

The old cobblestone house stands alone on the hill, usually alight and full of life and yet now dark and vacant. The wind hisses and seems to wrap around the house like a snake, carrying the rumors and assumptions that the villagers had whispered earlier that day in the town square but had been too scared to say aloud as they watched him being dragged away in handcuffs. He was a mess, his arms all crooked, broken in odd angles, the lashes of the eight tailed whip etched across his back, new wounds reopening the old. Soon an announcement is to be made, an explanation for this man's punishment that no one really wants to hear but still awaits with reluctant ears. They will tuck their children in their beds, tell them goodnight and assure them that they are safe, then go and sit on their own beds in their own rooms, anticipating the sunrise and the news of what someone could have possibly done to deserve such beatings.

A man sits slumped in a chair in a tiny box-like room, the same man that was beaten in the town square earlier. His hands, caked in his own blood, are clasped in his lap, his head is bowed almost like he is praying, but he's not, there is no one left to pray to in his world. Outside the room two men, dressed in matching enforcer uniforms stand, debating how to crack a man that, even after being beaten to the brink of death, still will only claim innocence. The older man's hand touches his whip, visibly strapped to his side, showing his opinion on how to treat the matter. In response, the younger one glares at him and shakes his head. He swings open the door and steps inside the room, the other one in short pursuit. Dropping the file that was in his hands on the table, he slaps the prisoner on the back of his head. His eyes flutter open and he looks around, trying to absorb his surroundings. The older guard flips open the file and reads, "John Escali, accused of the murder of his wife, Angela Escali, who was found dead on their kitchen floor, stabbed in the stomach." He takes a pause to breathe, "He was whipped in the town square ten times." At this, the guard smiles, as if to congratulate himself, then continues, "And he claims he didn't kill her. Well, let's see if that has changed. Did you kill your wife?" "No." The man says shortly, glaring at him sideways. The guard shakes his head and pulls

a knife out of his pocket. "This is the knife that your wife was stabbed to death with and I'm going to guess that it has your fingerprints on it." He says peering down at the file again, "Time of death was early morning. Nobody else would have been at your house. So I ask you again, did you kill your wife." Staring up at the guard, the man says "If only you could understand" and then spits in his face. Dragging the palm of his hand across his forehead, the guard nods at the younger one and gestures towards the door. The younger guard, who has been standing in the corner observing, steps forward, smiling, and grabs the man's arm yanking him to his feet. "I'll teach you how to act properly to the people who will decide your fate."

The ropes that are binding his wrists to the wooded post are too tight and are cutting into them, drawing blood. The crimson seeps through the ropes and drips down his arms, creating a swirl pattern as they flow down his arms. His knuckles have turned white from clenching his fists. Once more he is leaning against the post, relying on it to keep him upright more than his own legs. His shirt is torn in the back: the guard hadn't bothered to take it off before the punishment began. Every time the whip cracks there is a searing pain shortly after that spreads and lingers until the next one comes. Having lost track of how many times he had raised his arm, whip in hand, the guard finally ceases. The man, sitting slumped against the post, is beginning to lose consciousness quickly and the red that had begun to brim the edges of his eyes is now almost completely obstructing his vision.

He starts to cough up blood. The guard comes over and heaves him up by his arms, causing him to cough more. "Come on. You're done, for the time being at least." The man stumbles alongside the guard as he drags him back to the cramped room. They turn heads as they walk back towards the large stone building, everybody trying to get a glimpse of the prisoner. The wedding band the man is wearing catches the sun just before they push through the door back into the dank, candlelit building.

"Do you need anything?" The new guard asks. "Water." He croaks, his voice sounding parched. The guard pours a glass of water from the carafe on the side table and hands

it to him. As he gulps it down the guard watches him through pinched eyes as black as a raven's back. "You ready to tell me why you killed your wife?" He squints up at the guard. "I already told you people, I didn't kill her." He says.

"Alright then how do you explain the knife in her stomach." The guard retorts. When the man does not respond the guard says, "We can go back outside if you'd like that. I could add more lashes to your back."

"You think I care what you do to my body. I have witnessed the only woman I will ever love die. So do what you want to my body. It does not matter, my soul is already crippled beyond repair." He looks away from the guard as a teardrop escapes his eye. After a long pause he glances back up at the guard. "Grief." He muttered, almost inaudible.

"What?" The guard asks, confused. "It was grief that killed my wife. In the beginning it consumed her and in the end it destroyed her. She killed herself." He sighs, the weight leaving his shoulders. "What kind of grief drives someone to stab themselves to death?" The guard asks, still looking rather puzzled. "The kind of grief that comes with losing a child." He stares with unfocused eyes as he continues, "She wanted a baby so badly and we were so close. We had one for all of five minutes before he was ripped from our grasps. I held my only son once and then he was gone, as simple as that. The thing my wife and I had been waiting for was gone. Only an empty crib left in the empty nursery we had built."

"Why did they take your child from you?" The guard asks, cocking his head. Another long pause before he answers. "They deemed us unfit to be parents. The doctors said we weren't ready for a child so they took our baby." The guard simply nods. Noticing the change of guards for the first time the man says. "You're different."

"Yeah, you must have blacked out from blood loss when I came on duty." The guard came around the side of the table and stood, hovering, behind the man. He reached down and touched the shredded skin underneath the torn up shirt. The man let out a gasp as pain shot through his body from the open wounds on his back. "You should get these looked at. For now though, get some rest." The guard's voice fades as sleep overcomes the man and he is drawn into the darkness.

The man is awoken by the dull, repetitive drumming of raindrops on the roof. Blinking to clear his vision, he looks around to find that he has been moved. In the corner there is a silhouette of the guard asleep in a chair. The single-pane glass window reveals a misty, gray morning with dark, heavy clouds that hang low in the sky. He tries to move but he is stopped by the pain in his back that quickly spread throughout his body, making his skin tingle. He is reaching back when he is stopped by a voice. "I wouldn't do that, it's going to burn." The guard mumbles in a gruff voice. "A doctor came in, treated it, and wrapped it up." The guard stands up and stretches as he says this. He pours the man another glass of water and hands it to him. The man takes it with two shaky hands and gulps it down. The guard starts to walk towards the door, "Where are you going?" The man asks. "You'll see." He says, without turning around. He knocks on the door and waits. A female guard comes to the door. "Make arrangements for this man to be taken home." He says. "Sir?" She asks, confused. "I said he is going home, make arrangements." The female guard nods, still looking rather confused but she does as she is told.

"What are you doing?" The man asks, just as confused as the woman. "Well, I had some time to think about it and I decided you are innocent and what do they say... If a man is innocent, let him walk. You're going home." The guard responds with a smile. The man hesitates, before he whispers, "Thank you..."

"Alec, my name is Alec." The guard tells him. "Thank you, Alec." He is close to tears as he says this, water beginning to brim his eyes. Alec simply smiles. "There is no 'Thank you' necessary. I am only following my instincts, and my instincts tell me you are innocent." A knock on the door interrupts their conversation. Alec sweeps over to the door and pulls it open in one swift motion. "You're back." He greets the same female guard that had come before. "Indeed. A car is waiting to return him to his home." She says, gesturing to the man.

"Very good, very good. That will be all, thank you." She turns around and strides away. Alec swings around, his eyes glinting with joy, and claps his hands. "You ready?" Nodding the man tries to stand but falls back down. "Oh right, forgot about that." Alec says, tapping his finger on his lips. "I will arrange for a doctor to come and treat that but

for now, can you stand?" He asks as the man makes another feeble attempt to rise. Finally he does and they start to the waiting car.

When they arrive the chauffeur opens the door, looking straight ahead without seeing anything. Together they clamber into the car. "People will be staring, so be ready." Alec reminds him and he nods. He is ready for this, to fall asleep in a bed and not black out in a hard metal chair; he is ready to go home. The car pulls away from the building and starts down the dirt road that leads away from the town. The man watches the jail out of the back window of the car until it disappears. There are people that line the sides of the street, their eyes searching the tinted car windows, looking for the man that some believe to be innocent while others think deserves to be whipped to death. "You okay?" Alec asks, his eyes searching too, only for an emotion. "Yeah. I'm going home. It's just... I can't help thinking how different its going to be, how lonely." Alec pats his hand. "You're a free man. That's all that matters."

Weeks have passed, maybe even months, long enough for the lashes on his back to have healed almost completely. Though the wounds might be healed the memories still are present. The pain that shot through his body can still be felt, as if it is still happening. The rocking chair moans and creaks as he rocks back and forth. Tears silently stream from his eyes as he looks around the nursery. Though Alec visits him occasionally, he is still all alone in an empty house. He spends his days wandering from room to room, without purpose, gazing out the windows across the fallow fields. The only reason he keeps eating is because the doctor comes by every day to check on him.

A knock that echoes through the house causes him to turn his head. The doctor already came today. As he approaches the door he hears the whines and sobs of a baby.

He grasps the brass knob and tentatively opens the door. On the doorstep there is a baby wrapped in wads of blanket, sobbing. The man bends over and picks the child up. "Shh, shh." He whispers as he looks around for the person who abandoned their baby at his door. He then notices a slip of paper tucked beneath the blankets. He shifts the baby to

one arm as he unfolds the paper.

Take care of him.

-Alec

The man looks down at the baby resting in the crook of his arm. The baby opens his eyes. The man exhales as he stares into sea-blue eyes identical to his own. "It's alright. You're safe now." He says, clutching the baby closer to his chest. "My son, you are safe."