

Principal Lightkeeper, Reginald Greenweir, prepared dinner in the tiny lighthouse kitchen on Flannan Isle. A tattered calendar on the wall showed AUGUST 1899. Reggie lit the gas burner and fried two fish fillets and four small carrots. He dished the food onto two plates and set the table. He called over his shoulder, towards the spiral staircase that wrapped tightly around the interior of the lighthouse.

“Dinner's ready! Have you lit the lamp yet?”

A beat. No reply.

Reggie sighed and walked up the narrow staircase. The thin, metal railing he gripped was rusted from the salty sea air. At the very top of the stairs was the lamp room, surrounded by glass windows. The black sky peered in, and waves crashed loudly below, sending sea-spray up the side of the tall lighthouse.

Reggie paused at the doorway and looked at the huge glass lamp that warned ships of the treacherous, rocky shoal below them, standing waiting to be lit. Through the half-opened doorway, Reggie noticed smears of spilled oil on the floor, and a pile of dirty clothes and blankets piled against the window, like a huge nest.

He stepped forward, pushing the door open.

The door slammed shut from within and Reggie jumped backwards. “Alright, alright, I just came to check you were going to light the lamp?” Reggie said.

From within the lamp room, he heard a sour reply. “Piss off, just leave it alone. Leave me alone,” Matthews muttered. Muffled swearing and the sound of a glass bottle rolling across the floor was all Reggie heard after that. A moment later, a match flared, then bright light flooded out from under the gap of the lamp room door. Reggie sighed and slowly walked back

downstairs and wrote in the Lightkeeper's Log Book. *Day 295 – First Assistant Matthews has lit the lamp at 8pm. No ships sighted today. Vegetable supply running low. Will plant potatoes and carrots tomorrow. Tinned stock and fish in good supply.*

Then he sat down at the kitchen table and ate his fish and carrots, with the shrieking wind as his only companion.

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The next morning, Reggie entered the kitchen, and brewed a pot of coffee. He cooked an egg, then sat at the small table. A plate with a piece of fried fish and a solitary carrot sat untouched on the table from last night. Ants marched in a solemn line to and from the food.

“So now you're not eating? What a waste.” Reggie muttered and cleaned up the cold food.

Later that morning, Reggie sat at the kitchen table and wrote a letter.

*Dear Sir,*

*I am becoming increasingly concerned with First Assistant Matthews' erratic behaviour. Requesting immediate replacement First Assistant at the earliest possible ship. I fear he will not last another three months out here. I am alarmed for my own safety with this unsociable man.*

*Principal Keeper Reginald Davis.*

Matthews, hunched and unkempt, appeared in the kitchen doorway and watched Reggie writing.

“What's that?” Matthews asked.

Reggie jumped, smearing his signature. He hastily stuffed the letter into his jacket.

“Just requesting more tinned goods and vegetable seeds. I'll send it when the next boat comes by,” he said.

“That won't be for a while. Not expecting anyone to stop by for another month, I thought,” Matthews said.

Reggie didn't reply. He left the kitchen, Matthews' beady eyes watching him the entire time.

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Reggie snored loudly in his bed. The door to his room slowly opened and a dark head looked in. The figure entered and began looking through Reggie's jacket, which was folded over the back of a chair. Reggie turned over in bed and stopped snoring.

The figure froze, until Reggie began snoring again.

There was a loud crinkle of paper as the figure took the letter from the jacket pocket, then left the room, pulling the door shut softly behind them.

Reggie woke up, disorientated and looked frantically around the room, before realising he was alone.

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The next morning when Reggie woke up he noticed his jacket on the floor. He picked it up, his fingers searching for the letter but coming up empty. He frantically checked the pockets, and the rest of his room, before realising the letter was long gone.

He picked up the Lightkeeper's Log Book and huddled over his desk, writing quickly.

*Day 297 - Matthews did not light the lamp last night. I could not enter the lamp room as he had locked himself in there. He has stolen a letter I wrote to the Head Lightkeeper requesting a replacement assistant.*

*Repairs need to be completed today to the exterior lighthouse walls.*

He slammed the book shut, feeling on edge. He distracted himself in the only way he knew how, by continuing the never-ending job of re-painting the exterior wall of the lighthouse. He tried, unsuccessfully, to forget about the missing letter.

While he painted, he looked up and saw a bird had begun nesting in the side of the lighthouse where a brick had fallen out.

Reggie walked to the lighthouse front door and called out, “Matthews, can you come outside?”

He waited, then heard the sound of a door slamming overhead and footsteps on the stairs. Reggie walked to the shed and retrieved the tall wooden ladder. He leant it against the side of the lighthouse beneath the nest. He heard Matthews walk up behind him.

“Here, hold it steady will you? I need to remove that bird's nest before they dislodge more bricks,” Reggie said.

Matthews grunted in reply and Reggie began to climb the ladder.

Higher and higher he climbed, his hair blowing as the wind picked up, his hands grasping the splintery sides of the ladder. He reached the top rung and stretched his right arm as far as he could to grab the bird's nest. He checked there were no eggs in it, then dropped it to the ground and tried to push the dislodged brick back into place.

Suddenly, the ladder swayed and tipped away from the lighthouse. Reggie swore and grabbed the ladder, trying to press himself into the wall of the lighthouse.

“Matthews! Hold it still man, the wind is picking up!” Reggie cried.

Reggie heard nothing below him. He looked down, his stomach swooping as he saw the ground so far away.

Matthews was nowhere to be seen.

Reggie climbed down the ladder, sweating as it swayed in the high winds and gasped in relief when his feet touched the ground. From inside the lighthouse, he heard a low chuckle.

“God help me,” he muttered, glancing skyward.

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Reggie woke in the middle of the night to the sound of a door slamming. A beat passed, then the door slammed again. And again.

He got out of bed and groggily walked out to the lighthouse kitchen. He lit the small gas lamp and held it in front of him, squinting from the flame.

The front door was open, slamming against the door frame in the wind then bouncing open again. Outside rain was falling thick and fast. The kitchen floor was sopping wet.

Reggie walked to the front door to secure it, but something caught his eye. He took a step outside, into the blustering rain and stared in shock as he saw loaves of bread, sacks of flour and trampled fish and vegetables spilled across the garden in a huge wet mess.

The food was completely ruined. Cracked eggs ran across the ground and the bread had disintegrated into white mush. Reggie swore, then turned around and entered the lighthouse, slamming the door shut behind him and locking it closed.

“YOU FOOL! Are you trying to kill us? What are we going to eat now!” Reggie yelled.

There was no reply, except the rain pounding outside. Reggie sagged against the wall and dropped his head into his hands.

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The next morning the sun was shining brightly. Chickens and seagulls were pecking over the food strewn across the ground. Reggie watched them sullenly from the kitchen table. A piece of paper was stretched in front of him and his hand shook slightly as he began to write.

*Dear Sir, requesting immediate delivery of food supplies and replacement First Assistant, as Matthews has become too unstable. He ruined our food supply last night. Tinned goods are all we have left.*

*Principal Keeper Reginald Greenweir.*

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Reggie sat on his bed to write his daily log. The sagging mattress strained beneath him and he heard a strange clinking sound underneath. He got off the bed and knelt down, one arm reaching under it. He pulled out an empty rum bottle.

He reached under the bed again and pulled out a second empty rum bottle. He took them both out to the kitchen and slammed them down on the table, looking angry.

“Bloody Matthews! Keep your drinking habit out of my room!” he muttered, stalking back to his bedroom and slamming the door.

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The following day a strange dripping sound woke Reggie. He sat up in bed, trying to work out what it was. He got up and walked out into the main room. His eyes widened and he let out a strangled noise.

Thick, viscous oil was cascading down the metal spiral staircase that ran around the interior of the lighthouse. Brown oil dripped and landed on the floor, pooling in huge glossy puddles.

Reggie staggered towards the staircase and yelled, “Matthews! Are you okay? What’s happened to the oil?”

He was met with silence, except for the oil dripping rhythmically. Reggie tried to climb the stairs, grabbing onto the railing as his feet slipped in the oily mess. He stumbled and pulled himself back up, his hands and feet now slicked in oil, and continued battling his way upstairs.

He finally reached the lamp room and looked in. Matthews was not inside. The huge metal canisters that held the lamp oil were all tipped on their sides, lids off, and the lamp room was flooded in oil. Reggie moaned and ran his hands through his hair, leaving streaks of oil behind.

“MATTHEWS? Where are you? What have you done!” he yelled.

The only answer was the oil dripping below.

Later, Reggie walked into the small brick lean-to connected to the kitchen, holding a gas lantern. He was completely covered in dried, brown oil.

The warm light glowed over a tiny room, showing a small table that filled most of the space. On top of the table was a telegraph. Reggie placed the lantern next to the telegraph and glanced over his shoulder uneasily. Silence filled the lighthouse.

He leant over the telegraph and began to connect the wires to the circuits. He paused again, looking around, but saw no one. He hurried, his oil-stained fingers jerking around as he finished making the connections and readied the transmitter.

He reached for the Morse code key, and spelled out three letters, the taps echoing loudly in the silent lighthouse.

*Dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot.*

Reggie waited, watching the receiver, but the machine was silent. He repeated his distress signal, and was again met with silence. He sagged against the wall, closing his eyes.

The next morning Reggie slowly ate baked beans, spooning them cold, straight from the tin. His fingernails were still covered in brown oil and there were dirty smears across his face. He looked around the lighthouse, the stairs still covered in oil despite the mound of towels and blankets below which he had used to try clean up the mess.

He sat the tin of beans down on the table and wrote in his Log Book. *Day 300 - Lamp was not lit again last night. All the lamp oil has been spilled. I fear for the ships. Sent SOS telegram last night. No reply. Going to search for Matthews on this godforsaken island.*

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Reggie had been searching for Matthews all day, but now the sun was setting and he turned back towards the lighthouse and wearily headed home alone.

A tiny movement on the horizon made him pause. He fumbled for his binoculars, hanging around his neck, and peered out to the ocean. He could just make out a ship on the darkening horizon, far out to sea. Reggie's face lit up and he began to run to the lighthouse.

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Reggie scrambled through a huge wooden chest inside the kitchen, throwing objects aside. Finally, he pulled out a huge blue and white chequered flag.

He grimaced as he saw the flag had been cut into strips and he grabbed at the fragments of material, trying to piece them back together.

“No, no, no!” he moaned.

He jumped up, dropping the ruined distress flag and ran into his bedroom. He scrambled through his cupboard and finally pulled out a long, red flare.

He grabbed a packet of matches from the kitchen, then ran up the spiral staircase. He slipped on leftover oil and swore, as he clambered up the stairs, gripping the flare.

Reggie scrambled into the messy lamp room and ran towards the windows. It was dark outside now, the ship a tiny pinprick of light bobbing in the ocean. He unlocked and pushed the window wide open, pulling himself out and standing on the small, precarious balcony that ran around the outside of the lamp room.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you.” Matthews' voice came from within the darkened lamp room.

“Shut up!” Reggie replied, looking out to sea, frantically searching for the ship. His hands shook as he took a match from the box, striking it against the side.

It didn't light.

He swore. Took a deep breath and tried again. The match hissed to life. He held the flare in front of him and lit it. He shielded his face, as the flare blazed red and shot off into the sky above, turning the night crimson.

He heard swearing and the sound of Matthews walking downstairs, but he ignored him. He only had eyes for the ship on the horizon. He watched in his binoculars, as the ship grew closer and closer to the island.

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The ship pulled in close to the rocky shoal. A slight figure hopped in a small boat and rowed to shore, climbing up the steep cliff to the lighthouse above.

Officer Adam Mitchell was neatly dressed with short, combed hair, and a thin moustache. He held a bright lamp and walked towards the lighthouse, his polished boots gleaming. He knocked on the front door, brow crinkling as he saw remnants of food on the ground outside.

Reggie rushed outside, running straight into Officer Mitchell.

“Ooft!” Reggie stumbled backwards, clutching a handful of letters and his Log Book. His hair was wild, standing on end and streaked through with oil. His eyes had a manic glint.

Officer Mitchell took a step back, lamp swinging, casting wild shadows around them. “Principal Lightkeeper Greenweir, is it?” he asked.

“Yes, yes that's me,! You've arrived, you've saved my life!” Reggie stammered.

“Oh my,” said Officer Mitchell, “Well, the Headkeeper grew concerned when the lamp hadn't been lit for multiple nights in a row. We saw your flare, whatever is the matter?”

Officer Mitchell peered into Reggie's face, looking concerned. He glanced around uneasily, taking in Reggie's unkempt appearance, oil smeared face and the ragged black blanket wrapped around his shoulders like a cloak.

“It's First Assistant Matthews, he's a mad man, he ruined the food, he hasn't lit the lamp in days,” Reggie said, grabbing Officer Mitchell by his lapels. Spit flew off Reggie's lips as he continued. “He's wild, he's been waking me in the middle of the night, he locks himself in the lamp room. He doesn't do his duty, he's spilled all the oil everywhere and drank all the liquor, he's not cut-out to be a Lightkeeper!”

“Greenweir,” Officer Mitchell paused, “Greenweir, there is no one else here with you. There is no First Assistant assigned to this station.”

Reggie shook his head. “No, no, no, First Assistant Matthews, he's here, he's-“

Officer Mitchell was looking wary, glancing back towards the ship anchored just off the island. “I'll just get the Captain, he can-“

“NO, no, he's here. He is. He's been driving me insane for weeks now,” Reggie cried, gripping Officer Mitchell's arm tightly.

Reggie's voice trailed off. His grip loosened and his hand slipped from Officer Mitchell's arm and hung at his side.

He looked towards the lighthouse like he was seeing it for the first time, his eyes glassy. Then he turned and stared out at the anchored ship.

Memories rushed over Reggie and he staggered back as though he had been struck.

*Reggie climbed off a ship into a row boat, then walked up the cliff onto the island by himself. He waved the ship goodbye, knowing he won't see another soul for twelve months. He opened the lighthouse door and entered, alone.*

*Reggie staggered around the lighthouse drunk, yelling and shaking his fist, then kicking the empty rum bottles beneath his bed.*

*Reggie stood in the lamp room and glared out at the dark sky, then slammed the door and yelled "Leave it alone, leave me alone!"*

*Reggie ran to and from the kitchen, heaping piles of food outside. The rain washed over him as he frantically emptied the food stores onto the grass.*

*And finally, Reggie sleeping in a pile of clothes and blankets in the lamp room, flinching at noises, looking confused and afraid.*

Hours later, Reggie was huddled on the deck of the supply ship, clutching his ragged black blanket around his shoulders. He held his letters and his Lightkeeper's Log Book, gripping them to his chest like his life depended on them.

The island retreated further behind him, but Reggie's eyes never left the lighthouse, waiting for a glimpse of First Assistant Matthews. He watched until the lighthouse was too small to see.