

# The Lighthouse

By Kermit Alexander II

“If you would, Ramon? I can’t seem to manage the hem here.” Marie pulled and tugged at her dress, trying in vain to get it to rip at the seams. The gown wasn’t made to be ran in, after all. I shuffled my way over to her ill-lit figure. The lighthouse basement was damp and dim, but I could make her out well enough.

This rock in the middle of nowhere, sought after by 3 nations and governed by joint treaty, was now laid low by famine and a famine-addled madman. Things had started well enough; a few adventurous sorts here and some military men there, and a supply ship for good measure – not much to go around on an island not 10 square kilometers and 10 times as many people. But they forgot about us, perhaps tried to forget – “shame about the war,” intoned the supply ship’s captain on the penultimate trip. And like a plant scorched in shallow soil we withered. Three-fourths of us dead inside 3 months; scurvy, nearly as we could figure. Papa took the soldiers with him to flag down a passing ship in our only raft, and we never saw any of them again.

How devastating the funerals were at first. I must have wailed for days when Mother passed. By the 15th, the 30th, the 40th time, I had numbed myself to the specter of it all; they lay in the ground, as I would soon thereafter. Or so I believed (how much better that would have been!),

but I had reckoned without the knowledge of what measures the lighthouse keeper would take, of what he would avail himself while the rest of us were weakened and dispirited.

At gunpoint he had walked us down here in this pit, and from time to time led some of us out, never to be seen again. We heard neither struggle nor screams, but his relatively healthy complexion left little doubt as to the fate of our friends on the other side of the basement door. At length, only Marie and I remained. I had given myself up to follow in the footsteps of the others, but the maidservant had other plans.

We could scarcely have come from more disparate backgrounds; I was born here – the closest thing to a native the island had – and being Papa's child (the de facto governor of the place) was the closest thing to a prince as well. Marie, on the other hand, was a more recent immigrant, an attendant of a one Helene Leclerc; "the madam" – as Marie always put it – had provided funds for our settlement, being a stakeholder of the guano mining done here. She talked on occasion of Paris and Marseille, of streets and houses that sprawled like an artificial Pacific, of the Mediterranean and its warm waters. Common and commonplace if her tone was to be believed, even.

I laid my hands on her dress, trying to get the best grip I could muster. I pulled, with no success. Dirty, tattered, frayed, yet unbroken. Like us, I'm certain she'd say if prompted. It came apart with the next yank, a scrap of stained and faded cotton remaining in my hands. I slumped back, Marie's thanks punctuating my fall.

But the next words out of her mouth were less than thankful. “You really think we’re done for, don’t you?” What, was it my enthusiasm that gave it away? “How do we even know where the guns are?,” I mumbled.

“We don’t,” came the flat rejoinder. “You’ll have to find them.”

“Supposing I don’t find them? Or they’re under lock and key?”

“We’ll make do with the kitchen knives. Surely they must be left in the open.”

As if utensils would even the game between us and that crazed cannibal of a lighthouse keeper.

I would have liked to drink her intoxicating optimism to death. She stood, practicing a gait unhindered by her clothing.

“And you gather you can beat him to the rocks, and even giving you that, lose him there for long enough?”

“What harm is there in trying? Our souls are spoken for, are they not? But –” and here she whirled, and gripped me with such intensity that I briefly wondered if the keeper was more sane than she – “but, I like living, Ramon. I’ve acquired a taste for it. You may seem resigned to

meeting your Maker, but I intend to stay a little longer, and God *willing*” – she squeezed harder – “I will keep you here with me.”

She held her stare even as her eyes watered. I didn’t feel like meeting her gaze after the tears started coming. “But the gun. His gun, Marie,” I quietly implored the ground.

“When the madam, when he, when the madam went” – She choked on her words, released her hold on my shoulders, composed herself. “When he took the madam away, it wasn’t with him. Like lambs to the slaughter, that’s how he sees us. It won’t be with him this time either.”

Before I could try to put another damper on her hopes, we heard that dreadful telltale shuffling beyond the basement door, and the moment of truth had come for us, ready or not. Marie fully let me go, making a silent appeal to heaven as she did so. She looked at me, tousled my hair.

“It’ll be alright. He’s not the only man on the island.” She made a start for the door, and apparently remembering her face was still stained with tears, wiped it.

I wanted to make myself feel so small. If I could shrink until I winked out of existence just to not witness the opening of that door, I would. But it creaked open all the same. And there he stood.

In truth, he was an unassuming individual by appearances, if a bit haggard (but weren’t we all?), with a bit of a crooked bend in his posture. We had, deliriously enough, written him off previously as a meek eccentric, never speaking a word; it was never even apparent under

whose employ he was. He was never present at the many funerals, with the only proof of his existence being the perpetual glow of the lighthouse and the missing bits and pieces of supplies that he was assumed to wander off with on occasion.

What wretched fools were we.

Marie glanced back at me one last time, and having done so, wordlessly made for the door. If there was any tell on her person regarding her imminent plans, it was too subtle for me to see it. She passed through the door, still wordless, and I looked at the floor, partially to avoid drawing any further suspicion (though what does one suspect from someone unable to maintain eye contact?), and partially to avoid gazing upon that man.

She passed out of my line of sight as I bowed my head, the monster reaching for the basement doorknob as I did so—

Pause, a hesitation, hurried scuffling of feet, an opening and slamming of a door a ways away, erratic shuffling, opening once more, silence, silence, silence. I nervously raised my gaze, as if somehow that man could be there to meet it. But only the basement door remained to greet me.

I made my way towards the door cautiously, furtively, as if it would somehow punish me for daring to escape in the absence of that man, or as if the monster himself was waiting in

ambush beyond it. Nothing and no-one was, of course, and I chided myself for hesitating and wasting precious time.

In my dash for the keeper's quarters, I caught a glimpse of that tottering figure hurrying in his uneven way towards the lagoon; Marie was probably beyond it and making towards the outcropping at the other end of the island. His visage drew forth a heightened sense of urgency, of the reality that Marie was buying me time with her life as collateral.

I turned the room upside down, tearing this way and that, trying to find any manner or trace of a weapon I could use. The Rubys Papa and the others carried with them must be somewhere; if not the Rubys, then the Lebel he let me shoot sometimes. But there was nothing, nowhere—

—a cabinet, perfectly Lebel-sized! Locked, and no trace of a key! I turned the room inside out once more, searching in a mad dash for anything resembling a key, but my progress was hindered by the strewn bits and pieces from my first pass. My panicked mind assessed the situation as best it could; how long had I been searching? Was the key on that man's person? Should I fall back to the kitchen? I threw myself at the cabinet and it at the ground, hoping against hope that it would, by some miracle, shatter into a million pieces. But it fell and landed, whole, with an indifferent, metallic clang.

I stifled a near-crazed scream. The cabinet lay, staring defiantly up at me as I imagined it, as if to taunt, "the utensil it is, the utensil it is." But what other option was left to me? The knife it

must be. I ran, or stumbled rather, towards the kitchen, deliberately sorting through the knives with shaking hands. I settled on what must have been the largest blade; the size of perhaps three of my palms set widthwise.

How does one kill with a knife? With a slash? I quickly practiced a few half-hearted swings, before deciding that was no good. A stab then, I thought to myself, thrusting a few times, shuddering as I considered a three-palm distance between me and that cannibal. Would I be able to steel myself to wield it against the devil hunting Marie among the rocks? Would it even be sharp enough? I breathed a silent request to Providence that the answer to both questions would be yes.

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The world around me was a sensational blur; pain or something resembling pain against my feet, breath or breathing in my ears, a jagged gray-black in the distance that must be the rocks. I caught a mechanical black mass of masses in the lagoon as I half-splashed by it, and a half-terror set in that the cannibal assuredly giving pursuit somewhere behind me had dumped the excess guns in the water. There was no time to investigate; he must be close, or so I assumed, not allowing myself a backwards glance (see how that treated Lot's poor wife!).

The waves growing louder and the haphazard dark beneath me alerted me that I was at my destination, and the world seemed to settle and clarify itself. I grew aware of how hard I had

pushed myself, of how my body screamed for respite and how the salt air burned my lungs, but those feelings were fairly murdered by the dull approaching off-beat rhythm that signaled death. My hands shook as I clutched at my tattered dress, trying to choke down my fear.

The rock formed a walkable loop of a sort, extending from the southeastern edge that I had made my way onto, through the southern tip of the island, then rejoining the beach at the southwestern edge. The children had often made a game of running around it as fast as they could (Ramon excusing himself from participating), and it was with no small amount of bitter irony that I thought about how best to incorporate my memories of their playtime into this less-than-playful affair.

He drew nearer still. I pulled myself along the ledges, staying a good distance out of his reach, but close enough that the ideal strategy was to follow my lead and not double back. My nerves were at their limits as I forced myself to keep that thing constantly in my sights, but the thought of Ramon with one of the island firearms steadied me. With less guilt than I should have had, I prayed that that savage might lose his footing and dash himself or drown himself, and several times it seemed he might do so, but he caught himself at every instance. A mad thought flitted across my mind to chase him down and push him over myself, but I could not chance it; there was no telling that I would have the strength to do so, nor that I would not also perish in the process.



How much time had I purchased? I had no idea; there was ill time to keep time while survival was of paramount importance. But it would suffice, or it must suffice, as I had reached the southwestern beach. I briefly considered attempting another loop around the outcropping (how absurd that would have appeared!), but I soberly judged that my legs had maybe one good sprint in them, if that; that energy would be needed to make it back to the lighthouse, and it was decided thus.

The world blurred again, marred by fatigue this time. I made a point out of glancing at the lagoon, and my worst fears were confirmed – those were, indeed, guns in the water. But maybe not all the guns, I reasoned to myself. I caught the outline of the lighthouse door parting; Ramon must have noticed and been ready. Ready with what weapon, I would soon see...

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I saw Marie making her way pell-mell back towards the lighthouse and myself, and threw open the door preemptively so as to not slow her down. My right hand gripped the knife, knuckles whitening, praying she would forgive me for being unable to find the pistols or the rifle. She noticed the knife as she drew nearer, a look of horrified dejection creeping across her face, and I swallowed down a thought to turn the implement on myself in despair.

“The top,” she panted as she breached the threshold. “We wound him there, then off the ledge!” Not breaking her stride, she made for the spiral staircase that concluded in the lantern room,

and I, swallowing hard, made off after her. We ascended the staircase, Marie a few strides ahead. Our out-of-time clatter had another, more erratic, percussion trailing behind it, a sound that drove the finality of the situation into my heart that threatened to leap out of my chest. We had cornered ourselves, and in so doing had ensured that only one party would walk away.

The peeling paint on the walls flew by, bearing witness to the demon below shortly thereafter. I steadied myself on the railing a few times, scraping my hand on the rust. The lantern room drew near, a few steps ahead; the circular chamber with the beacon in the middle would be our penultimate destination. Marie, now clearly dreadfully fatigued at this point, made for the gallery, the platform that ensconced the top of the building and the lantern room. She broke left; I, intuitively, went right, thinking if push came to shove that we could flank the madman.

I had scarcely dropped out of sight of the lantern room before a foot dragged itself out of it, a body following. And there he stood, facing me, for the second time that day—

It must have taken all of an instant. The decision had already been made, the knife readied. Unconsciously, I screamed, right hand on handle, left bracing the butt of the blade, throwing myself forward with what strength remained. I made contact, kept going, sinking into his abdomen till it was flush with my right hand.

My perception grew warped; another set of screams had joined mine, and I further grew aware of Marie's yells as well of her presence near me. "Push," she seemed to utter, push. I tried to stand myself up from my crouching position, and brace my shoulder against his chest, bluffing my body into believing it had energy where it had none. We were against the railing now, and I crouched again; Marie did likewise. There was a clawing sensation on my back, a scratching; it passed to my neck, the back of my head. I stood myself up, and the sensation suddenly ceased, as did the weight against me, and my senses returned to normal.

I became aware of a sick, guttural scream, lasting several seconds, before being terminated with a sickening, dull thud, both sounds that I knew I would carry with me to my own grave. Everything left me at that moment, and I slumped against the railing, tired, yet still in some sense alive.

Marie's eyes were focused on infinity, like Papa's binoculars at night. She drew me close, rubbing my head, crying, sobbing after a while. I cried as well, or made some sound approximating it. The knife had gone over the ledge; my right hand closed and opened, as if it too, was in disbelief the implement had plunged.

This, I swear before the sailors of the *Yorktown*, is the truth of our survival, and nothing else beside.