

THE NIGHT TEA

I can recall being timid of the nighttime at some moment in my existence. Being informed on its compositions and instructed on how to safeguard myself against whatever hid within the night - these tools were supposed to assist me. However, whenever I noticed myself immersed in it, my imagination would get so overwhelmed that I could never dare further than a few steps without my mom's palm to escort me. She was ever so patient and warm, and even if my soul remains cold until I pass I'll still recognize her warmth - on the blackest of midnights, especially. While reminiscing, I can sense the resonance of the sun as it sets behind me. Its growing absence allowed the woodland surrounding my lad and I to have a dark greater than the surface of it. As we sought the light produced by the area ahead, I no longer found myself afraid of the dark and could roam as often I as I chose with comfort.

Regardless of the beautiful scenery and childhood memories, seeing this trip as more than average was difficult. If I'm fair, when my colleague had requested me to leave on a trip with him, I cringed at the notion. However, as this trip ends, I recognize that Reed isn't as bad as I had once felt. Working in the library, you never have a chance at conversation. We'd normally glance awkwardly or occasionally aid each other - once the day was over any form of friendship reset itself. So when he casually approached me to suggest my accompaniment, I had already refused it in my mind. What had finally convinced me was the opportunity to meet a man who offered to supply American works; Hawthorne, Thoreau, and my absolute favorite, Edgar Allan Poe. When I was younger, my parents disapproved of reading, so to have a copy of one of his works gave me an uncontrollable smile the whole way through.

"I didn't think you could smile, Tomas. " Reed jested sarcastically.

"I'm sorry?"

Once again, he'd pester me with his satire and overall ' chippy ' nature. He couldn't have been more opposite of myself, but at this moment in our small adventure, it stopped tormenting me. I still dropped my smile as revenge and shot back at him,

"I didn't think you'd ever stop grinning, a first for everything now, isn't it.?"

I had put him off enough to make me feel satisfied, however, I ended up feeling upset for sounding so out of nature.

We started getting closer to the port, and strangely the entirety of it altered from when we had gone. If getting past the anxiety of the line in front of the gate was achievable, an excess of patrols would definitely stop you. Reed's energetic smile died down into a straight face.

"My, we've only been gone half a day. I wonder if something's happened." Before I could recall any reason, the couple in front of us revealed enough for us to piece things together.

" You know you've been sick the last couple of days, I pray you don't have what they're looking for. "

" Hush now, just a drippy nose is all it is. And I know it aint no regular illness that would have them wastin' a knight's time doing a hunter's job. One of them damned things got in now we all gotta pay the consequences till they get em' out is all. "

Looking to the sky as the man scanned in our direction, I was curipp. Fortunately, I'd long ago given up worrying about sickness along with all my other vulnerabilities.

" A bit scary, isn't it? An illness so dangerous it caused all this, is it possible for us to already have it?" I didn't think of comforting him until I heard the uncertainty in his voice - people always seem to be the most afraid of what they can't understand. I tried to give him a reassuring glance but it surely came off as unsure as he felt. Keeping my eyes on him as he was checked before me, he gave a relieved smile before motioning to the tree he'd be waiting for me under.

" Step forward. " The knight's voice was trained, and his masculinity caused me to shrink as he scanned me over; eyes, face, ears - nothing below my face was worth seeing more than once. I tried my best to mask my appearance-make myself seem ordinary without making anything too permanent, but there were so many thoughts in my mind that I had no clue what exactly I chose to look like.

" We don't usually see gingers traveling here. Are you from here? "

" Not originally - I've lived here for a good chunk of time, though. "

" Is that so.."

At that point I couldn't keep looking him in the eye, so thankfully he sent me off with a nod. Even so, I could feel him still glancing at me while I walked away. Reed struck my back as if to praise me for bravery, it surely knocked me back to life for a moment. I flashed a smirk and we began to make our way to the library.

The streets of Britain aren't as beautiful as people paint them to be in books. If anything, whatever beauty the city had was isolated within the architecture given to the churches and the buildings used by the royal family. The library was no exception to this, and yet it's musty smell and slightly dusted windows would never hinder its own inner beauty.

The old man who owned the building greeted us with a classic grin he always held even though he looked too weak to even blink. Rather than have him break a bone carrying any of the books, we offered to set them inside. I would have stayed to read, but I had been looking forward to a cup of tea and was determined to have it even at this time of day. I was too sheepish of the thought of my company wanting to join me, so I told him I would be heading home instead. After he dismissed himself and the owner went back to his quarters, I grabbed my purchase to walk to my favorite cafe - the Night Tea.

The place was a bit underground - literally, and was rarely talked about by any average person. It was the kind of place you wouldn't recommend if the person didn't belong there. I had been brought there my first night in Britain, and even though I hadn't intended on finding an entire basement filled with individuals like myself, I've learned to find my place there. As I walked into the pub it was under, a man I knew very well named

Ollie looked as if he were waiting for me - he usually didn't work at all upstairs though he owned the whole business.

" Tomas! I see you're displaying your usual ghastly look. Really nice touch with the eye-bags - they compliment your elderly white hair. "

Clearing my throat to give the signal that he ran his mouth a bit too much, I motioned for him to accompany me downstairs.

" Ah, wait. " Feeling him give me a light pat on my shoulder, I could sense a bit of tenseness within him which made his composed persona appear hidden. He was visibly nervous, which of course made me nervous.

" Yes, Ollie? " He looked to the ground, calming his nerves, before continuing.

" You were outside the city today, right? "

" Well, yes. Were you expecting a souvenir? " I jested to lighten the mood, and he gave an appreciative smile that soothed my nerves as well.

" It's just - how many guards did they actually have out there? Word around was that they made sure to do everything in their power to have them check anyone who entered the city since early this afternoon. "

" The post I went through had a few, but it wasn't anything more than a bother. "

" Oh, but it was more. " He paused to look behind me before continuing. " It was a woman. "

I gave a confused glance before snorting and averting my gaze - wherever he was going it sure to end as one of his 'soulmate' findings. He was as frustrated as he usually got when I debated things he informed me off, probably because I used to hold him in a more respectable place than I do now. " Come on, Ollie. " Lightly nudging him with a fist, he forgave my snicker but wouldn't continue unless he was sure I was ready.

" If it were just because it was any woman, would the hunters be in this much of a stir? " Perking up at their mention, just from hearing the word I felt anxious. I'd thankfully never had to face one - at least, not yet. He'd suddenly seem a bit happier, knowing that I felt a way about them and whatever else would help him sleep at night. At this point, I would've killed for the cup of tea I had originally come for, so I waved a hand for him to get the hint and allow us to continue into the basement.

This cafe was truly like no other. You could be the nicest guy in there and would still receive dirty looks or at least a cocky glance from others in the room. There weren't many and yet it still felt crowded. People spoke, but their voices were so quiet that you could still hear the smallest of sounds. Thankfully, the music played by a regular pianist never stopped, so things never felt awkward. Everyone moved slowly and if they happened to touch one another, it was gentle, yet you could feel strength resonate within them. There wasn't a spot not lit by candle, and nevertheless the room couldn't help but look so dim. I like to think it's due to too many people brooding in the same room.

As we walked on the opposite sides of the bar, I took my usual seat while Ollie threw on an apron.

" Darjeeling tea, Tomas? "

" Of course. "

Finally giving the paperback I'd purchased earlier a look, I viewed the cover and tried to assume what it would be about based on its title, ' The Haunted Palace '. It could have been just as easy for it to be something abstract as it was for it to be something as simple as a haunted palace, so it was best to

leave it there and begin reading .

A few lines in, I didn't expect myself to be thinking of the woman, but something compelled me to. If I calmly think about the reason for that much security, the woman must have been the kind of person who belonged in the cafe all too well - a Nightcrawler, as humans prefer to call us. It couldn't have been that she was solely one of us, she had to be a big enough deal. Scratching the end of my chin, I set down the copy to think a bit more, however, something in the air made me lose focus. It was as if there was a feeling of immense pressure, complemented with the scent of flowers that had withered due to lack of sun rather than water. Ollie noticed it as well, causing him to creep out of his cave with my unfinished cup of tea to observe the cause of the sudden change. It narrowed down to a woman, and to put it simply she seemed like the type to pour whiskey in a teacup rather than have any ol' cup of tea.

With hands as poised as possible, she went at a pace unique to her own accompanied by a stare as intense and commanding as death itself. Truly, she had to be some form of death. There was a person who could change the territorial glances of the room's patrons into glares of fear and discomfort - no one knew what to do with themselves. It'd simply be a minute before she cemented the entire place to her existence, and indeed the piano never went mute. She seemed fixated on the piece being played, even swaying a while before her eyes would settle onto me. I'd never felt so winded. As I straightened myself upward just to bury myself into the poem I still held, there was a spin of panic running about in my mind.

A few exchanges of words could be heard behind me - certainly not from her but largely from those who couldn't foresee what she was preparing to do. Some were bold enough to ask questions; Who was she? What was she? Curiosity raved so fiercely I even found myself asking the same, especially

questioning why she felt the need to view me so strongly. However, I quickly denied it to be nothing more than a coincidence for my own safety.

"Do you serve ceair - er, black tea?"

Instantly recognizing the accent in her voice, I moved in my seat as she took the chair next to mine. I hadn't heard a word of Romanian since I'd moved, however, I rejected succumbing to recollections of experiences I didn't wish to relive. Ollie, the miserable bastard, stood in wonder with mouth agape as she quietly awaited his reply. Taking the initiative, I quickly went behind the counter and whacked his shoulders in an attempt to revive him.

" Give us a moment. " I made certain to dodge any eye contact before forcing him toward the back. Once we withdrew to the safety of the kitchen, I leaned on a counter and took in a deep breath.

" Damn it all. What's happening? " As Ollie came back to his senses, he crossed his arms in an offended manner.

" Should've taken me seriously earlier! " I ignored his exclamation as I tried to comprehend the sudden feeling of familiarity.

" I - Ollie, I believe I recognize her. "

" Oi. " Firmly placing his palms on my face, I was dumbfounded as I glanced down at him.

" Don't go mad on me Tomas. "

I smacked his hands away before wiping my cheeks of whatever foolishness he must've had himself, it may have been far - fetched but it wasn't as if I'd

recognize strangers left and right. Regardless, I wouldn't know unless I actually conversed with her. I'd almost cursed myself for being so socially incompetent, and honestly, I had no clue as to where the immediate desire to understand more rose from. Who'd choose to dig up pieces from the exact points in their past where all turned rotten? If anything, I was the type of person to feel that if I ran away long enough, I'd forget the reason I took off. I must've been visibly self - conflicted because Ollie felt pressured enough to collect himself in order to console me.

" This one is undoubtedly trouble, however, if you've illusioned yourself into thinking you must, go for it. " He halted, peering around the kitchen before preparing the black tea the woman had ordered. Once he was done he gave it to me with a half-smile, showcasing a charming dimple. It was easy to figure out his intentions, and I felt as thankful as I had when I first found the fellow. After a second of this gratitude, I realized that there was no way he could survive out there, and this drink was the only physical form of support he could provide.

" There you go. " I was still unable to maintain more than an occasional look in her direction as I set down the cup of tea. There wasn't the slightest possibility I would be sitting where I had before with it was barely an inch away from her. I settled with standing in front of her behind the counter where I felt protected enough to speak. A minute would pass, and I began to stress over the thought that I still hadn't spoken a word - I gave the back of my head a scratch as I contemplated on how to go about it.

" This. "

Out of the blue, she held up the poem I'd been reading, before continuing.

" An interesting read, isn't it? " I placed my hands into my pockets to brace myself before trying to respond as competently as I could. " You've read it before, miss? "

" Just now. " She'd scan it again as she went on, " A prince who's terrified of the evil that surrounds him and his home. It persists on warning him of the doom he's yet to face. I suppose, he realised the terror the idea of fate can hold. After all, fate is quite terrifying, isn't it? "

I was pleasantly amazed at her judgment - not only had she read it but she knew the jargon of it enough to decipher it. Acknowledging her query, I thought for a moment before replying. " Creatures like us fret less about death - do you worry about your fate particularly? " As she glanced elsewhere to determine a response, I seized the opportunity to study her and see if she was truly an acquaintance. Although she didn't look remarkably familiar, I noted the allure of her portrait as well as the abundance of luster in her eyes. Concentrating further on her altogether there was an aura of rebellion, and still, she had that vulnerability most women manage to have.

" I'm petrified of being alone when I perish. "

I was startled by the sudden proclamation that merely made her look more exposed - perhaps she was softer than death. I observed as she calmly set her chin onto one her hands, while a finger on the other encircled the rim of the cup that she hadn't even tried yet.

" It's pathetic, isn't it? " She'd go from a strong fearless woman to a natural and sensitive one in a second, and thankfully it allowed me to steady my nerves.

"No one is more pitiful than this prince." I tapped the top of the page, anticipating that the testimony would assure her. She let out the softest chuckle before peering around us.

"You may be correct. I should be certain to not be as fearful as him. "

"If it isn't intrusive to ask -" Rubbing the top of my head, I chose my words carefully before pushing further. "Who are you exactly? "

"What an unattractive way to ask for a name." Of course it was.

I hid my face to try to mask my shame, but there was no breaking away so I had no option but to go on. "Well, I - You just seem like someone I should need to know."

As she crossed her arms and sulked a moment, I assumed I'd lost any chance. She was unquestionably too confident in conversation for me to win, so I felt unmotivated and decided it was best to finish my drink and be on my way.

"I control it all now, the lot can't help but perceive it." Is she being blunt or delusional? The confusion made it difficult to know how happy to appear with that being the situation.

"Control as in...?"

"As in the King is no more but rather within me. "

"If you're saying you're some kind of..Queen King - based on history, I know for sure a woman has never been the head of our kind. Based on politics I know that sort of thing is made impossible." Even though the last part of my

statement turned into a mumble, some of what I mentioned surprised her. It was suddenly, I could learn she was imposing a facade within a gentle smile that differed from before. Her face smiled but her eyes refused to.

"I see, you've forgotten quite a bit of what you've learned. "

"I'm sorry?"

"Regardless. " She'd hastily take a stand, and by now I got the sense that she knew me somehow. The woman was much less eager for the truth as I had been, and ultimately, for all I knew she was just a higher-ranked vampire with enough charisma to make it sound like what she claimed was genuine.

" Would you like to accompany me on a walk? " There was no room for rejection, and before I knew it we were walking alone in the dark, with no other sound but us. Ollie was probably trying his best to milk his customers of any information on this mysterious person while we were gone, but I was sure to find out all that was needed while we headed toward wherever she pleased to lead us.

" My name is Lavinia, Lavinia Vasile. "

The prominence of her accent was strong when she pronounced her name, and it left me with a slight smile on my face from hearing the accent I so dearly missed. With a nod I'd do my best to remember if I heard the name, and though it was familiar I couldn't pinpoint when exactly I'd heard it. This quickly frustrated her - she'd expected me to have some revelation upon hearing it.

" Tomas Cernas - at least we're formally acquainted now. " Lavinia granted me a nod to agree, before falling silent again, as if something heavy weighed her thoughts.

" Is there - "

" Tomas, I must confess something. " Her tone was much more serious than it'd been, and coming from someone who felt this important I had no choice but to feel nervous. Whether it be a small crush - the chances for that were practically nonexistent -, or maybe just a declaration of wanting to know no further about each other, there was no denying that my hands couldn't stop shaking. As her eyes looked up to me, she opened her mouth to speak but was stopped by the sounds of men speaking to each other not too far away.

"I can sense it, I'm positive." One spoke in a husky voice.

" Maybe if we bring her in, we can get moved up in the ranks. I'm sick of doing all this dirty work day and night -"

We broke eye contact as we looked toward the direction of the voices - hunters, and they were searching for her. The way her scent filled the air like gas from a volcano, we were walking targets. To my amazement, she didn't appear phased when she glanced at me once more.

" Quickly. "

There wasn't enough time to react before she reached for my palm and gripped it way too tightly. I kept up with her momentum as best as I could, but she was insanely quick on her feet. In just a minute we'd find ourselves in

front of a home - my home, specifically. As I stared at it in shock, she saw my bewilderment and decided to clear the air.

" I'd visited briefly today, but you weren't home. " This woman was - I couldn't identify a term to define her better than just peculiar.

I was stupid to consider she had just so happened to chat with me at Ollie's place. In fact, there was a cry inside me that screamed she was arranging the entire ordeal. That all of it was just so she and I could end up at the residence she sought to enter sometime today - possibly for the one and only purpose of being alone, and confessing to me whatever she felt she needed to. Viewing her as stealthily as I could, I could see she was meekly waiting for me to piece the whole matter together, before oddly inviting me into my own home. With a grip on the doorknob, she let out a sigh that almost sounded peeved as she opened the door for us. Locking the door behind me, I privately hoped for the fellows to find Lavinia as immediately as they could- I feared for my life. It had nothing to do with death or any idea of her harming me, but more with the fact that I knew my quiet stay in Britain had concluded once I encountered her. The life I had made here had ended.

