Would you... um? Hmm, where are my words?” I ask, looking away with false nervousness.

“Yes?” I hear the smile in her voice.

“May I offer you a drink?” I ask as I looked back to her, blurring the question a little for effect.

“Getting drunk with a complete stranger; what’s the worst that could happen?” The light sarcasm charms me and my grin comes as a warm surprise to me; whether masterful actress or nymphish minx, I *like* this woman.

“I meant tea—or coffee, rather.”

“Now coffee seems a bit more appropriate,” she says, nonchalance tailoring her voice. Another impish smile appears, reaching her eyes and making her nose crinkle. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have tea, though, Mr. Adams?” she asked, playfully mimicking my accent, and well.

“I sound positively archaic, I suppose?”

“Not for Downton Abbey, I suppose. I quite love the accent, very—,” she looks away, thinking, “Sherlock Holmeisan.”

I chuckle, unable to help myself. Why have my words—weapons refined in the fire of centuries—suddenly found cause to betray me? Might that also be a power of hers? Reputation paints the Katsune to have great wisdom and where might wisdom reside if not within one’s words and thoughts? Likewise, more stories of Cat Sidhe’s slyness exist than tales of goblins’ greed.

I made a resolution; if indeed she intends to play with words, so will I. Had I not proven myself a master of language in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? Even in modern times, mortals still revered my texts. Yet, in considering this, I suppose that is a bit too large a claim; the fame, after all, was just Anansi’s Quill and I can hardly attribute such works to true greatness, despite their standing.

“I have had more tea than any man should in a mortal lifetime,” I reply, honing both sides of the words. “That, you can take as truth.”

“And what about everything else?” she asked, words rolling over one another like waves and smooth as fine, melted chocolate.

I smile yet again, impressed; no one has taken such an air of presumption with me in a very long time and I find such cheekiness magnetic, she reminds me of a woman one might meet

in the French courts of several centuries past, though without the false veneer. Then again, perhaps that is how everyone behaves in the twenty-first century; I have been rather reclusive in recent years, after all.

I admire her for a moment, feeling the smile on my face grow considerably, a Cheshire grin. “I do believe I am coming to like you.”

“Well I certainly hope so,” Kate replies, loosely feigning indifference. “Otherwise, I might think you have bad taste.” She then examinations me an amused, apprising look, eyes squinting slightly as she looked me over. “I believe I’m starting to like you as well.”

Then we both pause, staring at one another. While I cannot not know the nature of Kate’s thoughts, I certainly do attempt to speculate. Organized mind churning, I began deconstructing her words, attempting to decipher meaning, discover subtext, and determine underlying patterns. She is a mystery, a mystery that, despite the danger, begins to stimulate within me sentiments more akin to curiosity than caution.

I should have begun suspecting danger, perhaps, but all I find is a mind swimming with intrigued captivation.

CHAPTER 2

I am a simple woman, much too weak to oppose your cunningⁱⁱ

“Coffee then?” she asks, interrupting my thoughts.

Before having the chance to process the words in any conscious way, my subconscious sees fit to answer. “If I may be so bold, may I also request the privilege of dining with you?”

A gratified smile forms on Kate’s face as she bites her lip. “Hmm..., I like the sound of that.” She pauses. “*Even* the way you said it.”

I offer her my arm and, after a perceptible, intentional, and withholding pause of magnetic reservation, she accepts the courtesy. As we walk, she reached down my arm, taking my hand in hers, interlacing our fingers.

I do not know how to feel. Perhaps if I could rewind the centuries and consult with my youthful, poetic self, I might find better words for it. But as it stands, her hand in mine is like holding a glove wrought of silk and filled with fire.

After a while spent walking, we near a well-lit and rather distinctive diner. Entering, we are immediately ushered to a table by a black-haired and rather ostentatious waiter. As I sat, I notice a fleeting glance and smile shared between Kate and a mocha-skinned waitress. The woman has almost distractingly white teeth; dentistry has evolved substantially in the last several decades.

Opening my menu, I consider potential relationships shared between the two women, the most sinister possibilities giving me chills. Had Kate lured me into an environment swarming with her *kind*—whatever that might be—intending to overpower me in numbers?

Part of me wants to photograph the waitress to see if she too possesses immunity to my camera. If so, I must retreat. Uncomfortable consequences be damned; I had little intention of dying.

Nevertheless, what if my camera kills the woman? Distractible and unobservant, though people of this age are, the effect would not go unnoticed.

An outburst of music interrupts the calm logic of my thoughts. I seize my camera and my mind flies to scenarios of varied and violent conflict. But then Kate laughs, the lovely sound stabilizing me. I almost glare at her, but catch myself.

“Jumpy, are we?”

Looking around, I see the waiting staff singing, one of whom doing so while standing atop a chair. “They... they sing here?”

“And some quite well,” she says, motioning to the afore-seen dark-skinned waitress who, at the moment, looks to be serenading an embarrassed busboy.

“I see,” I reply, smiling despite myself.

She looks trifle underwhelmed, though I have a chance to ask, she speaks. “The performances are generally better—more lively, I mean—when there’s a bigger crowd.” She shrugs. “Half past two on a Monday ain’t exactly the busiest time, after all.”

I sit back, considering her statement, particularly “ain’t” and the unqualified use thereof. Given my suspicions of the woman, I expect more pristine grammar—or at least some sort of faux accent to make the term’s usage a joke of some sort. Had let the language of the day evolve without my notice again?

“What do you recommend?” I ask, pulling myself from thought.

“What do you like?”

“Well I do suppose that depends on my mood and company.”

Kate raises an eyebrow. “And your mood?”

“How about something *spicy*?”

Her eyebrow went higher still, a grin joining it as she rolls her eyes.

We talk for the better part of three hours, a courtesy afforded to us by the slow day and plentiful open seating. The waiting staff occasionally interrupt us with song, the performance even targeting us once. Kate flushed with embarrassment as she glared at the waitress with whom she had been sharing covert glances, the woman having prompted me with a microphone.

Voices, like violins and when well cared for, are instruments of music that mature with time and, after a thousand or so years of practice, even my meager voice was unlike anything anyone there had ever heard. While unfamiliar with the song the staff sang, I had heard it performed twice during our time there and, while of an unfamiliar vocal style, I sang the song well. Though an awkward and forced rendition though it seemed to me, it apparently left the patrons and staff more than satisfied, many standing in applause. I flushed a little at this, not meaning to garner the attention.

After the performance, the attention made our banter a little less cozy. We both seem ready to leave, by which time my fears concerning Kate have almost entirely transformed into transfixed captivation. While I have not ruled out the possibility of her being dangerous, the supposition seems less and less likely, despite, of course, the fact that I know my criteria for the “likelihood of a demigoddess being dangerous” are no more substantiated or provable than my theories regarding the semi-divine races’ actual existence. In short, I am still very under-informed.

But how can someone who has so supremely stolen my attention be anything less than magical? Such cautions should be meticulously eroded over the course of decades spent acting out a master role, not done in the better part of five hours with a witty lines and captivating smiles.

Indeed, each of us has tailored our words with potentially polysemantic—even duplicitous—meaning, each sparring a riveting intercourse. Her double-entendre—the play-sport of a secret-bearing wordsmith—enshrouded the tantalizing puzzle of her existence, hinting at the truth, but saying little. I also wove my words masterfully, imbuing each thought with care and several layers of meaning, both straightforward and assumed. Few other things, for me, rival such intrigue and the two of us participated in and enjoyed a duet of thought, counterpoint and interweave in a sublime sonata.

Yet, for all the underlying and unmistakable intelligence sublimated within her words, she infracts upon herself with slang and contractions, grammatical sacrilege and all manner of unholy vernacular. Like planting roses amidst rot, her genius suffocates in a congestion of miss-mannered words—a songbird’s melodious singing choked beneath the sound of a windswept tree. The frustration is unending in its... no.

But no.... No, this is not the case—not at all.... I, after all my verbal maneuvering and deliberate oral methodology, only now see the truth.

The roses have not been placed amidst rot haphazardly, but deliberately, using the compost as sustenance. The bird’s song, likewise, had not been choked by the tree, but rather challenged, sung louder for its duress. She has not been suffocated by her own vulgarity, I see, but enhanced, empowered, and truly ingenious in it.

Everything, every improper sentence, each verbal misstep, all unchecked and unnecessary abbreviations, *have been intentional*. The vernacular is another layer of conversational tactics; she has woven feeble words not as a deficiency, but as a strategy, like an underestimated chess master purposefully sacrificing unneeded pieces to surprise her opponent.

She is *brilliant*; oh, this woman's mind!

I withdraw within myself momentarily, impressed and frightened by her. How have I not seen? What have I revealed, thinking her the lesser elocutionist? What defenses had I foregone, assuming such devices were unneeded? Who is this who has so matched me—and without my noticing?

Standing, I can hardly think. I took a bill from my wallet and placed it on the table. As we left the restaurant, I only just see the smile shared between Kate and the waitress. A few steps outside of the building, she stopped. “What now?”

I, still absorbed in and dumbstruck by my discovery, look at her, this the only thing I can bring myself to do.

My expression evidently amuses her as she raises an eyebrow, showing that harrowingly disarming grin. “I’ll give you a hint: coffee was mentioned.”

I shake my head, almost beside myself with a strange, intellectual excitement; having realized her conversational cleverness, I want nothing more than to stay in her company, danger or no. “Coffee would be wonderful,” I say, voice betraying my rapt exhilaration and hell, I do not care.

Kate laughs, offering me her hand. I took it with pause, savoring the moment. Her laugh fades and she took on a cooler expression, one that, it seems to me, nears something of ardor.

She blushed and looked away. “I... I know a place.”

Clearly an action of mine has stirred something within her, though I know not how or why. Usually I earn such reactions as reward for well-crafted seduction; such an unprompted response surprises me.

It feel... well, *good*.

“Very well,” I say, voice a bit shaken by my own unanticipated emotion. “Lead the way.”

We walk for a half hour or so, each seemingly content with the triviality of our conversation. I, for one, have no intention of wasting my efforts trying to decipher Kate when unable to look into her eyes and observe her body language; I assume she feels the same. Furthermore, this intermission of sorts only spurred more excitement for act two.

When we reached the coffee shop, a small, dimly lit place that is not a Starbucks—a rarity—and take an unoccupied booth near the back and resume our conversation, drinking as we do.

“*“The only coffee in New York worth the money?”*” I ask, quoting an earlier claim of hers as I sipped my drink.

“You don’t agree?”

“I did not say that, my dear. I simply....”

“—you simply what?” She smiled and I looked at her. Her run-on sentences, her contractions, her interruptions; such things, despite their deliberateness, still offend my linguistic sensibility. Yet I had begun to find myself enthralled, positively captivated by her. “You simply...?” she asked again, voice then more sincere.

“My apologies; I had become lost in thought.”

“What were you thinking about?” she asks, voice playful.

There she goes again, adding such an unnecessary end of sentence preposition to an otherwise healthy question. But, despite it, I find the mistake alluring, the intentional defect in a masterpiece illuminating the brilliance of the whole.

I smile to myself; has my life become so mundane that rebellious grammar excites me?

If the speaker had been any other person, I would not have given the words a second thought, of course, but the fact that these were *her* words made all the difference. I suspected, furthermore, that if she had used proper speech I might not have found her as interesting. The combination, it seems, proved to be the magic.

“I was trying to remember the last time I had coffee,” I said after a while, lying inoffensively. I looked up to see her raised eyebrow. “It will be a time discerning the *best* when I have nothing with which to compare. I may find myself hoodwinked.”

Kate stares into my eyes as if trying to decipher something more interesting than puzzling. “I like you,” she says with a nose-crinkling smile. “You say everything so *precisely*.”

My smile widens; it would seem she has grown tired of the façade. I, nevertheless, want a couple seconds’ more enjoyment from the game. “I could say the same of you.”

“What are you talking about?” she asks, exuding what I know must be playacted annoyance and confusion. “I speak normal enough—you’re the one who talks like your mother was the school English teacher.”

I can no longer hide my amusement and speak without guard. “First, one should not end a sentence in about—or any other preposition, for that matter. Secondly, you speak ‘normally,’ not normal, despite the irony in such a statement. And, lastly, your contractions denigrate your speech, though I suppose that is a more personal grievance.”

Kate stares at me, lighthearted disbelief full in her expression. “Well aren’t you just the little grammar prodigy?”

“I have had many years to learn, my dear. I hope you do not think lesser of me for my attention to *proper* speech.”

“Oh, *never*,” she says, obviously toying with me.

“The strange thing, however,” I say, the playful accusation that had been coloring my voice becoming a tad more serious, “is that I get the distinct impression you already know such things. Your poor grammar, if my assessment proves accurate, is *intentional*. But why?”

Kate smiles at me, eyes sensuous. “You certainly are a strange one—observant though.”

“Is a man who attentively listens to a woman’s words so rare or suspect?”

She narrows her eyes. “A strange one indeed.”

I lean forward. “I believe it is time you ask your question. Surely you have been pondering one?”

She smiles, though does not speak for a while. Finally she proceeds, caution tailoring her expression. “Why haven’t you asked me what I do?”

In truth, I did not anticipated such a question—not in the slightest. Some enquiry about my nature, my camera, or any number of other things seemed the obvious choice, but this?

“Pardon?”

“Every man I’ve ever talked to has asked me what I do within the first five minutes of conversation.” She leans forward. “Yet you, after several hours, have yet to ask.”

I, still confused, forego a reply, imploring an explanation with my eyes.

Kate, evidently understanding, continues. “I find that men seek roles—positions—something to which they can relate in conversation. *You*,” she said, intrigued accusation in her

voice, “have plainly contented yourself with simple talk about *me*. So I ask again... why haven’t you asked me what I do?”

“Well,” I, perceiving the obvious intended message, yet still suspecting an ulterior meaning, answered, “plainly because I am more interested in who you are than what you do.”

“But why?”

“I believe that is because of who I am.”

“*That* is not a good enough answer,” she says with narrow, knowing eyes.

“Then, I suppose, it is because of who *you* are,” I say, lessening the lightness of the mood severely. “From the very moment I saw you, I knew you were something *special*.” I look away. “Yet you sought to hide yourself from me, shielding your intelligence in prosaic posturing, *double-dealing in your dialogue*,” I add with a semi-theatric inconsequential flourish.

I return my gaze to her, seeing a look of vulnerable conviction on her face. I sigh, somewhat exhausted and regretting my bluntness.

“I do not blame you and cannot say I did not enjoy the mystery while it yet remained cordial,” I say, shaking my head and looking down. Then I raise my eyes and catch her gaze again. “But you have asked me—fishing for this very answer, I suspect. Who am I to deny it of you?” I pause. “Have you at last grown tired of this game we play?”

She looks at me, sorrowful, it seems, though in a way I cannot decipher.

“You have spoken truth to me, yes, but truth shaded, misleading, and incomplete. I have learned many things about you, certainly, but nothing you did not *allow me to know*.” I look at her, imploring a reaction with my eyes. “I do not need everything, but tell me something—*anything*—about you of significant truth... some clue regarding who you really are.”

She stares at me, eyes hollow, and a soulless contemplation emanates from her. “I...,” she stammers. “I love the works of Shakespeare.”

Hearing this I became very still, fear, once more, replacing curiosity.

CHAPTER 3

What woman is this?ⁱⁱⁱ

Concern overtakes her expression, I absentmindedly note. I might have expected smug satisfaction, but I did not know anything anymore; the field has changed, changed so significantly that I am unsure if I understand the game we play. “What’s wrong?” she asks.

“Shakespeare?” I ask, tone vacant. What does she know of me?

“Yes, Shakespeare,” she replies, still concerned. “I mean *you have heard of Shakespeare*, right?”

I have to remain calm. Even if she did know the truth, I cannot let her see it affect me. I need to make the fact seem inconsequential. I must make her believe I knew of her knowledge and that it did not surprise me in the slightest. Yet I have just made the grave misfortune of pausing. I needed to say something—*anything*—to justify the gaff and point her beliefs toward some alternate meaning—somewhere away from the truth. In an instant, I think of a sole, weak, and only just acceptable solution.

“*What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,*” I quote.

“*Romeo and Juliet,*” she says with a smile.

“I too know the man, Shakespeare,” I said, preparing to introduce the suggestive misinformation. “Imagine the coincidence of such an interest on your part, I myself having studied the playwright extensively.”

Excitement sets her aglow. “I did my masters in Shakespearian studies!”

And with that, she simply reverses my deception, parrying and parading it before me in her own context; oh surely this woman is a master. “Brilliant,” I praise with all the unstated spite of one player beaten at his own, very best game.

A mischievous smile gives her face a nonspurious air. “*Chaos is come again?*” she asks and I cannot tell if the question requests the proper attribute or serves as an invitation for more wordplay. In either case, the answer is the same.

“*Othello*, act three, my dear,” I said. “*I am constant as the northern star,*” I reply, choosing a quote to reflect myself.

“*Julius Caesar*, act three.”

I stand, offering her a hand and myself a momentary hiatus to collect my thoughts. “Shall we?”

Kate stands and accepts it.

“Oh, my, my, I have forgotten the bill,” I say, just remembering. I release Kate’s hand, withdraw my wallet, and place a Grant on the table. I then begin to take her hand, but she stares at the note.

“Um, that’s a fifty,” she said, voice bearing mild confusion.

I look at the note on the table for a moment. I then slowly remove it, trying to gauge her reaction. “Forgive me. I sometimes find your currency a trifle bewildering.” I chuckle, nervous at the mistake; cost of goods is skyrocketing, it would seem. “All your bills are the same shape and color—confusing really.” I place a Franklin on the table. “What?”

“That’s a *hundred*.”

“Surely, I am missing something.”

“Yeah. The bill was like nine dollars; a twenty would be more than generous.”

“But, I do not have a twenty.”

“Well, *get change.*”

“Oh, no matter,” I said, becoming a trifle nervous and waving her off. I then motioned to the bill. “Make the waitress’s day, that will,” I say, what little bit of London there is in my accent flaring.

Kate shakes her head. “There’s no need to try to impress me.”

“Impress you?” I chuckle, finally understanding. “Oh, I suppose that does make a sort of sense.”

“Why else would you do it?” she asks and I sense the first bit of genuine annoyance from her I have encountered.

“Well, I have more money than I could ever spend, for one, and I suspect that is not the case for our waitress.” I have not convinced her. “It is not anything for concern, I assure you.”

“Hmm...?” I then see the look in her eye and understood.

“You are trying to determine whether I am generous or lying, correct?”

“I should start calling you Holmes,” she said, a slight tone of accusation in her voice.

“Mycroft would be a better comparison, I would say, though I suppose old Sherlock is no insult.” I say with a light, dismissive chuckle, remembering my brother Lancelot. “Very well; back to the matter at hand then? What hope have you of discovering my disposition? With my attention so splendidly attuned to your little observation, I can either lie further or aggrandize my generosity. But...?”

“But?”

“But you have no way of determining which case proves the correct one, now, do you?”

“I suppose not. So what do you suggest I do, *detective?*”

“Oh, it is quite elementary, my dear,” I say, garnering a smile and a disbelieving shake of the head from Kate. “Put it from your mind and renew the quandary at a time when my guard has weakened so you may then learn the truth,” I say, making my voice scholarly and humorous.

“Yet I get the strange feeling that such an opportunity will not present itself.”

“Well one must resign to hope, I suppose.” I then smiled, thinking of something. “*Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.*”

Kate rolls her eyes. “*Hamlet*. Are you trying to distract me?”

“Perhaps?”

When I offer my hand for the third time, Kate takes it with something like begrudged amusement. We exit the coffee shop, testing each other, I, ever vigilant, still looking for meaning in the words. “*To thine own self be true,*” I say.

“Hamlet again,” she answer. “*‘Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed.*”

“Sonnet 121... which is not a play.”

“I do not recall *that* being a rule. *Well that’s all Greek to me.*”

“*Julius Caesar*,” I answer and then, having a sudden need to impress my rather unfair knowledge upon her, continue, “but actually the phrase was derived from George Gascoigne’s *Supposes*, a 1575 play. ‘*This geare is Greeke to me*’ was the original quotation.”

She stops and stares at me. “Very impressive.”

I release her hand and bow.

When I look up, she is looking down. “Well, we’ve arrived.”

“Arrived?”

“My hotel,” she answer. “How about just one more then?” she ask, a mysterious and enigmatic air to her tone.

“Very well.”

“*Journeys end in lovers meeting, every wise man’s son doth know,*” she said, quite suggestive in her choice of emphasis.

“Genuinely Shakespeare, yes, and from *Twelfth Night*.”

She pauses, biting her lip. “I meant it more as a suggestion, actually.”

“Pardon?”

She raised an eyebrow, smiling and staring directly into my eyes, the expression on her face somewhere between sultry and vulnerable.

“Oh,” I say, fumbling for words. “Oh, you wish to have relations?”

Kate explodes with laughter. “*Relations?*”

“I do not see the humor in this,” I reply with levity, recognizing the rather unfortunate resurgence of my antiquated words. Damn, but what a time to misspeak.

Kate calms, catching her breath. “Oh, *relations...*,” she says, practically laughing the word. “Oh, aren’t you the strange one?”

“Of a different age, entirely, my dear,” I say with a sigh, a sudden rush of relaxing calm soothing me.

She look at me again, requesting an answer with her eyes. “Well?”

“Well?”

“Shall we?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Fornication with a complete stranger; *what’s the worst that could happen?*” I ask, quoting her.

Kate jabs my chest with a finger. “I see what you did there.” She pauses. “You aren’t saying no, are you?”

“Oh, no, no. No is such a *horrible* word.” I chuckle, thinking of another, if somewhat inapt, quote. “*Why, man, we did make love to this employment?*” She tilted her head and opened her mouth a little in amused shock; what woman, after all, wanted to be called a man.

“*Get thee to a nunnery,*” she says and I snorted with laughter.

“*That man that hath a tongue, I say is no man, if with my tongue I cannot win a woman,*” I add.

“*The lady doth protest too much, methinks.*”

“*I have no other but a woman’s reason,*” I say with an amused and serious a smile. “*I think me so....*” I step forward taking her hands and looking into her eyes. “*Because I think me so.*”

“*Nothing can come of nothing: speak again,*” she whispers.

“*Why then tonight let us assay our plot.*” I take another a step toward her, becoming very close.

“*Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.*” She steps back and I saw a very subtle flicker of a struggle within her.

“*Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?*” I ask, looking into her eyes. I then thought of something and decided to imbue the words with a measure of new life; after all, if anyone had the poetic license, was it not I? “*To the winter’s snow from clouds of grey?*”

She stares at me, mystified. “But that’s not....” She stops herself.

“To autumn’s leaves on wind held dancing? To springtime life and younglings prancing?” I pause, letting her look transfix me as she sifts the words. “To mountains wiser than our words? To oceans deeper than our minds? To rivers unashamed to wander? To forests time has left behind?”

She takes a step back and I think she might speak, so I stop. She does, tremulous and softly. “To... to springs of fire—founts of heat? To crackling leaves beneath our feet?”

I step forward, joining her. “To chilling winds bearing frost. To spanning meadows never crossed.”

She takes another step back, looking more vulnerable still as her back meets the stone wall. “To voiceless whispers from the deep? To every secret that we keep?”

I joined her again. “To each night and day of bliss.” I leaned in, lifted her chin with my hand, and looked into her eyes. “To every man and maiden’s...,” I whisper, joining my lips to hers. After a long, meaningful kiss, I pull back.

With that, she seems to break, taking my hands in hers, a look of mixed abdication and excitement possessing her movements. We enter the hotel, a most curious and entrancing couple, I had little doubt. *As the well dressed gentlemen and the scantily clad lady entered the elevator, whispers wander between patrons*, I silently narrate to myself; I, however, do not care what the patrons think and I offer Kate more poetry as we walk.

I have my hesitations as we entered the elevator—oh, hesitations in abundance—but she starts kissing me in the carriage and all fears I had concerning the woman’s potentially semi-divine power begin melting. The elevator reaches the eighth floor, opening to an empty hallway, and we stumbled down the passage, bumping into walls; as we progress, fear’s fetters disappear, leaving my enraptured mind free to wander. Reaching the room, we lean against the door and,

after Kate waved a keycard and I fumbled for the handle, we tumble to the ground as it opened against our weight, each of us laughing.

As we got to our feet, Kate pulls me in by the strap of my camera, which I take from around my neck and place in an antique case I had been carrying, an obvious and unforgivable mistake; she, likewise, places her digital camera on a table. I then wrap my arms around her and she kisses me; I kick the door closed behind us.

I lifted Kate from the ground and she wrapped her legs around me. I take a couple steps and we collapse onto the bed. After kissing her several more times, I begin untying what I could only describe as a corset, marveling at the ever-changing and recycling fashions of the world. She giggles and wrapped her legs and arms around me once more. I try to stand, but she pulled me to her by my tie, kissing me once more. I get free and, with a flourish, closed the blinds. I then turn back; she stares at me, longing and suggestion in her eyes. I made my approach.

Kate shifting backward a bit and letting her head hit the pillow, a passion tensing her as I kiss her on the neck. She then rolls me over on my back and kneels down, kissing behind my ear. Reaching over blindly, she turns off the only illuminated lamp, knocking it from the bedside as she does. After that and in the darkness, we enjoy one another.

Several hours later, I rested on my back, exhausted, staring up at the ceiling through a darkness no longer impenetrable to my eyes. I find Kate had exceeded all my expectations, moreover any hopes I had ever entertained concerning the art and craft of lovemaking. She held an aggression that outright astonished me and I had never experienced such raw sensuality before. I had enjoyed intercourse with many a woman over many centuries' time, but this felt different; not even those trained in the various arts of pleasure had succeeded in doing what Kate had done.

I roll over and looked at her; she nestles closer and I took her in my arms; she smells of love.

Thinking, I believe the power of this connection come from my fascination with her, not from her still unproven powers as a demigoddess. But, for all the pleasures we shared, I cannot not help feeling she acted as though the night might be her last, a strange, subtle misery in her... that *I* hold her final hope of being truly alive. Something in this causes me vague anguish and, despite my growing disposition toward remaining emotionally uninvolved, I desperately want to know what ails her... and... and to fix whatever that is.

I sigh, tired. Though my particular flavor of immorality allows me to forego sleep, it, nonetheless, does not preclude me from doing so; that, and the crystal itself was in the camera, which sat on the kitchen's island, something I should have realized was a mistake. Judgment impaired and powers of immortality muted, tiredness crept into me.

While I had made love to women many a time, centuries had passed since I had last slept with one. Looking at Kate and brushing a stray lock of hair from her forehead, I pull her closer and close my eyes, falling to sleep for the first time in thirty-seven years.

i	Othello, III, 3, 1730
ii	History of Henry VIII, II, 4, 1470-1
iii	History of Henry VI, Part II, II, 1, 819