

Baa Baa Bald Sheep

It was harvest season, the three months before winter laid claim to the celtic village's crops, the time when the bearded Woollyton men toiled in the fields, ironed their tools, and carpentered their headquarters, all the extra miles that would deliver them from winter's cruel fangs. When the day of labor was done, the Woolly Tavern's doors opened. Men reeking of dust and soil came in, admiring the barmaid and guzzing the mead. If ever Lady Gilbert thought the crowd too scant, she would climb aboard the bar and can-can her way along, tossing her skirt and sharing the sight of her stockings. Occasionally, she'd kick a mug clear across the room, where it spilled in blessed white foam to the cheers of a dozen half-drunkards. The jovial noise would alert bypassers and those who'd otherwise be tee-totallers; more company, more profits.

The atmosphere was an entirely alien one to Cornelias Cobb. Rather than plant, wood, or metal, his trade was fabric. All around him was the fruit of his labor, hiding the veins and muscles brought up by manlier work, barricading well-nourished bosoms against gazes of ill intent. Perhaps that was what made this so foreign; Such fervor was unheard of back on the farm, where his own commitment to love lay in parts unknown. Oh, what doom that farm boded! This posse was so much more than a new settlement; it was a stronghold. Outside, hungry butchering wolves banged knives and forks on a bloody, banqueting table. Who was their latest slaughter? Cobb didn't know. All that mattered was that it wasn't him. All he could do was wish a very hairy meal on his predators.

Whenever he had his fill, he'd follow the rather obscure cobblestone path just behind the Tavern to his cottage, nestled cozily next to a double smoke-stack. The seventy-or-so daily kilts and skirts was all the company Cobb had at home. The cottage, narrow though it might be, impressed him with an inner landscape of barren ground and yieldless flora. Fruit, fauna, and fresh air were scarce in this indoor confinement center. What did he have to confine? His identity. It would not leave this room. Here, he would have it. He would breathe easily. No lecherous barfellows were around to say otherwise.

He stood before the mirror and removed his hat. A shiney pink scalp lay beneath, reminding him how similar his hair count was to his coinage-handly. The sight was so unbearable that he seized the cluster of skin and pulled. Veins and glands alike stretched to reach as the rest of his face followed the fist, tugging the tissue around the neck as it crept up his throat, releasing small cottony

tufts little by little until the face in the mirror was no longer that of a man's, but of a manging, middle-aged sheep.

His wool, his yarn mine, was mere patchwork on his body, islands, if you will, in a sea of pale veiny skin. Once fertile for business, now barren. How much had fallen out just now? He reached into the mask and felt for that which had deserted him. These had sheltered the bulging bits from all manner of carnal desire. They had been Cobb's own shelter. Like a terrible fish, the dire alternative surfaced in his thoughts. How might he make himself unappetizing? Surely the mead would spoil his destiny, if enough sailed his blood before it all shed.

Sail it did, as the clothing supply dwindled and housewives grew noseey. Villagers measured the ratio, and Cobb truly drank more than he tailored. The barfolk blamed it all on lovesickness, and saw in him no great competition over Lady Gilbert. For the most part, his plummet from a professional standpoint was permitted; the mead, after all, wasn't free. Yet it became clear to those around him that his was a case of determined self-poisoning. He awoke one evening in the midst of the entire bar. An entourage, led by Enette Flandery, had brought him back to sobriety by way of a tonic, with one particular ingredient still lingering on his pallet.

He pulled out a small piece of wool. It did not belong to him, for it was brownish rather than white. He surveyed the surrounding faces for a match; if there was one, he didn't see it. "What have I been drinking?"

"The wares of Satan." Enette Flandery thumped the flask. "Only the Lord's potions hath delivered thee from such fatal wretchedness."

Cobb inspected the wool. It might deliver him from more than that if he could trace its origins. His contribution to celtic fashion was still slight, and his devotion to the tavern was still zealous, yet he went with aims anew. His mug barely emptied with time; rather than drink, he watched for signs of non-human behavior in his mates. This quest proved rather trying; tavern behavior amounted to no more than drinking and jeering for everyone, the exception being Enette Flandery, the parson's wife.

Enette Flandery came exclusively during Lady Gilbert's barcounter can-can. She came with a quill and a rag and what nobody got a good look at but could be suggestably a Bible to steady her inscriptions. Nobody asked, but they didn't need to. In her mind, her husband invoked the almighty power of God, even the faminous winter came at his calling. No doubt it was all a scheme to purge the village of all its lechery. At least, that's what it was to the average taverner. To Cobb, it was where his investigation truly began.

He didn't get very far before Ennette Flandery raised the alarm. "The Devil hath taken possession of this man, just as the Satanic alphabet foretold!" The lack of religious interest dismissed Enette's knowledge of such taboo letters and locked onto Cobb's wayward fingers. A quick tussle later, he sat sprawled over the ground outside. Rather than move on with her judgment, Enette followed him, armed with the same tonic she'd fed him a night before. No matter Cobb's protestation, she insisted on exorcising him, if even by force.

He spat out much of it; enough to convince her of his sobriety. "What do you mix in that stuff?"

"All is spoken in the sick on the ground." She pointed to the parts he'd just spat out. With an unclouded mind, Cobb could see that more wool had been used than he thought.

He sampled a little. Definitely sheep wool, definitely from someone else. "Where did this come from?"

Enette blushed. "The Lord grants holy potions to those who ask."

"Balogne. You got this off another person, and I need to know whom."

Enette looked to the left; she looked to the right. If the wool's owner was a ghost walking around them in circles, Cobb couldn't see it. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and invoked the divine power of deliverance from uncomfy questions. The two adults didn't share the same God (and for that matter, Cobb couldn't imagine Ennette sharing anything that didn't taste like swine dining). Cobb was not bound to his creeds or ordinances. He step forward to intercept the prayer, and her less devoted eyeball took a peep. Then she shuffled backward into the bar, where the bouncer loomed into view and dismissed Cobb with a solid grim glare.

In the realm of personal aesthetics, Cobb's manguise had little appeal. It was all by design. He couldn't have the villagefolk staring at him long enough to recognize the livestock under the skin. He backed away from the bouncer, fleeing the moment when his sternness turned to horror. In a flash, all he had to look at was a bare cobblestone road.

Cobb's view was quite the same. He examined the wool, conjuring different ways to match it to its headquarters, when some light groaning alerted him to a nearby window. Within, the bouncer stood off duty, relaxed and rather smug, as though inhaling the vapors of freshly boiled soup. It was a bit of a delight at first; Cobb recalled the moment he'd first tasted the cuisine of mankind. He looked at the floor.

Horrors below! Ennette Flandery had her hand down his trousers, and she plucked whatever she could find and deposited it in a glass jar. Cobb's own sample fell fast from his fingers. Dread headquarters, vile headquarters.

Dizzy and frail, he sank to the ground. It was almost enough to put him off his mission. And yet, the threat of landing on someone's gourmet tray compelled him to complete his investigation. Come sundown, the bouncer, Abs Absolom, traded shifts with another bouncer. Cobb set to work following him.

Instantly, an obstacle arose; Abs was on horseback, Cobb on foot. The Bouncer outpaced him within seconds, taking the mystery of his hidden woolpatch away into the late evening. Foul flockmate must have offered his steed some sizeable carrots to rank *that* level of speed. Well, if Abs had bribes to offer, so did Cobb. Whiskers O'Reilly had his own hound, trained to sniff out elusive game. Cobb accosted it and set it on the trail of Abs on the promise of meat he did not have. Dumb Fetcher, as the hound was named, took Cobb at his word, and led Cobb across the mountain.

Abs's path stretched over a mountain. The sheer length of the climb outlived the daylight, and pivotal features and landmarks hid beneath the curtain of darkness. Their single navigational tool was Fetcher's sense of smell, and even that didn't protect the two of them from tripping over the occasional root or colliding with the periodical tree. Fetcher came to a point where he longed to return to the village. Cobb took none of it; he threatened to abandon the dog then and there, and then, not wanting to be harsh, reminded him of the fresh meat waiting at the end of their journey. Fetcher complied, but only with peak reluctance.

Over the last rise, Cobb noticed a foggy shadow before the moon. Like vile souls of the dead ascending unjustly to heaven, a smoke cloud joined the skies. The peak of the hill gave him the view of its origins. It was a factory, many times the size of his own. Festive lights spilled out onto the lawn, illuminating a pathway dotted with stone lions. Above the doorway was a sign made barely legible by the direction of the light; a closer look revealed the message, "Sales so far" and a grossly exaggerated six-digit number. This was a house of vainglory, but vainglory had a mother named triumph; Therein lied the door to business recovery.

Speaking of doors, this one was tall and imposing; the festive lights within outlined a doorknocker shaped like a bull. Merry fiddles, pipes, and bells mixed with laughter. No doubt food and drink accompanied all this merry-making; perhaps Fetcher would get his meat after all. Cobb lifted the bull's nose ring and knocked. The music dimmed, confused voices sought an ambassador, and an embassy of submasculine manservants answered the door.

"I have something that belongs to one of you." Cobb presented the wool sample. It was a bit muppy under a layer of slobber, but their faces allowed a definite tincture of recognition, if only for a callous second before they remembered to be disingenuine.

"This is no thread of ours, sir," said the most masculine of the lot. He was short, his beard was mere stubble and a pair of spectacles hung over his nose, but his sidburns stood formidable like a pair of bodyguards. "We are tailors, true, but only the cleanest threads pass our needles."

"Then do the cleanest of threads end up in the fingers of the Parson's wife? Smell, Fletcher."

Fetcher, who'd been rolling around in the bones of some yard vermin, stood to attention. Cobb offered the wool, and Fletcher found a match deep within the confines of the castle, where while Cobb had yet to access, a rather incriminating piece of evidence came out dragging the hound by the scruff. "Confound it all!" Abs Absolom expunged his captive. "He made for the rotisseri chicken after nosing my..." He stopped and paled before a sight Cobb imagined him to have dreaded. This sight wasn't Cobb, but one of his leaner colleagues, kneeling on all fours and sampling the lawn.

"Melonham, get up, you buffoon!" Abs delivered a short kick to the grazer's ribs. But the damage was already done. An identity had been divulged.

"Melonham? Teddy-Bill Melonham? Now *there's* a name spoken more than once in the life I left behind. Or the *death*I left... in fact, we *all* left it, didn't we, Teddy-Bill?"

Teddy-Bill couldn't answer; to do so would forsake the agony-groans so devoted to repairing his ribcage. Abs took his place, or rather, tried to, when a squeeling voice rang out, calling for the dog. However the alarmed men tried barricading the door (excepting Teddy), the lamb weaved his way through their legs, bearing a gift of a drumstick, which Abs quickly confiscated before ushering the lad back inside.

The remaining men surrounded Cobb on a chain. "We can no longer allow you to leave, sir. Go fetch the burlap sack."

As Abs turned to follow orders, Cobb held up his hand. "Gentlemen, there is no need to keep secrets from me." Off went the mask, stretching over his face like a drying river; wool flakes fluttered down like dandelion seeds. "As you can see, we are the same things. Or I am the same as young Ichabod Hoolie. I see he's got a liking for dogs."

"And I've got a liking for fresh meat." Fletcher drooled in anticipation, and the gentle~~sheep~~ flinched.

"You'll get what's coming to you," promised Cobb. "Now gentlemen, off with your own masks. You've got nothing to hide from me."

The first to concede was Teddy, much to the anger of the others. "Traitor! Blabber-mask!" Spat one Cobb remembered as Gayner Lorlinic, and another tried to drag the mask back down, but Teddy pushed them off. "He already knows, you dolts! Also, he already knows you dolts. Blazing beehives, how easier I now breathe."

Much unlike the yet-to-confess flockmates, who persisted as long as their respiration would allow. Teddy was not lith, youthful, or spirited, but at least he could breathe. He stood tall among a pile of breathless beardmongers and, one-by-one, pulled their masks off. "There now, all the better to breathe, isn't it? What reason have you to hide, anyway?"

The authoritative hand of Gayner Lorlinic, a man otherwise panting on the ground tire-bound as the rest, marked him exempt from the unmasking. Teddy shrugged and moved on to his neighbor. Lorlinic stood and lept between Cobb and the factory doors. "The proper question is rather this: What reason have we to *remove* our masks? We chose to live among men as men, as did you, Cornelias."

"That I did." Cobb shook his mask, a bit annoyed at the obvious observation. "At the moment, however, I would rather breathe easy, as would seem to be the case with most of your followers."

He waved his hand palm side up at the surrounded faces, sheep of all shades and color combinations. Many guests of the house appeared, free from their masks, whispering to one another about the commotion. Lorlinic turned straight around and directed them all back into the house, where Abs's search for a burlap sack became ever more frantic.

"I, for one, agree," said Teddy. "Our more humane guise and apparel is of inexorable use out on the town, but in one another's company, I'd say ease is called for."

Lorlinic shook his head. "It's all well and good until a stranger from the village comes nosing around. Sheephood is what we left behind, *that*," He pointed at one naked face after another, "is the life we left behind."

"But you didn't leave it behind, did you?" Cobb did a little pointing of his own, in the direction of the moon. "You still sheer yourselves and sell the wool, don't you?" Lorlinic hesitated in his response, but he was intellectually cornered into allowing his opponent a nod. "It's exactly what I do," Cobb continued, "or what I *did*, before *alopecia* set in."

The hint was the same for most present. A sheep's wool is his honor, and to lose it is to lose his purpose in life. Those still with wool bowed their heads and held their masks to their hearts, and shed a tear for Cobb's fallen wool.

Lorlinic bowed no head and shed no tear. "You're not getting any."

"Any more wool?" snapped Cobb. "Of course not, I'm bald."

"Any of *our* wool, not-so-wooly booger."

That penetrated all due respect. Hearty laughter, akin to that at the Wooly Tavern, chased away every last tuft of reverence. They ceased, not at Lorlinic's incessant halt-handing, but at a shriek from within, followed by frantic cries of "Out, out!" and "Find your own bag!"

Before another bout of laughter could start up again, Lorlinic pointed at Cobb. "Have you all forgotten that this scoundrel deserted us all? We were left at the hands of a bloodthirsty slaughterman, and he goes off to revel with the local ruffians."

"I warned you, all of you. And you didn't believe me. Have you forgotten that living as men was an idea I presented to you? You rejected that to."

Lorlinic shook his head and tsk'd. "You were certainly counting on us taking hearsay as fact."

"You *are* sheep, aren't you? What actually convinced you to leave?"

A spell of discomfort took over. Whispers of suspicion passed from sheep to sheep. Feet shuffled, eyes plummeted to the ground when Cobb sought contact. He sharpened his focus towards the whispers, and couldn't catch anything other than "tell him?" asked with a rising inflection. It was a terrible moment of unease. The closest he came to getting an answer was when Lorlinic opened his mouth, but if any words came out, they were only heard by the burlap sack Abs had thrown over his head. Even if his words were audible, they would likely be no more informative than, "Stop, you muscle-headed oaf, you've got the wrong man!" And thus all ice was broken, the diversion was taken, and Cobb was left standing ignorant of the flock's mysterious motives.

He wasn't through with them. He pounded on the double doors until someone shot a gun out into the night. The warning sent him running, but not back to the village. On the other side of the house, he panted and heaved up fresh breaths, grateful that he hadn't had his mask on. His mask! Damn that infernal gunshot, he'd left it on the ground in the front yard.

The first step back landed him in a puddle of something foul-smelling. He couldn't see what it was in the dark, but it was neither the burnt rubbery smell nor the clay, grassy-grit texture of he prayed it wasn't.

"They wouldn't let me any chicken," groaned Fetcher. "They wouldn't let me anything."

"It's a wonder they even cook chicken. Those who look like men, live like men must eat like men I suppose."

"I eat like a dog."

"You'd be best to leave the grass alone. Come one..."

Force wouldn't get him in, but maybe subterfuge would. Careless sheep tended to leave their crafts and handiwork where others could snatch them. He himself, in his haste to escape gunfire, had forgotten to take his mask with him, and he was comparatively crafty. Foolish brethren. Their butcher, when came the slaughter hour, would have left an empty pen and gone on a country-wide hunt. As far as it concerned Cobb, may the lowest sheep go around mask-free and pay for his or her own stupidity.

One rather careless design of the house was that there were no shutters above the first floor, so that was an advantage. There were no safe ways to scale the walls, though. He relied on the sturdiness of the ledges and vines as he hoisted himself up into view. The first few rooms he checked had no spare suits lying around, nor any grip spots in the panes. Cobb eased by any of the occupied rooms, the ones with old funny-duddies bickering over the décor or lads reenacting famous beheadings. One curious sight, an orchestra of teenaged girls in corsettes celebrating their most recent breakups through song and dance, gave him pause, but Fetcher barked out a reminder; Cobb promised him meat. In the next window over, something was burning. Cobb inched his way over to get a better look.

Two figures stood before a bedfire. There was little decor in the room; supposedly any missing necessity--furniture, books, clothing, even an immodest stretch of their wool--made up the tinder. Insanity? Senility? Pyromania? The two were holding hands, so their own little inferno was obviously deliberate, only to what end, there was little clarity. That is, not until one of them asked, "Shall I?"

The voice was unmistakably that of Cobb's father in law. He picked up one of the few unburned things in the room, a frame picture, and sent it to its fate. As the pyre consumed the photograph within, shreds of paper took flight, and his mother-in-law began to sing.

Honeysuckle sweet as the hills,

The ground couldn't hold you in.

Will we see you when we ascend past the clouds and stars?

Oob, your precious face too good for this Earth.

His father-in-law joined in.

*Honeysuckle bright as the moon
But dim came your hour of sleep
Will we bear you when we give our breath to the wind?
Oob, your gentle hands too soft for this Earth.*

A shred of burnt photograph hit the window. Honeysuckle, his wife. Her eyes looked back at him, sooty and smoked by the fire but tender and vibrant nonetheless, until the red gleam ate them up. Cobb's grip on the window began to waver, but he joined in the last verse.

*Honeysuckle gone as our days
Never here to kiss or embrace
So wrong it was to part in your deepest need of needs
Oob, your lovely heart too frail for this Earth.*

Some commotion stirred; inhabitants had smelt the pyre and pounded on the door, but Cobb was already lying face up on the ground, staring up at the sky. Actually, only in the direction of the sky. His visage filled with the jewels of Fetcher, slobber glazing his face like self-made gravy.

"What are you waiting for? I promised you meat, and here I lie."

Fetcher cocked his head a little to the side; he might have found the offer a little odd, but he wasn't one to turn down meat-payment. He set to work on his leg, lifting the pants and lowering the stocking to get to the good stuff. After a minute of failing to strip off any meat, Fetcher's enthusiasm dried up. He attempted the other leg and met with no more success. Then he went after his arm.

"I wish you would make up your mind," snapped Cobb. "My wife awaits me in the afterlife. Or maybe she doesn't. I expect Enette Flandery would have the answer, but I want to be dead already. I don't care which part of me dies first."

Fetcher whimpered. "I can't chew through." He demonstrated, biting in with all of his might and not so much as breaking the skin. "I knew I was getting fresh meat, but I was hoping for something I could bite into. You, raw as you are, I cannot."

Not even death opened its doors to him. Escaping the butcher's knife felt like so less a worthwhile goal now; had he seen a boiling cauldron around, he would have bathed in it. Had a guillotine stood with a blade at the ready, he would have rest his head there. Fetcher flattened a circle of grass and lay down, glowering at him. If only the lousy mutt were a lion, then Cobb would slide down his throat in pieces. Fat was not so merciful.

"You're a weakling," scoffed Cobb. "Go home."

"I would if I had the energy, but I'm too hungry. I bet you wouldn't taste good."

No more was spoken between the two of them. Cobb, as he drifted off to sleep, imagined Honeysuckle's pyre spreading down the halls and bringing the mansion, disguises and all, to the ground. Perhaps even a new casualty, roasted just right for Fetcher, would come out of it all. No such event happened, for when he awoke, Cobb saw a factory, sturdy as ever, beneath the yellow rays of a rising sun.

That, however, was not what woke him up.

A long, trilling scream that he thought was a rooster crow was joined by a scattering of similar sounds. Its direction was uncertain; maybe it came from the closest village, maybe it was the alarm call of his former flock. Either way, they were liable to spill out of the house any moment, and with no quick way to join his wife in holy marketry, he planned for one last go at a life of wool tradesmanship.

He tripped over Fletcher. "Dammit, you're still here?"

"Shh! Something's coming from the village nearby. Someone's screaming. Do you hear that?"

"We need to hide; the flock will be out to investigate in a jiffy."

And they were. Like a stampede of chickens, they crowded out of the double doors as a cluster, very nearly tripping over one another on their way out. There lay Cobb's human mask on the ground where no one took care to straddle it. It was all Cobb could do to protect his position and not hurl insults their way. What he did hurl was a stone, half on impulse, half atop a continued desire to rejoin the flock and merge businesses. The stone made bluff contact with the skull of--what a shame; Teddy-Bill Melonham. He hadn't even set foot on Cobb's mask yet. Here was Cobb, stripping his last standing ally of his chances of survival and conformity.

A pin cushioned plopped by Cobb's feet. "I saw that!" Leaning out of a second story window was a seamstress. If she wasn't blind, she really needed glasses, considering her exceptionally bad aim.

"You're a beast is what you are!" The woman threw other things out of the window, aiming moreso for Fetcher, who'd laid into Teddy's leg.

"Now lay off that!" Cobb kicked him away. "He's no more fit to eat than am I."

"But you promised me meat."

"And you'll get it soon enough, once I reenter the flock. For the time being, I have to masquerade as Teddy here and test out my resemblance."

As the two sheep traded clothes (without any permission from Teddy), shoes and rolling pins continued to rain down. None of this practice improved her aim, but the liberal unfriendly fire lengthened Cobb's moment of dressing. He wasted no time smoothing out the wrinkles and ran after the flock, now certain to ask of his tardiness.

"You'll never get away with this," the seamstress called after him. "I'll tell everyone this instant, you stole my husband's clothes!"

"What can I say? I'm clever."

And his cleverness passed the limits of expectations when he hoisted Teddy-Bill's limp and nude yet wooly body over his shoulder and marched toward his first test of emersion. Teddy's voice was bland and uncharacteristic; it would be as easy to imitate as his featureless personality. Exercising ways to dull and dilute his own traits, he discovered a rich inventory of ways to adopt the mannerisms of not only Teddy-Bill, but even Lorlinic. And then he was struck by the notion of justice; why should this tyrannical nincompoop be allowed his wife when he, the prophet of the people, was denied his own? There was no reason whatever. It was so clear. Cobb would reclaim his station in the flock at the expense of another sheep. After all, as the sniveling Lorlinic said himself, they were to live as men for the rest of their lives. What matter was it who was under what skin?

Before all of the steps could fall into place, he found a good hiding place for Teddy's body. The unlocked cellar of... well, it didn't really matter whom, so long as he could keep an eye on it from the vantage point of his investigation. He lay the body carefully down, keeping a close eye on the crowd of sheep-men surrounding a fenced-in area. Nearby, a man and his wife bickered, something about coffins and funerary expenses. The fence itself, when came Cobb's turn to have a look at the yard, closed off a gruesome display; dead chickens and feathers spread across the yard; quite possibly the achievement of a wild animal. Or at least it appeared that way until Cobb saw a sentence written on the wall. Was that blood?

"Mmmm, it's tasty. Want some?"

Fetcher was chewing one of Higgins's chickens. What irreverence! He yanked it from the cur's mouth and threw it yonder. "Respect the dead, you heathen!"

Fetcher harumphed. "You still haven't made good on your promise. In fact, you've made quite bad. Respect my mangy tail; if you had any respect, why even offer me meat in the first place?"

"We don't eat he who died at the hands of the one we call 'Slice.' They died a death most dishonorable."

"You still owe me meat, though. I'll follow you around until I get that meat you owe me, honorable death or no, it all tastes the same to me."

A lachrymose outburst from Mrs. Higgins brought him back to scene of the crime. She pushed her way through the crowd, having apparently lost the funeral argument. "A penny saved is a penny earned," boasted the farmer as he took a sponge to the now illegible chicken-blood message.

Lorlinic was wrought with concern. "Where do you suppose the Misses will go?"

"To the Wooly Tavern," said Cobb, conforming as close as he could to the vapid inflections of Teddy-Bill's speech, "where woes and sorrows fly at the taste of mead."

Members of the flock exchanged glances and murmured notes of suspicion. Lorlinic was a bit taken aback, but he recomposed himself and looked down his nose.

"Damned vulgar destination for a lady."

"On the contrary, only women of class make it in." He nearly swooned over the thought of Lady Gilbert, but Teddy-Bill would never swoon. He hadn't the spirit. "Sorrows drown never to resurface when you're at the Wooly Tavern."

This scared a few sheep away, presumably to return to the factory for a shearing. Lorlinic snarled. "I don't know what's gotten into you, but it's a fine thing drudging up this drinking malarky when there's a subtle danger afoot." He pushed past, even with plenty of room to spare, treading on Cobb's foot on the way.

In that moment, a new goal arose; the target sheep, the one whose place he would take, would be Agnes Lorlinic. A wife for a wife, indeed; Agnes the nag. Her totalitarian noise was just the outlet he needed for his resentment, although it would mean forsaking Lady Gilbert once and for all. Again, he caught himself before he swooned, but the danger was low. The only witness was an approaching horse, one unlikely to be familiar with Teddy-Bill.

"You must get me out of here, I saw the whole thing."

This took Cobb by surprise. Horses, in his experience, only interacted with other animals to remind them how much higher up on the livestock hierarchy they were. That one should come asking for help, well, one had to be delusional to experience anything like that.

"The whole thing?" Was he referring to the argument? "I can't imagine it would be much of *anything* if it ended with a sobbing farmwife and a 'penny earned.' Paltry bickering, if you ask me."

The horse grunted. "Look, pal, I know what you are under there. I saw you dump your friend in the cellar."

"And also I told him too." Fetcher trotted up with a stern glint in his eye.

Cobb's willingness to listen sharpened. "Now, correct me if I am wrong," said the horse, "but you hold something of a stake in this ordeal. I don't think you'd like to see your potential squandered on an oaken platter on a crisp winter's eve. Are you taking me with you or not?"

A witness! That was all it took to explain the uncharacteristic familiarity; horses might flaunt their poise and prestige, but those very curtains fell when a mere speck of danger arose.

Nevertheless, expunging Agnes was the goal here. If anything, the horse could ease the burden of carrying Teddy. He led the horse back to his home town, implementing him as a luggage-cart. Teddy was stirring, but another stone to the head did the trick. Fetcher retrieved the clothes, and all set course for Cobb's house against a chill, biting wind. Closer to Woolyton meant treading the wolf's den; more than once, they passed men who eyed Teddy with lingering hunger. Cobb sharply reminded them each his trade was wool, and went on his way.

He was glad to be back at his cottage. Horse, sheep, and dog all gathered around the bed, and Teddy was permitted the remainder of his sleep, however unrestful. However, Cobb was taking no chances with his wakening. He bound Teddy's hands and ankles before turning his concentration to breakfast. Fetcher followed him out back, only to find disappointment in a vegetable garden, and a rather measly one at that.

"Shouldn't you be going back to your master?"

"I might as well; mind you, I'll come back periodically. I will have my dues, sir. Make no mistake about that."

And he was gone, for the time being. The horse, whose name had yet to make itself known, came out to announce Teddy's awakening. The two of them went in, passing the manguisse Cobb's manguisse on the way. It struck Cobb with an idea.

"What is your name?"

"Drop-Your-Drawers, although by now I've dropped everything on behalf of protecting my personal safety."

"From here on, your name will be Cornelias Cobb. You'll have to wear his clothes to match, but it's a guaranteed safeguard and armor."

Drop wasted no time hiding himself under Cobb's old skins. Unsure of the personal resemblance, the conniving sheep suspected he'd have to take up drinking if he wanted to fool anyone. At any rate, the focus now was Teddy-Bill, and any information he had.

"Merry waking." Cobb's offer of a seasoned cucumber was met with sour refusal. Not that he should expect too much. "Suit yourself, figuratively." He pulled up a chair. "Why did you wait to believe me until my wife was dead?"

Teddy sighed. "No sense on moving on a fancy, is there? And do you know how hard it was to sew up more than forty man skins? How hard was it for you?"

"It was hard, yes, but not done on a fancy. My wife wasn't even the first. Didn't any of you ever wonder what happened to Duncan Burlap? Didn't you get a look at the family dinner table that night?"

"No, only you remember that. You were the lone witness."

"And who witnessed Honeysuckle's slaughter?"

Teddy bowed his head. "Why didn't she..."

Cobb already knew the question. He knew the answer, too. Teddy didn't look to be in the spirit of arguing further, nor, once he was honest with himself, was Cobb.

Drop came in, surpassing the melancholy expression of them both. Hide the horse as it might, the manskin did nothing in the way of concealing the misery and droop within. The facial area sagged, particularly around the mouth. He gave off the aura of a devoted alcoholic checking the whiskey cabinets to find cobwebs and emptiness. All in all, a disease of the soul that warranted immediate treatment.

In fewer than ten minutes, a party of two were headed towards the best beer in the village. Teddy would hardly have volunteered, but Cobb would certainly ask for a to-go mug. Lady Gilbert's mead was too rich to pass up.

They arrived on the pretense of having been fellow schoolboys. Drop's demeanor hadn't brightened; all the more appropriate for the true Cobb's circumstances. No suspicious looks were cast his way; the barmates were all too engrossed in the latest gossip surrounding the Rivalton chicken massacre, a conversation that utterly propelled Drop's investment in the mead.

"Ooh, mighty mounds! Higgins'll be out for blood." "Hear word the wife's beatin' the war drum as well." "Word's spreading good and quick among anyone with so much as a housefly." "Wouldn't mind the death of a fly; hang me if he'd ever get to my stable." "Or she; nobody's caught sight of the scoundrel."

Lady Gilbert rolled her eyes at such talk, although she couldn't disregard the climb in business. Word *did* spread quickly; more livestock herders than ever before had come in to placate their nerves.

"My, how business has boomed," observed Cobb.

Lady Gilbert looked up from the mug she'd been pouring. "And how would you know? I've never seen you in here before."

Damn! He'd forgotten the guise he'd been wearing. "And... that you haven't. Business *has* picked up, hasn't it? After all, *I've* never been in here before."

"True enough. With all the extra money, I've been in a state. I purchased my own ranch to leave the funk. Now, instead of more money than I know what to do with, I have more livestock than I know with. I swear, any rogue butcher would almost be welcome with open arms with all the work I've bitten into."

"A rogue butcher *will* come, like a thief in the night." Cobb had all but forgotten Enette. "Lord of all creation does not deal livestock to the devil's bidders."

"What about the devil's carpet pickers?"

Enette looked this way and that. Nobody else understood exactly the very carpet being picked, but it was clear that she was the one picking it. As she had done only a day before, Enette turned her eyes towards the celestial realm, begged for deliverance, then helped herself to all the delieverance she needed. They can only guess she'd gone to pick the carpet; Abs Absolom was nowhere in sight.

The exchange mystified Lady Gilbert for a moment. "Are you a man with secrets?"

"Lady, I hold secrets that would scorch the hands of the common man."

From mist to steam, and Drop too drunk to realize anything going on. Cobb himself had lost a little awareness in the heat of the moment; drunks notwithstanding, the room appeared to dissolve into a spa, the mugs into martini glasses, their clothes into togas. Natural inclinations took over, and either one took a dip into forsaken territory. The lip-fruit blossomed in Cobb's mouth. It would one day flourish into a wedding bouquet, all the way to a blessed union in bed.

A distant but definite shriek disrupted the illusion, and Cobb glimpsed the window. Was that the seamstress? If it was, she didn't linger. Someone who *did* was Enette, back to make the sign of the cross, over and over again. "Carpet picker," uttered Cobb, and off she went.

Drop fell face first onto the counter in a drunken coma. "I pity Cobb," lamented Lady Gilbert. "He'll be flat broke soon. It's almost enough to refuse him service."

Right. Cobb hoisted the horse over his shoulder and carried him out the door. He didn't get very far before he collapsed. He considered rolling him; the dust might have been a nice touch, but it would've been a slow, laborous journey.

A howl, starting soft, then quickly loudening, startled him. There was unmistakable hunger in it. Dear God, that wasn't a wolf, was it?

Oh, no, it was Fetcher, trotting up with a drumstick bone. "Don't think for one minute that this counts for anything." He spat out the bone. "There may have been meat on this, but none of it went down my gullet."

Enette Flandery pushed past Cobb. "Allow me." She helped herself to Drop's maw and delivered her holy anti-enebriant down below. Drop sputtered and catapulted to full consciousness.

"Hooey," he cried, "That is some nasty mead."

Cobb, the real Cobb, turned to Enette. "You're going to have to give me the recipe, including everything beside's the carpet pickings."

"The Lord only bestows the mysteries of heaven upon those who proclaim his name wide and loud." And then she was gone.

Before Fetcher came, Cobb had planned to go back to the Rivalton flock and sleep there. His prisoner had the bed, his guest should have been too drunk to care where he slept, and his lender would no doubt give him away. He was in for a restless night. Whoever the seamstress was would almost certainly sell him out. He was in for a restless night, not only for the worry of spies and tattlers, but because of the onslaught of complaints coming from them all. Fetcher groaned about meat he deserved, and Drop longed for his inebriation. Back at the cottage, Teddy's complaint was that he hadn't eaten all day, and added to that the debt of mead Cobb owed him. The night was made of a three-man argument. Who had it the worst? All he could do, lying there on a tapestry, was to pull his mask off and dream of being part of the flock again.

Cobb woke up. At some point in the night, the other three had run out of arguments and fallen asleep. Fetcher and Teddy he let sleep; Drop he needed to demonstrate an alibi. The

seamstress, who he could only assume was Teddy's wife, would be wary of him from the start. She'd seen him trade clothes and had no doubt spread the rotten word among the other wives. They at least needed to see "the Cobbstume" in use if they were to see him at all. Still, he'd give them all a wide berth while he enacted his plan.

Their arrival in Rivalton, Cobb atop the shoulders of a mansuited Drop, struck an assuringly low number of villagers as peculiar. The weight of the population had collected at another farm, this one belonging to a dairy farmer. His cow lay slain on the ground under another message. The writing was crude, barely legible. Its color was only marginably distinguishable from the wall on which it was written, but Cobb could still understand the message. "You owe me one flock." He read it aloud.

Drop leant in close to Cobb's ear. "This is getting out of hand. Maybe you should turn yourselves in."

"And then what? Graze as low beasts of the field just to end up on the dinner tray? No sir." He scanned the crowd for members of the flock; He'd have to catch them before they went back to the house.

Ah, there was Lorlinic, good and pale with terror. Cobb weaved his way through the crowd and whispered. "No work shall come of your worry."

This startled Lorlinic, less so because it broke him out of a trance than because the return of Teddy was so unexpected. "What do you want? Shouldn't you be off galavanting with your Lady-friend at the bar?"

"We should *both* be at the bar but for different reasons. I can't very well smuggle the whereabouts of dear old Slice without tasting a little forbidden fruit, can I? Corn here has found me a good lead."

He presented Drop, jittery and teary from the sight of a slain neighbor. Lorlinic sniffed. "I see you've taken over his hero complex."

"And for the better. Can't you read the sign? It's definitely the work of the old butcher. Unless we can expose him, we're all going to end up--"

"Don't say it!" He grabbed Cobb by the collar and pulled him in close. "You get straight back to the factory before you spill another bean, you're in enough trouble as it is."

Trouble was what awaited him at the factory. He wasn't equipped to face Mrs. Melonham. Any moment, she might demand an intimate evening, one in defiance of Lorlinic's "live-as-men" ordinance. He didn't recognize him as Cobb, so that was one bright spot. Yet as he walked by sons

hearding their chickens back into the henhouse, farmwives debating the origin of a piece of wool, and frantic men sharpening their pitchforks on grindstones, he feared on behalf of his eventual return.

He tripped. "Hey, watch it," snapped a boy with a magnifying glass. "Sorry, Mister," said his friend. "But this is serious business."

"I can't tell," said the boy with the glass, "but these look like goat prints."

"They're not useful if they aren't sheep."

Cobb brushed himself off. The hoofprints were neither goat's nor sheep's. They were stag's. Never one to ruin the fun, he went on his way, wondering what his next move would be.

Said move didn't come for nearly a week, during which Cobb landed a job wiping glasses as Lady Gilbert's stooge. The kissing discontinued considering the danger of Mrs. Melonham at the window; why she went with the affair story rather than the truth of switched clothing, Cobb couldn't fathom. What did *not* end was his visits to Rivalton, where a new animal was slaughtered every day, each under the bloody claim, "You owe me one flock." With the growing body count came growing hysteria. Neighbor ransacked neighbor's house for signs of harbored livestock. Some even slaughtered their own game in an ironic drive to protect it. Not once did Cobb fail to bring up the Wooly tavern. Lorlinic resisted with all of his might, but his willpower had fallen exponentially. The carnage had sunken his spirit to the point of needing an escort to witness all the hysteria. That job had fallen to his wife, who was shortly arrested for her public naggery. It was then that Cobb made his move.

Safely separate from Agnes, Lorlinic hadn't the respect he would have liked from the rest of the flock. Cobb escorted him straight to his place of business, where he slunk onto the stool and began to mumble his troubles. They were surrounded by the evening crowd, into which Drop had slid quite smoothly due to a matching affinity for dulled awareness. "I shouldn't be here," murmured Lorlinic. "It is not of the sheeplly ways."

"I thought we left all those sheeplly ways behind," said Cobb. "I definitely did. These true men? They are already drunk. We're late, you see. If you want to live among men, then you've no choice but to drink like one."

He swept his hand along the room. Sagging farmers, blacksmiths, and constables, occupations of every duty, had taken up the mug. Their drink enjoyed a steady comradery with their minds, turning their attention towards imaginary guests, no doubt the spirits of fallen livestock. They

were part of the conversation; "Holly, where'd your feathers flutter to?" "Why, Lucille, you are utter udder nowadays. How refills your virgin supply?"

Cobb leant in. "Are you a man or not? Drink like one."

Lorlinic sunk a little further. His spine was waining. "I was all right until that butcher came to shut everyone's business down."

"He's here, like it or not. You'd best make the most of it."

Cobb ordered an entire pitcher of mead, promising to supervise his partners intake. Though hesitant, Lady Gilbert complied. Time to challenge Lorlinic's masculinity. Cobb dealt his cards; Real men handled their problems with a brain soaking in alcohol. "I dare you to face your problems." Lorlinic, lacking the courage to rebel, took the first sip. Some bottled spirit stirred in Lorlinic's eyes.

"It's been an uphill battle," he admitted. "Agnes and me. Which of us do you think wears the trousers?"

He took a hardier swig. Real men weren't afraid to lose their trousers to the women they married, and Cobb said so. Abs Absolom was in earshot. He moved in for a closer look, nearly erupting when Lorlinic reached for the button on his pants.

"Woah there, this isn't some strip dive, pal."

Lady Gilbert hopped over the bar and wiggled her hips. "Oh, live a little, Abs. I'd like to see what's underneath."

Cobb had his hand on the pitcher, prepared to throw it in Abs's eyes. The word "underneath" stayed his hands. "Besides, Enette already knows what's underneath *your* trousers, don't you."

"A very conflicted spirit," said Enette, not so much as looking up from her damnation rag.

Abs froze with indecision. Enette beckoned him to the backroom. "Allow all divine holiness to redirect that wayward spirit of yours." All he could do was follow. It was an uphill battle. He was losing it moreso than Lorlinic was losing his trousers.

Lady Gilbert couldn't taker her eyes off his legs. "That looks like something I bought with my barn. Oh, so does that." Then her attention shifted to his face, free of the human mask. She examined herself in the shotglass. "Is that what's underneath all the skin, flesh and blood? If so, where is the blood? It appears to be missing."

"It is missing, Mi'Lady. And so is the flesh." Cobb held up the mask. "For you see, I am Cornelias Cobb." He pulled off his own mask, and that of the drunken Drop. Both human faces creaked and squealed, exiled from necks, jaws, and muzzles they had concealed. "I have been a

sheep all my life, using the bearded skin of this here mask right now," He wiggled the one used by Drop. "My woolery became an unsustainable business when alopecia set in.. My one plan now is to rejoin my flock and live among men, safe from slaughter."

And safe from the eyes of any sound-minded person. Lorlinic was down to his gloves. Gilbert looked upon him with pity.

"'Tis a sneaky road you're wandering down," she lamented. "And I daresay, lives were lost among the way."

"My own wife was one of them," said Cobb. "I yearn to free animals, captive or no, from the tyranny of that wretched butcher."

Ennette and Abs stumbled out. Lorlinic's naked sheep body alarmed him enough to have him cease him, look around the room in a panic, and run towards the door. Ennette stuck out her leg, and the brute's head wound up on the strict end of the table. Cobb himself struggled to stuff Drop's head back into his own mask while Enette stepped over the bouncer and his unconscious captive.

"A curious revelation, don't you think?" asked Lady Gilbert.

"The lost, wandering sheep? Hardly." Enette spilled her tonic down Drop's throat, and he awoke to cranial agony.

Cobb tasked the awoken with escorting Lorlinic back to his quarters. Teddy-Bill knew a bit too much to have his skin back so soon, but the savoir-faire surrounding it was resolved when Fetcher came back to air his daily demands. "You'll get your meat tonight," promised Cobb. However old the song he sung, it still brought drool from Fetcher's jowels. Meat would most certainly enter his bowells. All lost skin was accounted for, Abs simply needed to see them. Fetcher did the honors of pouring Ennette's tonic down his throat, hopefully unaware that a piece of his own wool lay inside.

"Huh, what the..." he took a look at the two human men. "You had your masks off, right in front of women!"

"Take a sniff in the mirror," snapped Cobb. "You are the one with Flandery tonic on your breathe."

Abs did chack his breathe, exhaling onto his palm and then sniffing his the residue. "*Woo*wee, I need to get back to rivalton and brush my teeth."

"Brush your brain, while you're added," pushed Cobb. "The mugs you downed. I'm surprised we didn't look like Elephants to you."

Abs snarled and went out the door. Cobb filled a flask with mead, and he and Fetcher were out the door. Cobb debriefed the dog on the story so far, the rumors of Teddy-Bill's affair in Woolyton passed off as detective work. Fetcher barely listened. Every piece of him but his appetite was deaf. Also, every part but his appetite was mute. In spite of the adulterous rumors, Mrs. Melonham was relieved to see him back, though heartbroken that she only earned second place in his life, even if first place was a mere drumstick, coupled with ham, gravy, a biscuit, and mashed potatoes. Cobb couldn't very well blame him. The original promise had been made more than a week ago. Absence made the heart grow hungry.

"Now, how was your time in jail?" Inquired Cobb. Lorlinic's wife had supposedly nagged her way to freedom, back to the Hairydale Fashion Factory, yet still had enough left in her to run the household. She exerted even more authority after her first secret sip of Woolyton mead. One of Cobb's fascination with alcohol came from seeing the release of what its users held back under a sobre mind. Agnes's nagging was usually directed towards men; they could sew right, graze right, or shave right. Now, her command was *really* directed towards men. She hopped from Greenbell, whose leisure was spent rolling the dice too fervently, to Sokham, who didn't kiss his wife passionately enough. She sought out men to manage, competing with every wife for control of their marriages, their business practices.

In the meantime, Cobb prepared the bedroom for what he'd advertise to his wife as a steamy evening. This would end the moment her womansguise was off, he'd suggest they take it out to the fields like in olden times. He opened up a window; they were on the first floor, and the drop wouldn't do too much damage. Maybe he'd give Lorlinic's suit to Lady Gilbert, anything to convince Agnes that her role had been filled.

He lie in wait for his would-be wife. She'd certainly need another dose of mead if he wanted to completely oblivate her. He left the room for a bit, for she'd escaped his earshot to target the people on the extreme end of the factory. He didn't remember Agnes as a women who broke for a refreshing drink when she was on a roll, but she'd clearly needed to set her face free to nag more thoroughly. The mask was gone, and the wizened face beneath panted and wheezed. She had depleted her energy reserves, and if there was any question as to her sobriety, she urinated at Cobb on sight. She had to be intoxicated. Her aim was pitiful. "Foolish, foolish Ruby might have let

Teddy's curious lips wander astray, but no gallivanting whore will land a single kiss on my Frederick."

Her words were slurred and ill-delivered. "Come along to bed, Aggy dear. Nothing concludes a busy day like an evening of wild..." His gut wouldn't let him finish. All he needed were her skins and clothes. That body underneath... *yeesh*.

She flopped onto the bed and began snoring. Cobb peeled off the Lorlinic mask and tried on Agnes's. "Get along now, ye scamps." He raised the pitch and repeated the line. It was no use; he couldn't master it. Maybe Lady Gilbert would do a better job of it. At any rate, so long as there wasn't an extra sheep around to throw off the census. Cobb dragged her to the window and rolled her out. She rolled a little further down, snoring all the while. "Farewell, wench," bid Cobb. "You won't be missed."

"Do you really want to go through with this?"

Cobb spun around to face Ruby Melonham crawling out from under the bed. No, not Ruby, the voice was all wrong.

"Teddy? What business is it of yours?"

"The business of a captive confronting his captor. Imbalanced, I know, as my wife disrobed your dog and followed him to me. You should exercise more discretion when seeking confidants." Outside, Agnes belched eruptively. "Hmmm... Lorlinic had much the same response. I think Woolyton mead may be overrated."

"Oh, what is the use?" Moaned Cobb. "You're going to expose me, aren't you? Well, may this factory be damned. Ruby and Agnes live yet. I'd go so far as to say they will outlive the two of you. Meanwhile, I wander this world a widower for being right about the danger we were in for. My only blessing is that I didn't see her slaughtered."

"No one did. All we saw was the aftermath."

Another outdoor belch brought both sheep to the window. A lamb had pounced upon Agnes's gut and rolled off. Clearly impressed by the resulting sound, a friend did likewise. In his mind, Cobb replaced Agnes with Ruby, then Ruby with Honeysuckle. He pictured the urine stains on the discarded clothes were not those of Agnes's. At last, he imagined some other wifely sheep behind bars that afternoon. What was life but a chain of indignities?

"If you're going to expose me, I'm making a run for it. I hereby forfeit my association with all of you."

"I hardly think tattling worthwhile," said Melonham, "although I do advise you to retrieve your own skin, if for nothing else than for Mrs. Lorlinic's dignity."

Her gasbag was empty now; no amount of hopping on her would illicit the exciting sound. They'd moved on to playing, "She loves me, she loves me not," by pulling out her wool.

Cobb sighed. "Do you want to come back with me?"

Teddy shuddered. "Too soon, sir. I was tied and imprisoned in your house."

"Suit yourself. Or unsuit yourself. Just be glad *your* wife didn't get drunk and try to pee on you."

The boys had finished off Agnes's scalp and had moved to her back. Far off in Rivalton, there was something akin to a battle cry. The village had a distinct glow to it. "You owe me one flock." As far as he knew, there were no shepherds in Rivalton. Anything as little as a curly-haired mutt would go into the ransom flock stockpile.

"You boys need to put that old bag back where you found her," he ordered.

"Yeah sure thing." They gave no other sign of listening. Maybe they just wanted to truly know whether "she" loved them or not. Cobb couldn't blame them. It might as well have been the rest of the flock's way of determining whether to believe him on the matter of slaughter. "He's lying. He's lying not."

All the way back to Woolyton, he wanted to remove his mask. He'd become used to riding Drop between villages. Somehow, the horse had never lost his breath. Cobb already began losing his breath halfway there, yet dared not take off his mask, veil of dark or no. Drop deserved more for his services than a few evenings at the Wooly Tavern. Maybe he'd gone sneaky and helped himself to the garden. Even so, something ought to come directly from Cobb. Something to guarantee Drop's safety.

A few yards away from his house, he felt safe enough to take off his mask. Breathing did not come any more easily, though. The air felt, among a mixture of other things, greasy. The air was like an exhalation from a beehive that harvested bacon fat instead of honey. Nearing his own door, the odor multiplied a hundredfold. The nerve to open it might have been akin to releasing a deadly spirit, so he went to the window.

Drop was dead. Slice had butchered him. Those two facts had stabbed him in the brain before any of the details that had led to that conclusion. Those followed him into his fainting spell. A candle illuminated the tired message of the apparent debt this beast thought he was owed. More importantly, Drop was on the floor. A blanket of flies communed and dined around his chest. A

slab of meat lay to his side. Any other addition to this dreadful scene didn't quite reach him before he lost consciousness.

Sheep were never meant to drink. They were never meant to have hangovers. They weren't meant to be brave, or have any other defense mechanism other than to retreat. Fall over a cliff if they needed. Their destiny is to supply mankind with the holy thread, the building block of clothing, then crawl into the oven and out as a delicacy when the wool stopped coming. It was a fate that encompassed so many other members of the farming family, but horses were not one of these.

And thus, Cobb awoke to Teddy and Lady Gilbert standing over him. "There's no time to lose!" she said. "Now is the time to act."

"What do you mean?" said Cobb. "Where am I?"

"My barn," she said. "We've gathered an assortment of animals from Rivalton, and we want you to speak to them."

The smell was as awful as it was the night before. Cobb wondered if it would ever leave him.

"You're an inspiration!" Teddy urged him off the bed, or the haystack he'd been using as a bed, and ushered him into the next room before an audience of cows, pigs, and chickens. He didn't interrupt their gossip; whatever inspiration Teddy thought he was, it didn't appear to have any effect on the room. Feathers were all over the floor, as was dung. At least it wasn't horse guts, but it still didn't bring fort from Cobb any words of encouragement.

Teddy, somehow sensing an air of impatience among them, nudged Cobb. "The people are waiting," he said.

"These aren't people," said Cobb. "As far as I can see, there's only one person in this room."

"Now enough with that kind of talk." Lady Gilbert hopped atop a stack of hay and slung her skirt around. The whole barn snapped to attention. Some of them expected more mesmerings skirt slinging, but instead they got a speech. "Listen, all of you free living animals. Your lives are in danger of a rogue butcher, who feels entitled to a flock."

"Why shouldn't he?" A donkey stepped forward, nice and girthy. He reminded Cobb of a cauldron he'd seen back at the farm. "I heard that all he wants is his sheep back. You wouldn't begrudge a man his property would you?"

"But he wants to eat them, eat you," pled Gilbert. She didn't foresee the rebuttal of the donkey. However supple his waist may be, it would never amount to the edibility of pork, beef, or poultry, let alone lambchops. Teddy took over.

"Think of the potential you have! We sheep have gone into the wool industry; you chickens have your feathers to offer, you cows your milk."

"And the pigs?" The donkey stomped his hoof in defiance. "Don't think I haven't seen you parading around in those human skins of yours. You didn't flay your masters to make those disguises, now, did you?" Uncomfy mutters began stirring among the rest of the livestock. "I'll bet my whole foreleg that there is a bull somewhere with a missing bottom, multiple, in fact, if you had to clothe the whole heard."

The gossip and rumors crawling around the crowd gave Cobb the need to go back into the shed. That smell wasn't coming from the crowd, it was coming from deep within the haystack. Was that Drop? A better look at him demonstrated that he had an entire muscle missing from his chest. That muscle was right there, underneath, and it had a bite mark in it.

"This," said Cobb, "is what awaits us all if we do not have their cooperation."

"Is that a threat?" The donkey peered in, and screeched at the sight of Drop. Chickens, pigs and cows rushed in, panicked, and ran in every direction, including towards Cobb. The unmasked sheep crawled atop the haystack, only to topple from it and rolled through the wall. A bull had rammed through it. Cobb wasn't that potent when it came to crashing through walls.

"What... I'm not something to be trifled with..."

Where did that come from? Where did Lady Gilbert and Teddy come from? Where did that fire now burning the Gilbert estate down?

"It's the mob," cried Lady Gilbert. "They've come for us!"

"No, they've come for me," said Teddy. He threw his mask to the ground and beckoned the rioters. Then he headed back for Rivalton, with Lady Gilbert in tow. Among the villagers, Cobb recognized him. Slice. The butcher responsible for all of this. Donning the Teddy Mask, he followed the crowd all the way back to Hairydale Fashion Factory.

It was already on fire when Cobb made it there. The crowd had thrown their pitchforks in to encourage the flames, but Cobb wasn't letting loose. He closed in on Lady Gilbert and whispered, "that one," pointing at the lethal butcher. Lady Gilbert lost no time in clawing into the man's bald scalp. Suddenly, tufts of wool began to come out. Slice thrashed and clawed back, but his bald scalp was revealing more and more wool. Soon, slice was entirely faceless, and a few of the farmers were watching in dismay. It wasn't a man's face, but a sheep's face; and the sheep struggled to get away. Cobb gasped in alarm, facing a realization far worse than any that had come before.

The butcher Slice, was his wife, Honeysuckle Cobb.

As it were, the Butcher Slice never existed. Cobb's idea of dressing up as a human was not his own, but that of Duncan Burlap, who fell victim to Honeysuckle's appetite for her own kind. After the mass exodus, she sought a substitute for that tasty lambchops in other livestock, yet nothing lived up to it. Knowing full well that flesh-fed flesh was never a desirable meal, Honeysuckle was not cooked and eaten, simply jailed until a decision was reached. Cobb, meanwhile, understood the meaning of her parents' funereal ritual. His place was at their side, mourning the death of Honeysuckle, however figurative it was.