

CALICO'S JOURNAL

I begin this journal with a confession. I do not know if the stories contained here are true, nor do I think truth alone can hold them. Perhaps truth is too narrow a measure for the life of Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, a man whose days moved with equal measure through wonder and through horror, through light and shadow alike.

Across 196 interviews, and through the countless journals, loose notes, and field logs we've recovered from his expeditions, I have read every word, listened to every recorded recollection, and preserved each tale as he gave it to me. I have tried to set them down faithfully, unaltered and unsoftened, just as he spoke them. And yet, as I arranged them together, I found myself unsure not of his honesty, but of whether history itself is large enough to hold him.

The dates blur, never quite lining up. Places and people seem to slip between what should be and what cannot possibly be. I have seen in his words gods that walk in silence, pirates sailing seas of acid, beasts of flesh and steel, and Bella the one name he wrote of with a softness I never saw him show in person. There is laughter in these pages, but there is also pain, and a quiet, unspoken fear that runs through them all. Blackwood himself may not have admitted it aloud, but I think his greatest terror was not death, not even the strange things he hunted, but forgetting. Forgetting those he cared for, forgetting why he did what he did, forgetting who he was.

In the end, that is what makes these stories matter, whether they are truth, embellishment, or something between. Because for all his stoic words and his endless adventures, Lord Blackwood was a man who cared deeply, though he always tried to downplay it. He fought not for glory, not for himself, but for those he could not bear to lose, even when he believed he would.

And so what follows is more than a collection of tales. It is a map of a life spent running headlong into the impossible and refusing to turn away, even when the impossible stared back. Whatever judgment you render, I ask you only to read these pages as he meant them to be read. He believed every word, and after all I have heard, I find myself believing him too.

-Calico

The Shrine of Lovataar

I begin this tale with the humble acknowledgment that my survival was as much a matter of good fortune as it was of wit or skill. It is with great reluctance that I recount the affair at all, were it not for my sworn duty to share these exploits so that others may glean wisdom where I found folly. For indeed, folly it was to venture into those dense and untamed reaches of the Amazon basin in pursuit of an artifact whose very name invoked dread the Idol of Lovataar, the Sarkic Klavigar.

My voyage began on a dreary morning in London, beneath skies grey and drear as if they sought to discourage my departure. My loyal valet, Mr. Deeds, bore a troubled expression, as he often did when my expeditions drew near.

"Sir," he implored quietly, as he handed me my hat, "surely the civilized world holds enough perils to keep a gentleman entertained. Must you go to such inhospitable places?"

I offered him a reassuring smile, or as reassuring as one might muster when one's loyal servant had taken to worrying excessively. "Civilized dangers have their charm, Deeds, but the unknown compels me, as you well know. Besides, the world is far larger than our small English comforts, and I intend to know it all."

Deeds sighed heavily, though a twinkle lingered in his eyes. "Then may you return safely, my lord, that you may educate the world on what folly you find."

I laughed heartily at that, clapped his shoulder, and stepped onto the cobbled streets toward adventure. Little did I know then the true extent of peril awaiting my arrival across that wide and hostile sea.

My journey began in earnest from the bustling riverside city of Manaus, nestled deep in the Amazon Basin. I hired a company of six local guides, strong, capable men whose lives had been spent navigating the vast, labyrinthine waterways and dense, emerald jungles. They spoke often and anxiously of our destination: a remote, unnamed tributary inhabited by a secretive and feared tribe whose very existence was the stuff of whispered legends. According to rumor, they worshipped a deity whose true nature was darker than anything the human mind ought to conceive the Sarkic Klavigar known only as Lovataar.

Weeks of suffocating travel beneath thick foliage brought us to the outermost edge of what the locals called forbidden territory. My guides began to mutter quietly among themselves, their faces anxious. They frequently looked into the impenetrable jungle, eyes widened with a primal apprehension they refused to name aloud. One night, near a dwindling campfire, my senior guide, a hardened yet thoughtful fellow named Manuel, took me aside.

"Lord Blackwood," he spoke with difficulty, eyes shifting nervously into the shadows beyond our light. "This place is evil. Men who enter it do not come back or if they do, they are no longer men."

I reassured him as best as I could, though the pit of my own stomach churned uncomfortably. Yet, pride and determination, perhaps mingled with youthful arrogance, spurred me onward. Manuel relented, though I saw dread reflected deeply in his eyes.

The jungle grew oppressive as we pressed forward, the vegetation thickening to a suffocating wall, the sounds of wildlife replaced by an unnatural silence. Days blurred together beneath a canopy so thick it seemed night never fully gave way to dawn. Our supplies dwindled, our morale strained under a growing unease that crept like ivy over every heart.

At last, after weeks of pushing through vines and stifling heat, we arrived at the village. The sight was immediately disturbing, even repulsive. Rough dwellings built from wood and bone formed a grim circle around a massive, grotesque idol carved from dark stone and strangely shaped flesh, a totem to a terrible god whose name I now knew too well. The inhabitants approached, their eyes vacant yet hostile, their bodies covered in ritual scars and grotesque alterations flesh twisted, reshaped, and pierced in reverence to Lovataar.

They took us quickly and violently, dragging us into the village center. The air was heavy, thick with the smell of blood and decay. There they began their rites, chanting guttural hymns as my companions cried out in fear. Unable to intervene, I watched helplessly as each of my trusted guides was dragged forward and forced before the idol, where hooded priests performed dreadful ceremonies upon their trembling bodies.

Lovataar appeared in a manner that defied rational thought. Emerging from darkness, she took form before our very eyes, beautiful yet unspeakably grotesque, her flesh shifting, reforming endlessly into impossible configurations, her voice a terrifying melody resonating through the air.

Her gaze turned upon my men, and with a mere gesture she began to transform them. I watched, paralyzed by horror and disbelief, as human bodies twisted into monstrous shapes, bones

rearranging beneath skin, limbs elongating unnaturally, faces distorting into masks of agony and worship. Their cries of torment faded, replaced by guttural moans of ecstasy and submission. Before me stood creatures no longer human, mindless husks now devoted utterly to their new mistress.

Then Lovataar turned to me, and I felt my blood run cold. She spoke, her voice both alluring and repulsive, each word dripping like poisoned honey.

"You have traveled far, Lord Blackwood, and now witness the grace bestowed by Ion, my beloved master, upon those who embrace the supremacy of flesh. Do you not see? This is the glory that awaits all who surrender themselves to Sarkicism."

I forced steadiness into my voice, though my soul trembled within me. "Your ways may be divine to you, Lovataar, but I came only seeking knowledge not transformation. I am content with the humanity that has brought me here."

She smiled, a smile which felt like a wound upon my soul. "Humanity," she whispered contemptuously. "Fragile and fleeting. Ion offers eternity, power beyond comprehension, the liberation of flesh from mortality's cruel bounds. Embrace this gift willingly, Theodore, and you will stand by my side, ruling as gods."

Her eyes held a terrible allure, promising forbidden pleasures and unthinkable powers. Yet my heart recoiled, repelled by the unnatural blasphemy she offered.

Gathering what remained of my courage, I spoke clearly, desperately. "Your offer is generous, but I cannot accept. The strength and joy of human life lie precisely in its fragility in the struggle, the growth, the love we share precisely because life is finite. I will not abandon my humanity, even for eternity."

She gazed upon me, and for a moment I feared she would unleash upon me the same dreadful transformation. But instead she paused, considering my defiance. Perhaps curiosity overcame her rage, or perhaps my audacity amused her. Her form shifted subtly, and she drew closer, her voice low and almost intimate.

"Rarely does one reject Ion's blessing with such eloquence," she murmured. "Yet I shall spare you not out of mercy, but as a message to your world. Carry back what you have seen, Theodore Blackwood. Tell your civilization of stone and steel the truth of flesh's supremacy. Your

suffering will be the memory of what you witnessed here, and the nightmares that will forever haunt your sleep."

With those words, she withdrew into shadow, leaving me utterly alone with the monstrous things that had once been my guides. I fled through the darkened jungle, pursued not by beasts nor tribesmen but by visions of my former companions' contorted bodies and tortured faces, the hideous laughter of Lovataar echoing eternally in my ears.

Weeks later, battered, broken, and delirious, I emerged from the jungle. My survival was greeted with disbelief and awe, yet when asked to recount my adventure, I found myself unable to fully convey the horror of Lovataar's presence or the dread of Sarkicism's dark promise.

And now, back in London, beneath gas lamps and familiar comforts, I pen this account with trembling hand and heavy heart. My dreams remain haunted, my sleep forever stolen by the remembrance of twisted flesh and monstrous gods. I write not to inspire glory nor to boast of bravery for in truth I feel little of either but to offer a warning of the darkness that dwells in the world's unexplored reaches.

Should any who read this journal be tempted by whispers of Sarkicism, or by the promises of Lovataar and her beloved Ion, I pray you heed my words. For the flesh they worship is not divine, nor is it liberation it is corruption, decay, and madness. Better a brief and noble life than an eternity chained to horror.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood

Viscount, Naturalist, and Forever Changed Witness

The Heresy

I must admit, before commencing this account, that even after all these years, the memory of this particular adventure still fills me with a profound sense of melancholy and longing. The events I record now remain clear and vivid in my mind, etched indelibly by the strange wonder and sorrow that marked their passage. It is a story I have rarely shared, yet one deserving of being remembered, if only for her sake.

It began upon a grey morning in England, when I received a letter sealed with the personal crest of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. The instructions therein summoned me urgently to the royal palace, whereupon I presented myself promptly. The queen herself awaited my arrival, resplendent but grave, seated beneath a vast portrait of her late husband, whose solemn visage seemed to echo the seriousness of her request.

"Lord Blackwood," she began, her voice clear but tinged with subtle unease, "there is a disturbance in the countryside, one beyond the reach of ordinary men."

"A disturbance, Your Majesty?" I echoed politely.

"A rift," she clarified, her gloved fingers tightening on the armrest of her chair, "an opening to another place, entirely different from our own reality. I would ask no other man to risk the journey, but you, Theodore, have faced terrors beyond reckoning. Would you go on behalf of your Queen, into the unknown, and discover what threats or marvels may lie beyond?"

The answer came easily, almost instinctively. "Your Majesty, it is my honour and privilege to serve England and you. I accept without hesitation."

Thus, outfitted in the distinctive crimson uniform of the Crown's special service, armed with my trusted saber and a finely crafted pistol whose bullets had been meticulously inscribed to bend reality itself, I departed London. I journeyed swiftly toward the English countryside, to a remote village where reports of the rift had originated.

Arriving at dusk, beneath darkening skies streaked with unnatural colours, I found villagers hiding behind shuttered windows, whispering fearful prayers. They directed me toward the rift, which had appeared at the edge of a dense, ancient wood. Approaching cautiously, I beheld the shimmering, impossible fissure hanging silently in midair, the fabric of reality torn open before me like a wound. Gathering my courage, I stepped forward through that unnatural threshold.

Emerging upon the other side, I was immediately confronted by a landscape steeped in shadows. The sky here was eternally dim, painted in shades of grey and violet, broken only by looming spires and twisted cathedrals reaching desperately skyward. Gothic arches rose imposingly, and everywhere hung symbols of a church unfamiliar yet oppressive, stern crosses wrapped in dark cloth, monuments to some unknown divinity whose gaze felt more sinister than holy.

For a moment I stood motionless, absorbing the unsettling beauty of the place. Then, gathering my resolve, I strode forward along a cobblestone path that twisted into the heart of a great city. Its buildings loomed over narrow streets, the architecture darkly magnificent, evoking awe tempered by a quiet dread. Carved gargoyles gazed down at passersby with grim vigilance, their stone faces eroded as though weeping silently over centuries of unseen sorrow.

The people moved quietly, their heads bowed beneath the oppressive weight of their world, casting furtive glances in my direction. I noticed quickly the stark difference of my appearance, my crimson uniform vivid against the drab greys and blacks worn by the populace. Understanding that such a stark contrast drew unwanted attention, I procured a heavy dark cloak from a wary vendor whose pale hands trembled slightly as he accepted strange silver coins from my purse.

Cloaked thus, I moved unseen among the city's citizens, blending into the endless flow of somber figures trudging toward their destinations. I soon learned to imitate their mannerisms—their silent nods, their careful avoidance of eye contact, their whispered prayers when passing the endless shrines dedicated to the grim deity they worshipped.

For days I wandered through the city, absorbing the strange customs and traditions of this bleak society. I watched from shadowed corners as priests, dressed in robes adorned with symbols reminiscent of arcane runes, preached fervently about sin and redemption, their sermons punctuated by dark rituals that made my skin prickle uneasily. The townsfolk seemed perpetually gripped by fear, their obedience absolute yet born of dread rather than devotion.

In taverns and market squares, I heard hushed conversations hinting at dark powers harnessed by the clergy, thaumaturgical gifts bestowed upon them by their mysterious god. To speak openly against them was unthinkable; punishment was swift and merciless. Heretics vanished, their names erased, their fates whispered only in fearful speculation.

On the sixth day, beneath a sky bruised purple and tinged with strange silver clouds, I entered a curious little shop, drawn by its windows filled with rare manuscripts and intricate devices that seemed to blur the line between science and sorcery. The air within smelled faintly of parchment, lavender, and something sweetly metallic.

I browsed quietly, running my fingers along ancient texts whose scripts twisted dizzily before my eyes. Lost in contemplation, I nearly missed the gentle sound of footsteps approaching behind me.

"Those writings have a habit of ensnaring the mind if you're not careful," said a soft voice, amused yet gentle.

Turning sharply, I found myself gazing upon a woman whose appearance momentarily stole my breath away. Her hair, impossibly white like untouched snow, cascaded freely around her shoulders, framing a face whose delicate beauty was matched only by the intensity of her eyes, a piercing golden yellow that seemed to see straight through me.

"Forgive my rudeness," I managed to reply, bowing my head politely. "I am a stranger here. These volumes fascinate me, though I admit their contents are beyond my comprehension."

She smiled slightly, her expression warm yet guarded. "They fascinate many. Though I sense you are not merely another curious local."

I hesitated, measuring my words carefully. "No. Indeed, I am from...another place altogether. A world unlike this one, sent to learn what I might."

Her eyes widened briefly, curiosity sparkling openly. "A fellow traveler, then. It has been a very long time since I have encountered another like myself."

"You...you are not from this realm?" I asked, astonished.

She shook her head slightly. "No. My name is Bella. I have wandered through many worlds, many realms. Like you, I came seeking knowledge, though what I found here was more than I bargained for."

We spoke at length, hidden from prying ears among towering shelves of ancient lore. Bella recounted how she had come through a rift years ago, her journeys leading her to this darkened world ruled by a cruel faith and arcane rites. She spoke of the church and the ruthless clergy who wielded powers drawn from a being they claimed divine, yet whose true nature she doubted deeply.

As she spoke, I became aware of a stirring within my chest, a yearning sparked by her presence. Bella spoke with a quiet strength, wisdom tempered by kindness, courage blended seamlessly with grace. In the hours spent with her, I knew my heart had irrevocably changed.

Yet our conversation ended abruptly when Bella glanced out toward the street and visibly tensed.

"You've drawn attention," she whispered urgently, eyes sharp with concern. "The city guards are near. They will take you for questioning your clothing alone is suspicious."

"Let them come," I replied, my hand falling instinctively to the saber at my side. "I fear no unjust inquiry."

"No," Bella said firmly, eyes locked onto mine, a sadness passing briefly through her gaze. "If they capture you, speak cautiously. They fear outsiders greatly. Whatever happens, stay alive. We will meet again."

Before I could respond, she turned swiftly, slipping silently through a concealed doorway in the back of the shop. The sound of heavy footsteps echoed outside, and moments later, the door burst open, guards streaming inside, blades drawn, their faces severe beneath blackened helms.

I drew my saber instinctively, standing proudly before them, defiant yet composed.

"Lower your weapon," commanded their leader, stepping forward menacingly, his armor emblazoned with the twisted cross emblem. "You are under arrest by authority of the Holy Inquisition."

Considering Bella's words carefully, I knew that resistance would likely prove fatal, and survival would demand diplomacy rather than combat. With quiet dignity, I placed my saber and pistol carefully upon the floor, holding my head high.

"You mistake my intentions," I said calmly, meeting the captain's harsh gaze evenly. "Yet I shall cooperate willingly."

My wrists were swiftly bound, the cold bite of iron shackles closing around them. The guards marched me forcefully through streets now lined with curious, fearful townsfolk whispering ominously. My heart hammered in my chest as I was brought to an immense cathedral, whose dark towers rose sharply toward the ever-darkening sky.

The cathedral's heavy doors swung open, revealing a vast, echoing chamber lit dimly by flickering candles, casting long, ominous shadows across the stone floor. I was led forward to stand before a raised dais, atop which sat a figure whose mere presence radiated authority and ruthless intellect the Grand Inquisitor.

He watched me silently, steeping his fingers beneath a narrowed gaze that pierced through my very being. Finally, after a silence that seemed eternal, he spoke, his voice resonating coldly through the great hall.

"An outsider, wandering our streets without sanction. Foreign attire. Foreign bearing. Tell me, stranger who are you, and by what heretical powers have you trespassed into our sacred world?"

I steadied myself, meeting his gaze directly, and prepared carefully to speak.

I stood firm before the Grand Inquisitor, summoning every ounce of resolve within my spirit. His eyes bore into mine, a gaze sharp as a blade, yet I forced myself to return his stare evenly, betraying neither fear nor arrogance.

"Speak," he commanded coldly. "Explain yourself. What blasphemy has brought you here?"

"I assure you," I responded with careful, deliberate calm, "I intended no disrespect. My journey here was one of scholarly pursuit, curiosity alone. My world differs vastly from your own. I wished merely to understand your faith, not to offend."

The Grand Inquisitor's lips curled into a disdainful sneer. "Curiosity is the seed from which all heresy sprouts. You claim ignorance, but your presence alone defies the will of our divine protector, the Ebony Luna. Your blasphemous attire and manner speak louder than your lies."

"My intentions..." I began, but he silenced me with a sharp gesture.

"Enough! You will not poison this hall with your false words. Guards, prepare the prisoner for execution. He will receive the holy blessing of our revered Ebony Luna."

The guards seized me roughly, their armored hands bruising my shoulders as I was marched from the great hall. I was escorted through shadowed corridors that twisted deeper into the cathedral's labyrinthine foundations. The air grew cold and damp, the stone walls narrowing ominously as they led me to the cells reserved for those condemned by the church.

I was thrust violently toward an iron barred chamber, its confines bleak and suffocating. One guard stepped forward, his key ring rattling as he unlocked the heavy cell door. It was in that moment driven perhaps by desperation or by a deeper instinct of survival that I acted.

As the guard turned briefly, distracted by the rusted lock, I lunged forward, seizing the heavy ring of keys with deft hands honed from countless perilous encounters. In the confusion, I drove my shoulder into his chest, toppling him backward. The second guard reached for his sword, but I was swifter, slamming the iron door into him, sending him sprawling.

Without hesitation, I bolted down the shadowy corridor, heart pounding, breath shallow and urgent. I found my confiscated saber and pistol discarded carelessly upon a stone bench, reclaiming it swiftly with relief and a renewed surge of strength. It was then, in the half lit corridor, that I heard two guards speaking in hushed but cruel voices:

"The white haired witch is to be executed tonight alongside the foreigner."

My blood turned to ice in my veins. Bella. They had captured her, imprisoned her, and now planned to execute her alongside myself. I hesitated but for a moment my own survival seeming suddenly trivial compared to the thought of losing her. Ignoring my instincts of preservation, I moved silently toward the sound of the guards' voices, my grip tightening around my saber's hilt.

In seconds I reached another row of cells, torchlight dancing weakly upon iron bars. Peering carefully from the shadows, I saw her... Bella, her white hair shimmering even in darkness, wrists bound in cruel shackles. She stood proud and defiant even now, her eyes bright with quiet resilience.

I counted four guards, heavily armored, weapons ready. Fear gripped me fiercely, but determination overrode caution. Moving swiftly, I burst from hiding, blade whirling with practiced precision. The element of surprise granted me the initial advantage; two guards fell instantly beneath my strikes, their armor offering scant protection from the ferocity of my desperation.

Bella's eyes widened in shock, her voice breaking through the chaos. "Theodore!"

I could not spare breath for reply, ducking narrowly beneath a guard's heavy swing, striking upward, felling him instantly. The last opponent lunged recklessly, his movements driven by fear rather than skill, allowing me to parry easily and deliver a decisive blow.

I ran swiftly to Bella, keys rattling urgently as I unlocked her bindings. Our eyes met briefly, filled with unspoken gratitude and tenderness.

"Are you hurt?" I asked hurriedly.

"Only my pride," she replied softly, a faint smile ghosting upon her lips. "We must flee immediately. They will not hesitate to call their sorceries upon us."

We moved quickly, navigating corridors that twisted like veins beneath the cathedral, pursued relentlessly by the echoes of alarms and frantic footsteps. Bella guided us toward an ancient tunnel she had discovered long before, hidden behind a tapestry whose threadbare edges concealed a narrow stairwell descending further into the dark.

"Will this lead us to safety?" I whispered urgently as we moved swiftly down the passage.

"It leads to your rift," she replied firmly. "Your only way home."

I hesitated, turning to her, desperation coloring my words. "Come with me. Leave this place behind forever. Please."

Her expression softened painfully, eyes sorrowful and conflicted. "If only it were that simple, Theodore."

My heart clenched, knowing the futility of further argument. We pressed onward, the passage eventually opening into the open air. Ahead, shimmering faintly beneath the bruised sky, hung the rift between worlds, pulsating gently as if it sensed our approach.

Behind us rose shouts of fury, the baying cries of pursuit drawing near. We sprinted toward escape, my grip tightening fiercely upon her hand as we ran.

"Together," I urged breathlessly, heart aching with hope. "We can reach it."

We moved swiftly, guards appearing suddenly, blades and magic crackling fiercely in their hands. I spun desperately, blade ringing sharply, fighting them back step by step. A crack erupted from my pistol as the thaumaturge ushered a bolt of lightning towards me... in but a moment the thaumaturge's head vanished from existence... Bella moved with grace beside me, her courage matching my own.

At last, standing mere steps from the rift, we faced one another, breath ragged and heavy, exhaustion pressing upon us.

"Go now," she urged, eyes shimmering with emotion. "Your world awaits. I will follow."

"I cannot leave you," I pleaded fiercely.

"You must," she insisted firmly, placing her hand tenderly upon my face. "Trust that we will meet again."

Tears blurred my vision as I nodded helplessly. With a final strike, I broke free of combat, lunging desperately toward the rift, feeling its strange energies wrapping gently around me.

But as I crossed the threshold into my world, I turned to grasp Bella's hand to pull her through with me but found only empty air. Her form shimmered briefly, her eyes sorrowful yet resolute, before vanishing entirely from view. The rift snapped shut with terrible finality, leaving me alone in the quiet countryside beneath familiar stars.

"Bella!" I cried desperately into the silent night, voice breaking with grief. Only the whispering wind replied.

I collapsed to my knees, the ache of loss overwhelming. The terrible realization settled upon me that she had chosen my life over her own freedom, remaining behind in a world crueler than I dared imagine.

Though it is now that I know her memory and our encounter would not be the last to grace my presence. This world truly holds the most wondrous of mysteries and only ever ignites my passion for adventure.

Until then, I remain ever faithful to her memory.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood

Viscount, Explorer, and a man forever changed by love and loss

The Mekhanite Ruin

The Gobi stretched before me like an endless sepulcher, its winds whispering across dunes as if carrying the voices of those buried beneath them. For twenty two days we had marched through this sea of sand and stone, my expedition battered by the relentless sun by day and bitten by cold winds at night. Our goal, a forgotten Mekhanite ruin buried in the heart of this desolation, drew nearer with each exhausting step.

I had first learned of this place in Vienna, hidden in a set of water damaged notes copied from an older text, which described a lost city of the Mekhanites swallowed by the desert after what was cryptically referred to as The Last Assembly of Flesh and Gear. Even in ruins, Mekhanite remnants were dangerous. They had long been feared for the fusion of body and machine, a grotesque marriage of flesh and steel that pushed far beyond the natural order.

When at last we found it, I felt both triumph and unease. The ruin lay half buried beneath the sand, its entrance marked by a jagged arch of blackened metal, inscriptions along its base almost completely worn away by centuries of wind. It exuded silence. Not the peace of abandonment, but the silence of something waiting.

We made camp nearby. My men, Harlan our careful cartographer, Liu the hardened local guide, and two stoic laborers, spoke little that evening. Conversation dwindled into quiet murmurs as the night deepened. I found myself restless, my thoughts drawn again and again to the ruin, as if something called to me.

I left camp under the fading light, climbing a nearby dune to survey the site. The air grew unnaturally still, the usual hiss of desert wind falling into silence. And then I saw him.

A solitary figure stood at the crest of a distant dune, perfectly still as if carved from stone. He was tall, encased in ancient black armor scarred by time, his form wrapped in a long black cloak that stirred faintly with the slightest breeze. His helm concealed his face entirely, but two dim silver glimmers burned softly where his eyes should have been. They were not reflections. They were steady, unblinking, as if they had stared upon the same world for longer than it had any right to exist.

I approached carefully, my boots sinking slightly in the loose sand. He did not move until I stood only a few steps away. His presence was overwhelming in a way I could not explain. There was no sense of threat, yet I felt as though I stood before something far greater than myself, something older than the desert itself.

"Good evening," I said, keeping my tone even and respectful. "You seem far from any settlement. Might I ask your name, or what business brings you to such a desolate place."

He spoke after a long silence, his voice deep and resonant, carrying the weight of something that did not belong to men. "Lexington."

"Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood," I replied with a slight bow of my head. "Explorer and naturalist, in service of Queen Victoria. It is rare to meet another traveler in such an isolated region."

He gave a sound that might have been a laugh, though there was no warmth in it. "Traveler. I am no traveler. I am a witness."

"A witness to what," I asked, my curiosity sharpening.

Lexington turned his head toward the buried ruin, his cloak shifting faintly. "I watched a great battle here. Long ago, before your England existed, before your empires rose and fell. Thousands fell. Men and machines, torn apart. The sand shook with their dying. Their screams rolled across this desert for days, and their blood ran so deep the earth drank it gladly."

His words were not tinged with sorrow. They were reverent, spoken with quiet admiration. "A grim memory to hold onto," I said carefully.

"A beautiful one," he corrected. "Death on such a scale is rare. Honest. It shows all things for what they are. In that moment, there are no masks, no lies. Only truth."

"You speak of slaughter as though it were art," I said, frowning slightly.

"It is," Lexington replied simply. His voice carried no malice, no excitement. It was the tone of someone describing the sunrise, inevitable and eternal. "All things die. All things must die. Death is not tragedy. It is law. And I will see it again, as I have seen it before. I have eternity. Time cannot deny me what will come."

There was something in the way he said those words that chilled me more than the desert night. Eternity. It was not a boast. It was fact, stated as casually as a man commenting on the weather.

I studied him, unwilling to reveal how unsettled I felt. "You know what lies within the ruin," I asked.

Lexington inclined his head slightly, his gaze never leaving the half buried entrance. "They are not all dead, Lord Blackwood. The Mekhanite machines. The half born things. They still remember what they were made for. If you dig too deeply, you will wake them. They will kill you as they killed for those who built them."

"Are you warning me to turn back," I asked.

There was a long pause. Then his silver eyes shimmered faintly as he spoke, almost amused. "No. Go forward. Wake them. I wish to see if death here will be as beautiful as it was before."

I felt a chill despite the desert heat. His words carried no threat, only a strange, almost sacred anticipation. Yet I nodded politely, forcing calm into my voice. "Then I thank you for your... counsel. Though I do not share your enthusiasm for death, I shall proceed carefully."

He turned slowly to look at me fully for the first time. Those silver glimmers seemed to catch the fading light like distant stars, steady and unblinking. "Proceed carefully. Proceed quickly. It makes no difference. All things end the same way."

Without another word, he turned and began to walk away into the desert. His black cloak trailed behind him like a shadow slipping across the sand. The air stirred again, the desert wind returning as if released from some quiet tension. I watched him go until he vanished into the dunes.

When I returned to camp, my men were silent, sensing my unease. I told them nothing of Lexington, for I could not yet place his words nor the strange feeling he had left upon me. But as I lay awake beneath the stars, I could not shake the weight of his presence, nor the thought that his words had not been a warning, but a promise.

When the first pale light of dawn crept over the horizon, I rose before the others, staring at the buried ruin. Whatever awaited us within, I felt instinctively that Lexington would be watching, somewhere unseen, waiting for the ruin to awaken.

The morning sun crept over the dunes, casting long shadows across the half buried ruin. We set out as the air began to warm, packs laden with ropes, lanterns, and excavation tools. My men worked with quiet determination, though I sensed an unspoken tension among them. None dared voice it, but they felt it too, that strange weight in the air, as if the ruin itself watched us.

I could not banish Lexington's words from my mind. His silver eyes lingered in my thoughts like the afterglow of distant lightning. He had spoken with such certainty, as if he already knew what awaited us inside. I glanced to the surrounding dunes more than once, half expecting to see that black cloaked figure standing and waiting. If he was near, he kept himself hidden.

The entrance yawned before us like the mouth of some great beast, a jagged arch of metal and stone, the remnants of Mekhanite craft weathered by centuries. Strange sigils etched into the frame lay worn and broken, their meaning lost to all but the few who still studied Mekhanite design. I crouched to examine them, brushing sand from their edges. Some were mechanical inscriptions I recognized from prior ruins, but others were different, etched hurriedly, as if carved during some final desperate hour.

"Will it hold," Harlan asked, glancing warily at the collapsed metal and stone surrounding the opening.

"It has held for centuries," I replied, my voice steadier than I felt. "If it means to fall, it will do so whether we are cautious or not. We proceed."

Liu lit the first lantern, its glow casting quivering light into the blackness below. We secured ropes to the sturdier parts of the ruin and descended, one by one, into the buried structure. The air changed quickly as we lowered ourselves deeper, the dry heat of the desert giving way to a damp stillness that smelled faintly of rust and something older, something like decayed oil.

Our boots touched solid ground at last. The chamber was vast, its walls lined with strange metal conduits and the skeletal remains of machines fused to the very stone. Ancient Mekhanite craftsmanship was everywhere, yet it felt different from other sites I had studied. This place had not been built for worship or for progress. It had been built for war.

We moved slowly through the ruin, lanterns throwing shifting shadows across massive gears locked in place by centuries of disuse. Strange metal arms lay scattered along the floor, some twisted as if torn from larger machines during a great struggle. Human bones were here as

well, brittle and half turned to dust, some still locked in strange iron braces, as if fused with the machines even in death.

Liu muttered quiet prayers as he walked, his voice trembling despite his attempts at calm. Harlan sketched feverishly, his usual precision faltering in the face of such overwhelming history.

"This was a battlefield," Harlan said finally, his voice breaking the silence.

"Yes," I replied softly. "One that ended here, beneath the sand."

The further we went, the stranger the silence became. The air carried a faint hum, almost imperceptible, as if the very walls still held life. I noted it but pressed onward, curiosity warring with the uneasy weight that pressed on my chest.

At last, we entered what appeared to be the central hall. A great chamber opened before us, its ceiling arching impossibly high, supported by massive pillars carved with intricate Mekhanite patterns. In the center stood a colossal circular platform, its surface engraved with complex designs that spiraled inward toward a single core.

"This must be the control hub," I murmured, stepping closer to inspect it.

The others remained back, their unease deepening.

I knelt, brushing away sand and dust, revealing a series of symbols that seemed to depict some kind of activation sequence. The Mekhanites were notorious for building traps into their structures, yet my excitement overcame my caution. I reached to trace one of the etched patterns with my gloved hand.

The moment my fingers touched the central engraving, the entire ruin seemed to awaken.

A loud metallic groan echoed through the chamber, reverberating deep into the walls. The hum I had noticed earlier grew louder, resonating through the air like the heartbeat of some ancient beast roused from slumber. Lights embedded in the walls flickered to life, casting everything in a pale blue glow.

"My lord," Liu cried out, his voice cracking with fear. "What have you done?"

Before I could answer, the floor beneath the platform began to shift. Panels of ancient metal ground open, releasing clouds of dust and stale air. From the darkness below, something began to rise.

At first, I thought it was only machinery, perhaps old gears shifting from the disturbance. But then the shapes stood upright.

Figures of metal, tall and humanoid, began to emerge, their forms a grotesque blend of gears, pistons, and what looked unsettlingly like fossilized bone encased in metal plating. Their heads were featureless save for two glowing silver slits where eyes might have been. They moved with jerky precision at first, but as their systems awakened fully, their movements became unnervingly smooth.

"Mekhanite constructs," I whispered, stepping back slowly. "Golems."

One by one, they climbed onto the platform, turning their gaze toward us with mechanical precision. Their glowing eyes flickered briefly, as if assessing us, and then they began to advance.

"Run," I commanded, drawing my saber with one hand and my pistol with the other.

The constructs moved faster now, their heavy footfalls echoing across the chamber. One raised an arm, its hand splitting apart into a whirring blade of jagged metal. My men turned to flee, but I stood firm, firing the first shot.

The pistol roared, the specially crafted bullet bending reality just enough to pierce the creature's plating. Sparks erupted, gears snapping as the construct toppled, but two more took its place immediately.

My heart pounded. There was no choice but to fight, and fight hard, if we were to leave this place alive.

The first construct collapsed in a shower of sparks, its chest plate shattered where my bullet struck true. The echo of the shot rolled through the chamber, but the sound of heavy metal footsteps quickly drowned it out. Two more constructs advanced with deliberate precision, their movements smooth now, their silver lit eyes fixed entirely on us.

"Move," I called to my men. "Get to the surface. Now."

Harlan hesitated, sketchbook clutched uselessly in one hand, but Liu seized his arm, dragging him toward the rope we had left secured near the entrance. The two laborers were already scrambling up it, panic lending them speed.

I thumbed the breach of my rolling block pistol open, the hot casing dropping to the floor with a sharp metallic ring. My hands moved quickly, almost by instinct, pulling another cartridge from the pouch at my belt. I slid it in, snapped the breach closed, and fired again before the first construct could bring its blade down upon me.

The shot struck its shoulder joint, shattering gears and forcing the massive arm to hang uselessly. But it kept moving, lunging with its other arm. I ducked under its swing, drawing my saber in a single smooth motion. The blade gleamed in the pale blue light as I drove it hard into the exposed gap of its neck, twisting sharply until the head tore free in a shower of sparks.

The construct staggered once before collapsing.

The second lunged at me, moving faster than I expected for its size. I tried to fire, but the pistol's breach was empty, still open from my last reload. It raised a jagged blade of whirring metal toward me, the air whining as it spun.

I stepped sideways at the last second, feeling the blade tear through the edge of my coat. My saber caught the strike on the flat of its blade, sparks flying as metal scraped against metal. The force nearly tore the weapon from my hand, but I held firm, pivoting behind the construct as it overextended.

The weak point was at the back, where its plating did not fully seal. I struck hard and clean, driving my saber deep between its spine-like pistons. It convulsed once before collapsing in a heap, its glowing silver eyes fading to black.

The chamber, however, began to tremble.

More panels shifted around the edges of the platform, ancient gears grinding to life after centuries of stillness. Shapes began to rise again, not two, not three, but six, each stepping forward in perfect rhythm. Their movements were smoother, faster, as if whatever intelligence controlled them was learning.

I reloaded with practiced speed, sliding another cartridge into the rolling block pistol. But I knew even as I snapped the breach shut that six of them were more than I could hope to stop alone.

"Up the rope," Liu shouted from above. His voice echoed sharply across the chamber.

I glanced back, seeing my men halfway to the surface, their faces pale in the lantern light above. I had to hold them off, just long enough for the others to escape.

I steadied my breath, raising my pistol carefully. I fired, the shot ringing out sharply. One of the advancing constructs jerked as the bullet slammed into its knee joint, sending it crashing to the ground. But five kept coming.

The breach snapped open again with a click. My hand moved automatically, another cartridge sliding home. I fired, another went down. But the time it took to reload was too great. Three reached me before I could ready the next shot.

The first swung its blade arm downward, but I caught it on the guard of my saber, letting its weight slide past as I stepped in close. My blade drove into its chest plate, wedging between gears. I twisted hard, tearing them free in a screech of grinding metal. The construct spasmed and fell, but the next was already behind me.

I turned just in time, ducking beneath its strike. My boot slammed into its jointed leg, forcing it off balance. With a single smooth motion I wrenched my saber upward, slicing into its exposed neck. Its head split free with a burst of sparks.

The last one charged me, its arms both blades, moving faster than the others. It swung with brutal precision, forcing me backward toward the rope. My saber caught its first strike, but the second carved a shallow line across my side, hot pain blooming as it grazed flesh. I ignored it, stepping in close before it could swing again.

My empty pistol became a weapon of its own as I slammed the heavy steel frame into its eye slit, denting the plating. Then, with a final strike, I drove my saber through its core, twisting until its silver-lit gaze flickered and died.

The chamber fell silent once more, save for the hum of distant machinery still stirring somewhere in the ruin. More would come. I could feel it.

"Climb, my lord," Liu called urgently from above. "Now."

I looked up, seeing their faces lined with fear, their hands outstretched to pull me up once I reached the rope.

With one last glance back at the ruined constructs littering the floor, I grabbed the rope and began to climb. My arms burned with the effort, but I moved quickly, refusing to look down. The moment my boots cleared the lip of the entrance, Liu and the others dragged me onto the surface.

The desert sun blinded me for a moment, harsh after the cold blue light below. We collapsed onto the sand, breathing heavily.

Then I felt it, that strange silence falling again. I turned my head toward the dunes, and there he was.

Lexington stood exactly where he had been the night before, silver eyes watching us from the distance. He did not move, but I felt his gaze settle on me like a weight.

He had said he wished to see if death here would be as beautiful as before. Perhaps it had been, in his eyes. Perhaps it always would be.

When I blinked, he was gone.

We packed quickly, leaving the ruin to its silence. I said nothing of Lexington to the others. What words could I offer?

As we rode back across the endless sands, the memory of those silver eyes lingered with me, cold and patient. He had eternity. He would see this happen again. And perhaps, deep down, I knew he wanted to.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood

Viscount, Naturalist, and Bearer of the Ticking Machines

The Jaded Lion

I have always believed that curiosity is both the highest virtue of a naturalist and the surest path to destruction. If I required proof of this belief, I need only recount the events that began on a quiet spring morning in London when I received a sealed letter bearing the Queen's own crest.

The summons was brief but urgent. Her Majesty requested my immediate presence at Buckingham, and though no explanation was written, I understood at once that it could not be ignored. By the following morning, I was standing before her private chamber, the letter clutched in my hand as I was escorted inside.

Queen Victoria greeted me not with pleasantries, but with the solemn gravity I had come to recognize in her rare personal requests.

"Lord Blackwood," she began, her voice as firm as ever, "you are to undertake a matter of considerable importance to the Crown. A relic has been brought to my attention. It is said to rest in a remote province of China, hidden away for centuries. The locals claim it carries a curse, but whether this is superstition or something more, I trust only you to discover the truth."

"I am at your service, Your Majesty," I replied, bowing slightly. "What manner of relic is it, if I may ask?"

Her eyes narrowed, her hands clasping before her. "It is an artifact of jade, shaped in the likeness of a lion's head. The Qing court dismissed it as an old wives' tale centuries ago, yet those who have attempted to remove it have met untimely deaths. Its reputation has spread beyond China's borders, and I will not see such an object fall into the hands of foreign collectors. I want it here, secured and studied."

I inclined my head. "Then it shall be done. I will recover this relic, or at the very least learn the truth of its legend."

A brief smile flickered across her face, one of quiet trust. "I knew you would not fail me, Theodore. You leave as soon as you are able."

And so my fate was sealed with that single conversation.

By the following evening, preparations were already under way. I had traveled to distant lands countless times before, but I could not deny a particular heaviness in my heart as I readied my equipment. Perhaps it was the nature of this task, or perhaps it was something deeper, a quiet voice whispering that this journey would cost me more than I realized.

Deeds entered the study as I packed my pistol and saber, his usual calm replaced by something far more troubled.

"You are going, then," he said flatly.

"I am," I replied, glancing up from the leather satchel I was filling with maps, journals, and cartridges.

Deeds frowned deeply, adjusting the cuffs of his immaculate jacket. "China is not like the other places you have visited. Its history runs deep, older than the foundations of our own world. You will find no ordinary superstitions there. I have read what little there is to read of that relic. Men who sought it were not only killed, they were... changed."

I raised an eyebrow. "Changed? How so?"

He hesitated, which for Deeds was unusual. "Their bodies were found days after they vanished, untouched by animals, untouched even by decay, but their faces..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "I will not say. It is not my place to speak of such things when I cannot confirm them as truth. But I would beg you, sir, to consider leaving this one be."

"You know I cannot refuse the Queen," I said quietly.

Deeds looked at me then, his usual stoic mask slipping just enough for his concern to show. "Then at least promise me this, sir. Promise me you will come back."

I smiled faintly, though I suspect the sadness in it did not escape him. "You have kept my house in perfect order through every fool's errand I have undertaken, Deeds. I would not leave you with the trouble of finding a new master. I promise, I will return."

He gave a curt nod, though his expression remained grave.

That evening I left London, traveling first by train, then by ship, bound for Hong Kong. From there I intended to make my way inland toward the province where the jade lion was said to rest. The journey stretched on for weeks, each day a slow march toward the unknown.

China itself was a land of contrasts. Bustling ports alive with noise and color gave way to quiet countryside where ancient traditions still held sway. At every stop, I inquired discreetly about the relic, speaking in the native tongue, which I had studied years before. My fluency earned me cautious respect, though it did not ease the suspicion my foreign appearance inspired. Most refused to discuss the relic at all, some growing pale at the mention of its name, as if even speaking of it invited misfortune.

At last, in a small mountain village tucked deep within a forest of gnarled cypress trees, I found someone willing to speak. An elderly man, his back bent with age, approached me as I rested near the edge of the village. His eyes were sharp despite his years.

"You seek the lion," he said simply, speaking in his native tongue. His tone carried no curiosity, only quiet resignation.

I answered in the same language. "I do. I have been told it lies near this province."

The old man spat on the ground, shaking his head. "You should turn back. That thing is not meant for men to touch. It carries the anger of those who carved it. They were not men who prayed to merciful gods. It was made for a curse, and it has not forgotten its purpose."

"Where is it kept," I asked.

The old man looked at me for a long time before sighing heavily. "Follow the path into the mountains until the trees grow too thick for sunlight to pass through. You will find stone steps there, carved long ago. But do not take them. Not unless you are prepared to pay the price."

He left me with that warning, disappearing into the crowd before I could ask more.

I set out the next morning, my pack slung over my shoulder, the familiar weight of my pistol at my hip and my saber across my back. The air grew colder as I climbed higher into the mountains, mist curling between the dark trees. Each step seemed to carry me further from the world I knew and deeper into something older, stranger, and far less forgiving.

By evening, I found what the old man had spoken of.

The forest thickened until only faint strands of sunlight pierced the canopy. Moss clung to ancient stones, and there, half buried in roots, were the first of the steps, narrow and steep, climbing into darkness.

I stood for a long while, staring at them, feeling the weight of the silence pressing in from all sides. There was no sound of birds, no whisper of wind, only the quiet expectation of something waiting.

I tightened my grip on the hilt of my saber and began to climb.

The stone steps rose steeply, swallowed by tangled roots and draped in moss that glistened faintly in the cold mist. Each step creaked faintly under my weight, not from weakness, but as though something deeper within the stones themselves protested my ascent. The silence was absolute. No birds sang. No insects stirred. The forest felt as if it had been emptied of life long ago, leaving only me to trespass upon its forgotten ground.

The climb was long and arduous, winding sharply between jagged boulders and ancient cypress trees whose trunks twisted unnaturally, as though recoiling from the path. The mist thickened the higher I climbed until the world seemed reduced to little more than stone, moss, and shadow.

At last, the steps ended, opening to a terrace of carved stone half consumed by the forest. Before me rose the temple.

It stood quiet and forgotten, yet there was a strange perfection to it, as if time itself feared to touch it. The walls were hewn from pale stone, etched with curling patterns of clouds and coiling beasts, and its roof curved upward like the horns of some great creature. Statues of lions lined the outer edge, their faces worn smooth, their mouths frozen in snarling grimaces.

I stepped forward cautiously, lantern held high. The air grew colder as I approached, the scent of damp stone mingling with something faintly metallic, like the tang of blood long since dried. My boots echoed softly against the terrace stones, a sound far too loud in the oppressive silence.

The entrance to the temple loomed ahead, framed by two great pillars carved with coiling dragons. Their stone eyes seemed to follow me as I passed between them.

Inside, the light from my lantern flickered against walls lined with faded murals. They depicted men kneeling before a jade lion, their faces twisted in anguish, while above them loomed a figure with many arms, each hand holding a different weapon. Though the paint had faded, the artistry remained vivid enough to stir unease in me.

I moved deeper into the temple, the floor beneath my boots littered with fallen leaves carried by years of wind slipping through cracks in the roof. The further I went, the heavier the air became, thick with a stillness that pressed against my chest.

At last, I reached the inner sanctum.

The chamber was circular, its walls carved with endless rows of inscriptions too worn to fully decipher. In the center of the room sat a stone pedestal. Resting upon it was the relic itself.

The jade lion was larger than I expected, its surface smooth and polished despite its age. Its eyes were inset with something darker than jade, a stone so black it seemed to drink in the light of my lantern. Its mouth curled into a silent snarl, teeth sharp and finely carved, and for a fleeting moment I felt as if it were watching me.

I approached carefully, every instinct warning me to stop. Yet I pressed onward, compelled by equal parts duty and curiosity. I knelt slightly to examine the pedestal, noting the faint grooves around its base. They were too deliberate to be decorative. They looked like channels, designed to catch and hold liquid.

A ritual device, perhaps. Or something far worse.

I reached into my pack, pulling free my journal to begin sketching the relic. The moment my pencil touched the paper, the air shifted.

The temperature dropped sharply, the lantern's flame flickering weakly as if gasping for air. The silence deepened until even my own breath sounded too loud.

Then I heard it.

A whisper, faint and rasping, curling through the chamber though no wind stirred. I could not understand the words, but the tone was unmistakable. It was anger.

I straightened immediately, my hand falling instinctively to the hilt of my saber. The jade lion remained still upon its pedestal, yet its black stone eyes seemed to gleam faintly in the lantern light, reflecting me in a way that felt wrong. My reflection did not move quite as I did.

The whisper grew louder, rising and falling as though circling me. It was not a single voice but many, layered and dissonant, speaking in the native tongue so quickly the words blended together. I caught only fragments, curses too old to fully translate, but one phrase repeated again and again.

"Do not touch."

I swallowed the instinct to reply aloud, forcing my mind to steady. My journal remained in my hand, but I closed it slowly, sliding it back into my pack.

I stepped back cautiously, studying the pedestal for any sign of a mechanism. If the curse was not superstition, it might be bound to some device, some trigger that would unleash whatever had killed those who came before me.

But the whispering stopped.

The silence that followed was worse than the sound.

Something moved in the shadows along the wall.

I turned sharply, lantern raised high. At first I saw nothing, but then I caught the faintest suggestion of motion a figure crouched near the far end of the chamber. It was human shaped, but wrong, its limbs too thin, its head twisted slightly to one side as if broken.

It moved again, jerking unnaturally as it crawled closer, its face catching the dim light.

I froze.

The old man's warning returned to me in that instant.

The figure's face was not decayed, not rotted, but frozen in an expression of pure terror, its eyes wide and its mouth stretched as if caught in a scream it could never finish. Its skin was pale, almost waxen, and its fingers clawed weakly at the stone as it dragged itself forward.

There was no life in its movements, no mind behind its gaze. It was only a thing, still cursed to move long after death.

Another shape stirred behind it. Then another.

The chamber was no longer silent.

Something was waking.

I tightened my grip on the hilt of my saber, my other hand already reaching for my pistol. Whatever lay ahead, it was clear that leaving this place quietly was no longer an option.

The first of the cursed things dragged itself fully into the circle of lantern light, its pale limbs scraping across the stone with a dry rasp that set my teeth on edge. Its face, frozen in that

eternal mask of terror, reflected the faint glow of the lantern, its unblinking eyes glassy and lifeless. Yet it moved, inch by inch, as though some unseen force pulled it forward.

The whispering began again, louder now, no longer a distant murmur but a chorus of many voices speaking in harsh, broken fragments of the native tongue. The words overlapped, hissing and rising until they filled the chamber. I caught pieces only by listening carefully through the chaos.

"Leave it... Leave it... Do not... touch..."

The thing lurched closer, its arms jerking unnaturally as though the joints no longer bent properly. I stepped back slowly, my free hand reaching to open the breach of my rolling block pistol. My fingers moved quickly, pulling a cartridge from my belt pouch and sliding it into the chamber with a metallic click.

Another figure emerged from the darkness. Then another.

They crawled along the floor, some moving on hands and knees, others dragging themselves by their arms as though their legs no longer worked. All bore the same mask of horror, their mouths stretched wide, their skin pale and wax like. Their clothing was old, worn in styles long forgotten, many of them clearly the remains of past explorers who had sought the relic.

"Back," I said aloud, though the words were more for myself than for them.

One of the cursed lurched suddenly into a clumsy sprint, its body jerking with every step. I raised the pistol, sighting the center of its chest, and fired.

The crack of the shot roared through the chamber, echoing against the stone walls. The bullet struck true, the thing collapsing instantly in a heap, yet it made no sound. No scream, no gasp, only silence as its limbs twitched once and lay still.

I opened the breach again, the empty casing ejecting with a soft metallic ping as I quickly slid another cartridge into place. The others did not hesitate.

Three more surged forward at once, their movements stiff but faster now, as if the curse itself urged them to overwhelm me. I backed toward the pedestal, raising my saber in my other hand.

The first lunged. I met it with a clean strike, the saber cutting through its neck with surprising ease. Its head toppled to the floor, rolling to rest at the base of the jade lion, its glassy eyes staring blankly upward. The body collapsed, twitching once before going still.

The second grabbed at me, its cold fingers clutching my coat. I slammed the pistol's barrel against its temple and fired, the shot cracking its skull apart in a spray of shattered bone. The recoil jolted up my arm, but I kept my footing, shoving the body aside as it fell.

The third came from the side, catching me before I could reload. Its hands clutched at my arm, pulling me toward its face, that terrible frozen expression inches from mine. Its eyes did not blink, but there was something within them, a faint glimmer of movement deep inside, as though something looked back at me through those dead orbs.

With a sharp pull I twisted my arm free and brought the saber down hard across its shoulder, cutting deep enough to sever the joint. The arm fell, and I finished the strike with a thrust straight through its chest. It fell silently, collapsing beside the others.

The whispering grew louder, rising in pitch until it became almost unbearable. The chamber trembled, the murals along the walls seeming to shimmer faintly in the lantern light as if alive. More shapes stirred in the darkness, too many to count, crawling, dragging themselves forward.

For a brief moment I glanced to the pedestal. The jade lion sat unmoved, yet the black stones of its eyes gleamed brighter now, catching the light unnaturally. The grooves at its base glistened faintly, as if something wet had begun to fill them.

I reloaded the pistol quickly, the single cartridge sliding into place as I snapped the breach shut. My breath came heavy, my heart pounding against my ribs.

There were too many to fight one by one.

I stepped back toward the pedestal, my back nearly touching it, saber raised defensively as the cursed dead moved closer in a slow tightening circle. Their glassy eyes all stared at me, unblinking, their mouths frozen open in that same silent scream.

The whispering changed. No longer warnings. Now it sounded like chanting. The words came clearer, slower, almost rhythmic.

"Join us."

The cursed things stopped their advance. They knelt suddenly as one, their stiff limbs bending unnaturally, their faces still locked in horror as they lowered their heads to the floor. The whispering fell into silence, leaving only the sound of my breathing in the still air.

Then, very slowly, the jade lion's black eyes shifted.

I felt its gaze settle upon me.

For a single dreadful instant, I could not move, caught by that strange, heavy pull, as if the relic itself were weighing my very soul. My reflection stared back at me in the polished jade, but it was not quite right. Its mouth moved slightly when mine did not.

The cursed figures lifted their heads as one, their lifeless eyes locking onto me. Their mouths opened wider, impossibly wide, skin stretching until cracks formed at the edges.

I knew then that standing my ground meant death.

With a sharp turn, I broke for the entrance, firing once into the nearest cursed thing as it lunged again. The shot tore through its head, but the others gave chase instantly, their stiff movements quickening unnaturally as if the temple itself pushed them forward.

The chamber shook now, dust raining from the ceiling as I sprinted back through the halls, lantern swinging wildly in my hand. The murals seemed to twist in the flickering light, their painted figures moving as if alive, mouths whispering as I passed.

The cursed followed, their silent pursuit broken only by the scraping of their hands and feet against stone.

I could see the faint light of the entrance ahead.

If I was to survive, I had to reach it.

The cold air from the entrance brushed against my face as I sprinted toward the terrace, each step echoing against the ancient stone. The cursed things scraped across the floor behind me, their stiff limbs pounding against the walls in uneven rhythm. The whispering had returned, now no longer warning me to leave but urging them forward. It was no longer many voices but one, deep and hollow, speaking through their mouths in unison.

"Bring him back."

The words made the very walls vibrate.

I ran harder, my boots striking the moss slick stones, lantern swinging wildly in one hand, my saber ready in the other. My pistol was empty, its breach open, but I dared not reload while running.

As I reached the entrance chamber, one of the cursed dropped from above, landing on all fours before me like some grotesque animal. Its face twisted toward me, its jaw stretching wide enough that its skin cracked, thin rivulets of blood sliding down its chin.

I struck before it could rise. My saber swept across its neck, the blade cutting through in one clean motion. The body twitched and fell aside, but more poured into the chamber, crawling along the walls, dragging themselves from the shadows.

I reloaded the pistol quickly, snapping the breach closed and firing at the nearest one. The shot tore through its skull, throwing it back into the wall, but the others kept coming.

My breath came fast and sharp as I backed toward the terrace steps. If they caught me here, in the narrow hall, I would not survive.

I reached the open terrace at last, the forest mist curling around the ancient stone lions that lined the edge. The cursed things followed, stepping into the faint grey light. Their pale waxen skin looked almost luminous in the mist, their faces locked in that same frozen terror, though now their movements grew faster, more fluid, as though the relic lent them strength the longer I remained.

One leapt at me. I stepped aside, slashing across its chest, the saber biting through cloth and flesh before catching against something hard beneath its skin bone or perhaps something worse. It fell, twitching, but another lunged immediately after, its fingers clawing at my shoulder. I shoved it back with my boot, my pistol swinging toward it, and fired.

The last round in my pistol echoed across the terrace, throwing the thing backward.

I snapped the breach open again, sliding another cartridge home with trembling fingers. I had only a handful left.

The cursed began to slow then, circling me rather than rushing forward. Their heads tilted unnaturally, moving in perfect unison as they turned to look behind me.

I felt the weight before I turned, as if something far larger than them had stepped into the terrace.

The air grew heavy.

The jade lion sat upon the terrace now.

I knew it had not been there when I entered the temple, yet it rested upon a stone pedestal near the edge as though it had always been waiting. Its black stone eyes glimmered faintly in the mist, reflecting me perfectly this time, every motion exact. Its carved mouth curled into a snarl, and I felt its gaze press into me like a hand upon my chest.

The cursed things knelt slowly, bowing toward it.

The whisper returned, now clear and commanding.

"Take it."

I hesitated, saber still ready, my pistol raised slightly toward the relic. My instincts screamed to leave it where it sat, but the Queen's request weighed heavy upon me.

And perhaps, more than duty, there was a deeper, more dangerous curiosity.

I stepped forward cautiously, each movement slow, my boots crunching softly against the terrace stones. The cursed things did not move, their glassy eyes following me as I approached the jade lion.

When I stood before it, I could feel something radiating from it, not heat, not cold, but a pressure that filled the air like a storm about to break. Its black stone eyes seemed alive, watching me, judging me.

I reached out.

The moment my fingers touched the jade, the whispering ceased.

The cursed things froze, their bodies locking in place. The terrace fell utterly silent, the mist hanging still as if time itself had stopped.

For a heartbeat, I thought perhaps the danger had passed.

Then the jade lion's black eyes flared, not with light but with an unnatural depth, as if I stared into a vast emptiness. The pressure grew heavier, pushing against my chest, pressing on my mind, as if the relic itself were trying to look through me.

I gripped it tightly, forcing my hands to stay steady. "You will not have me," I said aloud, voice firm despite the growing weight.

The pressure lessened, just slightly, as if the relic hesitated.

Then, with one final pulse of that strange, suffocating weight, the jade lion stilled.

The cursed things lowered their heads further, bowing until their foreheads touched the stone. Their movements slowed, then stopped entirely. Their limbs stiffened, their faces still locked in those masks of terror. One by one, they toppled over, lifeless at last, their forms once again as still as corpses should be.

The mist stirred as a breeze passed across the terrace for the first time since I arrived.

I placed the jade lion into my pack, securing it carefully. The whispering did not return, but I felt the weight of its gaze even as I turned to leave, as if it watched from within the pack, waiting.

The climb down the stone steps was long and quiet. The forest no longer felt quite as heavy, though I kept my saber in hand and my pistol loaded.

By the time I reached the edge of the mountain, the mist had thinned, the sunlight faintly piercing the canopy. The village below looked almost welcoming after the horrors above.

Yet even as I descended, I could not shake the feeling that the curse was not broken.

The jade lion felt warm against my back, as though it still breathed.

The journey back to London felt longer than any expedition I had taken before. Though the path home was uneventful, the weight of the jade lion in my pack was constant. Its surface never again stirred with that strange warmth, yet I often caught myself glancing at it in the dim corners of my cabin on the ship, half-expecting those black stone eyes to shift. By the time I set foot once more on English soil, I was glad for the familiar chill of the London fog.

The Queen received me in a private study, smaller and far less formal than the grand halls where I had met her before. The jade lion sat upon a table between us, the morning light catching faintly along its polished surface.

"You have done well, Lord Blackwood," she said, her tone carrying both relief and something quieter, almost admiration. "The relic is exactly as described in the records. I trust you encountered difficulty."

I allowed myself a brief, measured smile. "Difficulty is not uncommon in these matters, Your Majesty. The locals spoke of a curse, and I found their warnings to be... not entirely without merit."

She studied me carefully, her sharp eyes searching for any hint of falsehood. "And yet you return unharmed, and with the relic secured."

I inclined my head slightly. "I am fortunate, perhaps undeservingly so. Others who sought it were not so lucky."

The Queen rested her hands on the table, her gaze turning briefly to the jade lion. "The Order will be most thankful for this," she said, almost as an aside. "Its study will advance knowledge far beyond what most can imagine. And perhaps its... unique qualities may prove useful in time."

"The Order," I repeated, watching her expression carefully.

Her Majesty's face remained composed, betraying nothing more. "You have done your duty, Lord Blackwood. England owes you another debt, though I know you will refuse to count them. You may rest now, if you wish. Leave the relic to us."

I gave a formal bow. "As always, I am at your service."

She allowed herself the smallest of smiles. "Indeed, you are. Well done, Theodore."

By the time I returned to my estate, the familiar quiet of home felt almost foreign. Deeds was waiting for me at the door, standing perfectly still in the entryway as though he had not moved from that spot since I had left. His eyes flicked over me quickly, taking in every detail, lingering briefly on the faint tear in my coat where a cursed hand had once grasped me.

"You are alive," he said, his tone as flat as ever, though there was the faintest trace of relief behind it.

"I am," I replied, setting my pack down beside the door. "Though it was not for lack of things trying otherwise."

Deeds gave a short nod, stepping forward to take my coat. "The Queen received the relic."

"She did," I said, loosening the strap of my saber. "She seemed most pleased. She told me the Order would be thankful."

At that, Deeds paused for the briefest moment, his hands holding the coat still. "The Order," he repeated slowly, as if weighing the word. "Then I suspect the jade lion will not remain idle for long."

"Nor do I," I replied, lowering myself into the nearest chair. "I have done what was asked. What comes of it is no longer mine to control."

Deeds studied me a moment longer before placing the coat neatly over his arm. "You promised you would return," he said simply.

I looked up at him, allowing a faint smile to tug at my lips despite the weight that lingered in my chest. "And so I have. For now."

Deeds inclined his head slightly, his usual mask of composure settling firmly back into place. "Then I shall see to dinner. You look as though you could use something warm."

As he moved toward the kitchens, I sat alone for a moment in the quiet of my study, listening to the soft ticking of the clock on the mantle. The jade lion was gone from my possession, yet I could still feel its presence, as though it watched me from somewhere unseen.

Deeds was right. The relic would not remain idle for long.

And though I had done my duty, I could not help but wonder if bringing it back had been the greatest mistake of my life.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood
Viscount, Naturalist, and Lion Tamer

The Royal Gala

**Note: This one is something to remember, perhaps it could be of use when I set out.*

The rain had settled into a steady rhythm against the windows of my study, a quiet percussion that suited the mood of the evening. Deeds moved soundlessly in the background, tending to the fire, while I sat at my desk reviewing my journals from the cursed lion affair. My pen hovered over the page, but my mind was elsewhere, restless in that way it often grew after returning from some distant corner of the world.

It was then that the knock came.

Three deliberate raps at the front door.

Deeds, ever the vigilant caretaker, moved to answer it. I heard the sound of hinges creaking, then his soft, measured footsteps returning. When he entered the study, he held something in his gloved hand, a letter, old and yellowed, its edges curling as though it had been sealed for centuries.

"This arrived for you, sir," he said, offering it to me with the same seriousness he might afford a weapon.

I frowned, taking the letter carefully. The paper felt older than anything that should have been circulating in the post, brittle and dry to the touch. The seal was stamped in black wax, bearing an unfamiliar sigil, a three pointed crown above a long vertical line, the symbol surrounded by curling shapes I could not immediately place.

I looked to Deeds. "Who delivered this."

"No one," he replied calmly. "It was on the doorstep. No prints in the mud, no sign of anyone near the gates. I have checked twice."

I broke the seal, sliding the folded parchment free. The ink was deep and rich, as if freshly written, but the handwriting was elegant in a way long out of fashion, thin sweeping lines, every curve deliberate, as though written by someone who still valued the artistry of script.

It read:

"To Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, Viscount and Naturalist of Esteemed Reputation

You are cordially invited to attend a Royal Gala at the Court of His Majesty, The Hanged King. Your presence has been requested in the spirit of celebration, learning, and great conversation. It is promised you will find among our esteemed guests those of singular talent and curiosity, whose company is most worthy of your regard.

The gala shall begin upon your arrival. Bring only yourself. Proper attire shall be provided. Simply accept, and the way shall be made clear to you."

There was no signature, only the sigil pressed again into the bottom of the parchment, the same three pointed crown.

I read it twice more before placing it carefully on the desk.

"The Hanged King," I said softly. "An unusual name for a monarch, is it not."

Deeds said nothing, but I could see the disapproval in his eyes. He stepped closer, regarding the letter with that same analytical stare he gave to anything that struck him as particularly foolish or dangerous.

"You cannot be considering this, sir," he said finally. "Whoever left this had means of entering the grounds unseen, and they speak of a king no one in London has heard of. There is no country by that name on any proper map."

"I am well aware of that," I replied, leaning back in my chair. "Which makes it all the more curious."

"Curiosity will be the end of you one day," Deeds said, his voice low.

"Perhaps," I said, smiling faintly. "But it has carried me this far."

Deeds folded his hands behind his back, watching me closely. "And how, pray, do you intend to attend such a gala, sir. There is no address. No instructions. Nothing but that... suggestion."

I picked up the letter again, studying the precise curling script. "It says the way will be made clear if I accept."

Deeds raised an eyebrow. "And you would simply accept without knowing where you are to be taken, or by whom."

I set the letter down and met his gaze evenly. "If I knew how to reach this place, I would go without hesitation. There is something to be learned here, Deeds. Something most unusual, if not extraordinary."

His lips pressed into a thin line, his disapproval growing more apparent by the second. "Then you mean to go."

"I do," I said quietly. "But only if the way presents itself. Until then, we wait."

Deeds gave a short nod, though his expression remained grim. "Very well, sir. But if you vanish into thin air, do try to return before dinner. It would be most inconvenient to reorg..." the air shifted. The candlelight stretched unnaturally long, shadows bending as though drawn toward the letter. Deeds took a step forward, his composure cracking for only a moment as the parchment trembled.

"Sir," he said sharply, but before he could reach me, the seal broke on its own. Black mist curled from the letter, spilling across the desk like ink in water.

I felt the floor tilt beneath me, my body pulled forward. Deeds moved as if to grab my arm, but his hand stopped short, fingers brushing only empty air.

The study vanished.

I stood now upon polished marble, deep wine in color and smooth as glass, surrounded by towering walls draped in silk that shimmered unnaturally, as though alive. The scent of strange incense hung thick in the air, sweet but cloying, and the sound of soft music drifted through the hall, beautiful yet wrong. Beneath the melody were faint cries, muffled and distant, woven into the music so perfectly they might have been mistaken for part of the song if not for the despair in them.

A vast hall stretched before me, filled with masked figures who danced in slow, elegant circles. Their movements were graceful but carried an unnatural precision, as if they followed some rhythm no human ear could hear. Every face was hidden behind a mask, some carved into

exaggerated tragedy, others into grotesque joy, all painted in vibrant colors that shimmered unnaturally in the candlelight.

Above us, a chandelier of black crystal hung suspended by nothing, glowing faintly from within like a cage holding captured stars.

I looked down at myself. My traveling coat and boots were gone, replaced by a formal suit of deep navy trimmed in gold, the fabric heavier than any I had ever worn. My saber hung at my side, polished so perfectly it gleamed like new, and my rolling block pistol remained at my hip, untouched yet somehow subtly altered, as if made to belong here.

Then I noticed my reflection in the polished marble. My own face was hidden behind a mask.

It was carved with a tragedy's long, exaggerated features, but the expression was strange to me. I could not tell whether it was sorrowful, fearful, or mocking, nor could I remove it. My own reflection stared back with that unfamiliar expression, as if someone else entirely now wore my skin.

No one spoke to me, yet I felt their masked gazes following my every movement.

Then the crowd shifted, parting slightly as four figures approached. They were unlike the others, their presence commanding the entire hall's attention.

The first to approach was the White Lord. Her gown shimmered like fresh snow beneath the chandelier's strange glow, and her ivory tragedy mask was carved into soft, sorrowful curves. Her movements were graceful, almost hesitant, and though she carried herself with noble poise, her gloved hands clutched nervously at the folds of her gown. She gave a shallow bow of her masked head.

"You are the invited one," she said in a soft, trembling voice. "A living man in our king's court. How curious and how dangerous."

I inclined my head politely. "Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, at your service, my lady."

She nodded slightly, her voice lowering. "You should tread carefully. The Ambassador watches. He notices everything. And he does not forgive those who anger him."

Before I could respond, another figure swept forward abruptly, moving with quick, uneven steps.

The Yellow Lord's robes shimmered in gold and saffron, catching the candlelight in sharp, almost blinding flashes. His tragedy mask was etched with intricate spirals, the painted frown exaggerated to a grotesque degree. His head turned constantly, jerking toward every sound as if he expected an attack from any corner. He circled me twice before stopping too close for comfort, his hands twitching in restless motion.

"You carry a weapon," he said in a rapid, strained voice. "Yes, I saw it. I smelled it. A pistol, old, yes, but not normal, no, not at all. It hums, it bends, it pulls at the air. Tell me what it does. No, do not, I will know when I see it. Reality warps when it fires, does it not. How did you forge it? Did you carve the runes yourself? Did you steal the design? Do you even understand what it truly does or are you a fool who meddles without knowing."

I met his frantic energy with a calm expression, or at least what calm I hoped my mask suggested. "It is my own design, and it works precisely as I intend. I understand it well enough, my lord."

He jerked his head sharply, as though that answer annoyed him, though his hands twitched with visible excitement. "You say that. You believe it. I should like to test it. Later, later perhaps." He turned away quickly, still muttering to himself as he stepped back.

The Red Lord came next, his presence as overwhelming as the Yellow Lord's was twitching and paranoid. He was massive, his round frame filling his crimson robes, which shimmered like liquid flame. His tragedy mask bore a deep frown, but he laughed loudly as he approached, his booming voice carrying across the hall.

"Ha. A living man. A visitor. I like this already. You are not afraid, are you? No, of course not, you stand straight, you are proud. Good. Tell me, have you fought? Have you killed? Tell me a story, a grand story. I would have one worthy of my ears."

His laughter was booming, but there was danger in it. His mood, I could feel, could shift in an instant. One wrong word, one disappointing answer, and the laughter might become rage.

I inclined my head. "If a tale is what you ask, then a tale I shall give, my lord."

He leaned forward slightly, hands clasped as if in anticipation. "Good. Then you will tell it to me soon. Make it worthy, or I will not like you."

The crowd seemed to still further, as if waiting for what would come next.

Then the last figure arrived, and the music seemed to falter.

The Ambassador stepped forward, his presence like a blade slicing through the air. His black and silver armor gleamed with intricate patterns, his long cloak trailing behind him, and his birdlike mask of silver and black metal reflected the candlelight sharply.

All around us, the guests lowered their heads, their movements stiff with fear. Even the White Lord bowed slightly, her trembling hands tightening on her gown.

The Ambassador stopped before me, tilting his head slightly. Though I could not see his eyes behind the mask, I felt his gaze pierce straight through me. He said nothing, yet the weight of his attention was more oppressive than the others' words combined.

And then, beyond him, I saw her.

Bella.

She stood at the far end of the hall, dressed in silver silk, her white hair gleaming softly beneath the black chandelier's strange glow. Her mask was simple, delicate, and it did little to hide the warmth of her smile when our eyes met.

I froze. The memory of her voice, her touch, all of it returned in that single instant. She looked at me as if she had been waiting for me, as if she knew this meeting was inevitable.

But before I could move toward her, the Ambassador's masked head turned slowly to follow my gaze. The silver of his birdlike mask gleamed in the candlelight, and though I could not see his face, I felt it the curl of a sinister smile hidden beneath.

The music shifted as the lords circled closer, the dancers gliding further away until the four of them and I stood almost alone in the center of the vast hall. All around us the masked guests moved with cautious grace, their heads bowed as if none dared interrupt what was to come.

The White Lord lingered nearest, her soft voice barely rising above the strange melody. "You should not be so still, not when his gaze lingers," she whispered, her masked face tilting toward the Ambassador who loomed nearby. Her hands twisted slightly in the fabric of her gown, betraying her nerves. "The longer he studies you, the more he wonders how easily you might break."

I kept my posture calm, though I inclined my head politely toward her. "I thank you for your kindness, my lady. But I have been studied by many who wished me broken. It has not yet ended poorly for me."

She hesitated, as though she wanted to say more, then lowered her gaze and stepped back slightly, her voice falling to a hum. The song she had been softly singing returned, the notes sweet but faintly strained, as if she sang only to keep her own courage.

The Yellow Lord seized the moment to rush closer, his gold and saffron robes glittering unnaturally in the candlelight. He circled me again, quick jerking steps, his head snapping sharply toward the guests, then back to me, then to the pistol at my side.

"Yes, yes, there it is," he hissed, his voice sharp and rapid. "A rolling block, yes, but changed, changed by clever hands. Not normal. I can feel the hum of it even from here. Reality bends when you fire it, does it not. Tell me. No, do not tell me, you would lie, no, perhaps you would not, you are proud, I can smell it. Who taught you the design? Who showed you how to twist the air when a bullet flies. Did you carve the runes yourself, did you find the metal somewhere forbidden, or did you simply stumble into knowledge you cannot understand."

His voice rose in pitch, his movements growing more erratic. His fingers twitched as though he wanted to snatch the pistol straight from its holster.

I met his frantic energy with the same calmness I had offered the White Lord. "It is mine alone," I said evenly. "I forged its parts, refined its workings, and tested every piece until it performed exactly as I wished. I assure you, my lord, I understand my own creation."

The Yellow Lord froze, staring at me for a long, silent moment. Then he twitched his head sharply to one side, his voice dropping to a mutter. "Proud, yes, foolish perhaps, but proud. I will test it myself one day. Yes. Later. Later." He stepped back abruptly, still muttering as though arguing with someone only he could hear.

The Red Lord stepped forward then, filling the space between us with his sheer size. His crimson robes shimmered like flowing fire, his round form moving with surprising energy for his bulk. His tragedy mask bore an angry frown, yet he laughed loudly, his voice booming through the hall.

"Ha. I like you already. A living man, standing proud. You do not tremble, you do not hide. Good. But words are nothing. Stories matter. Tell me a tale. A fierce tale, a battle worthy of my ears. Make it grand, or I will not like you, and I dislike those I do not like."

The way he spoke made it clear that to be disliked by him would be a dangerous thing. His laughter boomed again, but his hands clenched at his sides, fingers curling into fists as though his temper could flare at any second.

I nodded once, keeping my voice steady. "Then I shall tell you of my duel with the Warlock in Austria, when I hunted him during the Great Warlock Hunt."

The Red Lord leaned closer, his massive form towering over me, though his laughter softened to something more curious. "Good. Speak."

The hall seemed to quiet as I began. Even the dancers slowed, their movements growing more deliberate as though they too listened.

"It was in the winter of sixty seven," I began. "The Warlock had taken refuge in a ruined abbey in the mountains. The locals would not go near, claiming he commanded things not meant to walk in daylight. When I arrived, the snow was red in places, and the air smelled of smoke and blood. He waited for me in the courtyard, a tall man with a crooked smile, wearing a coat lined with strange runes that shimmered as he moved."

The Red Lord chuckled lowly, leaning closer still. "And you challenged him, yes. Not from afar. Face to face."

"Face to face," I confirmed. "He wielded thaumaturgy, bending the wind and stone as if they were his own limbs. He laughed when I drew only my saber. He struck first, hurling shards of ice through the air, but I kept moving, closing the distance before he could summon another spell. His power was great, but he relied on it too much. He thought me fragile because I carried no magic, but he forgot a blade does not care for sorcery if placed in the right hand."

The Red Lord let out a booming laugh, his massive form shaking. "Good, good. And you struck him down, yes. Tell me how."

"We fought through the courtyard until his runes began to fail," I continued. "I pressed him until he slipped in the snow. When he tried to cast again, I broke his hand with my saber's guard, and then I ended it. It was not the longest fight of my life, nor the hardest, but it was the one he deserved."

The Red Lord clapped his large hands together, the sound echoing like a drum. "Ha. Good. You fight with heart. I like that. You are proud, you are bold. Yes, yes, I like you." His laughter filled the hall, though I could see even through the mask that his joy could vanish at any instant should my words have failed him. For now I should be glad such a lie is enough. To fight with heart.

As his booming laughter continued, I felt another gaze settle on me.

The Ambassador.

He had not moved the entire time, standing perfectly still, yet I felt his attention sharpen as I finished my story. His silver and black mask tilted ever so slightly, and though he did not speak, the weight of his silent judgment was heavier than all the lords combined.

And beyond him, I could still see Bella, watching me with quiet warmth, her hands clasped gently in front of her.

For just a moment, even with the whispers of the court and the gaze of the Ambassador burning into me, I allowed myself to meet her eyes.

She smiled.

The Red Lord's booming laughter still echoed faintly through the hall when the music shifted again, softening into a slower, stranger rhythm. The dancers resumed their endless circling, but I could feel their attention turn toward me, just as I felt the Ambassador's gaze sharpen.

He had not moved an inch, yet the weight of his presence seemed to press heavier now, as though he had been waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

But for a brief, stolen moment, I allowed myself to look beyond him.

Bella stood near the far end of the hall, her silver gown catching the faint glow of the chandelier above, her white hair gleaming like snow in moonlight. The simplicity of her mask set her apart from the others, delicate and unadorned, and though it covered much of her face, it could not hide her smile.

I moved toward her.

The crowd parted without resistance, as if they too understood the significance of that moment. No one spoke. Even the White Lord's soft humming faltered for a moment as I crossed the polished marble floor.

When I reached her, Bella tilted her head slightly, her warm smile never wavering. "I wondered if it would truly be you," she said quietly, her voice as soft and familiar as I remembered.

I inclined my head, my own voice lowering. "I might say the same. I thought I would never see you again."

Her gloved hand brushed lightly against mine, the smallest gesture, yet it felt more real than anything else in this strange, dreamlike court. "I feared you would not come. No one comes here by choice, not truly. But you... you are always too brave for your own good."

"Brave," I said with a faint smile. "Or foolish. The difference is often a matter of luck."

She gave a quiet laugh, though it faded quickly. Her eyes, barely visible through the slits of her mask, darted briefly to one side, toward the still figure standing across the hall. "You should not be speaking to me for so long. He will notice."

I followed her gaze.

The Ambassador stood where he had been, black and silver armor gleaming, his long cloak pooling across the marble like spilled ink. His birdlike mask tilted ever so slightly, the candlelight catching the silver edges of its sharp beak.

He had already noticed.

Bella's voice lowered further, almost a whisper. "He does not like when others have things he cannot control. If he decides you should not be here, no one will stop him. Not even the king."

I squeezed her hand gently, offering the faintest reassurance. "I have no intention of letting him control me."

Her lips parted slightly, as if to say more, but she stopped as the air shifted.

The music stopped.

The dancers froze where they stood.

The sharp sound of heels against marble began, each measured step striking like a metronome of approaching dread. Click. Click. Click. The crowd lowered their heads, the White Lord shrinking back with trembling hands, the Red Lord's massive frame stiffening as though even he feared being singled out.

The Ambassador moved slowly, savoring each step, until he stopped only a few feet from us. His silver and black mask tilted toward Bella first, then toward me.

When he spoke, his voice was sharp and distorted, like a blade dragged across glass, yet filled with a sickening delight, as though he tasted every word. "What a charming sight," he said. "A living man and a familiar little treasure, whispering like frightened lovers in a garden. But this is not a garden. This is a court. My court. And nothing here whispers without my permission."

Bella lowered her gaze immediately, her fingers slipping reluctantly from mine.

The Ambassador turned his masked head fully toward me, his voice lowering to a hiss, distorted and full of dark pleasure. "How rare it is to see one of the living here. Rarer still to see one so... sentimental. Tell me, little man, is she a curiosity to you, a distraction for your fleeting life, or are you so soft you actually care."

I met his masked gaze and kept my voice even. "She is someone I will not allow you to harm."

The Ambassador let out a sharp, broken laugh, jagged and cruel, as if he truly enjoyed the sound of his own mockery. "Oh, delightful. The selfless fool. So brave, so noble, so wonderfully doomed. I can feel your heart beating faster, like a trapped animal pretending it is still a hunter."

He tilted his masked head slowly, savoring the silence as all eyes turned toward us. His distorted voice sharpened further, every word dripping with cruel anticipation. "Perhaps I should take her then. Perhaps I should remove her from you now, if only to watch that brave little mask of yours crack. I wonder what noise you would make when it finally does."

Bella's breath caught, her hands trembling at her sides.

I stepped forward, my hand brushing the hilt of my saber. "You will not touch her."

For a long, terrible moment, there was only silence.

Then the Ambassador laughed again, louder this time, a jagged, distorted sound full of pleasure, echoing through the hall. "Ah, yes. That is what I wanted. There is nothing sweeter than a man willing to burn himself alive for someone else. You will do wonderfully."

The Red Lord's booming laughter returned, full of excitement. The Yellow Lord muttered frantically under his breath, his head snapping between us as if calculating every possible outcome. The White Lord looked away entirely, her soft humming returning, sorrowful and quiet.

The Ambassador tilted his masked head sharply toward me, the distorted joy in his voice clear. "You are a guest, Lord Blackwood, but let us make this evening memorable. Defend her if you dare. Entertain me. A duel, here, before the court. Let us see how far that noble little heart of yours carries you before I tear it out."

I looked once to Bella, who stared back at me, her eyes pleading behind her mask.

Then I turned to the Ambassador. "If that is what it takes to protect her, then I accept."

The Ambassador tilted his head again, his sharp mask gleaming in the candlelight, and his voice dropped to a near whisper, twisted and full of dark delight. "How splendid. Ohhh and try not to die too quickly. I do so enjoy when they struggle."

The hall shifted as if the entire court leaned closer to witness. The dancers stilled entirely, frozen in strange contorted poses, their masks all turned toward us. The music ceased, replaced by an eerie silence broken only by the occasional whisper of silk as some masked guest shifted nervously.

The Ambassador stepped back slowly, each movement deliberate, his sharp heels clicking against the polished marble in a steady rhythm. Click. Click. Click. He stopped a few paces away, tilting his silver and black mask slightly to one side.

"Stand where you are," he said, his sharp distorted voice curling like smoke through the air, filled with sickening anticipation. "No need for ceremony. No bowing. No flourishes. A man fights best when he is desperate."

The Red Lord laughed loudly, clapping his large hands together. "Yes. Make it grand, little man. Bleed well. Show me something worth cheering for."

The Yellow Lord circled nervously at the edge of the crowd, muttering so quickly it was almost unintelligible. "He will die. Yes, yes, dead in three strikes, maybe four. No, no, the Ambassador

toys, he will draw it out, he always draws it out, he will break him piece by piece, yes, yes, I want to see it."

The White Lord turned her head away, her voice barely a whisper. "Do not look at him, do not meet his eyes."

But I did.

The Ambassador drew a thin, elegant saber from beneath his cloak, its blade dark and glimmering faintly with inscriptions too fine to read. He tilted his head toward me, his distorted voice curling with delight. "Draw your little toy, Lord Blackwood. Let us see how long you can make this amusing."

I drew my own saber slowly, its steel catching the glow of the black chandelier above. My mask hid my expression from him, just as his did from me, but my grip tightened slightly on the hilt.

The Ambassador's head tilted further, and I could almost feel his grin behind the mask. "Ohhh you are tense already. Splendid. That means you know how this ends."

He moved first.

His body blurred forward in a single sharp step, the click of his heel striking like a whip crack. His saber came low, then high, his movements unnaturally fast, so smooth they looked almost rehearsed. I barely parried in time, my blade ringing against his with a metallic snap.

The force of the strike jarred up my arm.

The Ambassador laughed sharply, his distorted voice curling with pleasure. "Ah, you blocked it. Wonderful. It is so much sweeter when they struggle."

He struck again, faster, his blade cutting in a tight arc toward my shoulder. I sidestepped, turning the strike with a narrow deflection, then lunged forward with a quick riposte. The Ambassador twisted aside effortlessly, his cloak swirling behind him, his sharp heels clicking as he spun around me.

"Too slow," he hissed, his voice almost joyful. "But you try. You really try. That is what I enjoy most."

The next series of strikes came faster than I could fully follow. His blade slashed low, then high, his movements so precise they seemed almost inhuman. Each blow carried enough force to

jar my arm, yet he never struck to kill—only to push me back, to exhaust me, to savor every second.

He laughed again, broken and sharp, his distorted voice rising with pleasure. "You are tiring already. I can hear it in your breathing. I wonder which will break first, your blade or your pride."

I forced myself to stay calm, stepping lightly, refusing to retreat any more than I had to. Every movement had to count. He was faster, stronger, and more skilled than any opponent I had faced, yet his arrogance made him careless in small ways. He wanted me to fight. He wanted me to last.

The Red Lord roared with laughter, cheering with every clash of blades. "Ha! Good, good, fight him, little man, fight him!"

The Yellow Lord muttered faster and faster, jerking his head with each strike. "Not yet, not yet, he could last five, maybe six more, no, no, he will be cut down in four."

The White Lord turned away completely, her soft humming trembling like a quiet prayer.

The Ambassador drove me back again, our blades locking for a moment. He leaned close, his distorted voice dripping with mockery. "Do you feel it, Lord Blackwood? That edge of hopelessness. That beautiful sinking in your chest when you realize you are only delaying the inevitable. That is my favorite part."

I pushed against his blade, forcing the lock apart. "I have felt hopelessness before, Ambassador. And I have survived it every time."

The Ambassador tilted his head, his laughter cracking like broken glass. "Oh yes. Defiance. Hold onto it. It makes you taste better when it finally shatters."

He struck again, harder now, his blade almost a blur. I blocked one, two, then barely turned aside the third, his edge grazing the fabric of my sleeve.

Bella's voice rose softly from the edge of the court. "Please, stop this."

The Ambassador froze for only a fraction of a second, his masked head turning slightly toward her.

And in that moment, I moved.

I lunged forward with all the force I had left, my saber cutting a tight arc upward. The blade struck his arm, slicing clean through the edge of his cloak and biting against the black metal of his armor.

The hall went silent.

The Ambassador staggered a half step back, his head tilting down to regard the faint scratch across his arm. A single drop of something dark slid down the metal, glinting faintly in the chandelier's light.

Then he looked back at me.

The distorted laugh that followed was softer now, but sharper, darker, filled with something far more dangerous than amusement. "Ah," he said, his voice low and curling with pleasure. "You marked me. You actually marked me. Oh, how delightful. How humiliating."

The crowd froze entirely, no one daring to breathe. Even the Red Lord's booming laughter faltered, his hands pausing mid clap.

The Ambassador straightened slowly, his distorted voice rising with excitement. "Now you are mine, little man. I will enjoy this."

He moved then, faster than before, his blade cutting down toward me with killing intent.

And before the strike could land, another voice filled the hall.

It was deep, echoing, and utterly mad.

"Enough."

The entire court dropped to their knees instantly.

The Hanged King had spoken.

The Red Lord's great frame lowered heavily, his once boisterous laugh silenced in an instant. The Yellow Lord muttered a frantic stream of broken phrases, his hands pressed flat to the ground as if he feared being crushed should he rise a finger. The White Lord sank gracefully to the floor, her head bowing low, her trembling hands clutching at her gown in quiet terror.

The only sound came from the sharp, deliberate clicks of the Ambassador's heels. One, two, three. He stepped back slowly, lowering his blade with controlled elegance. His black and silver mask tilted toward me for only a moment, his silent attention as sharp as a blade pressed against my throat, before he inclined his head slightly in a single gesture of submission.

The court turned as one toward the throne.

The Hanged King sat above them all, and to look upon him was to feel your thoughts twist and fold inward. His presence was not that of a man, not of anything the mind could rightly hold. Where my eyes sought definition, they found only chaos, a constant shifting of shapes and impressions that refused to settle. It was as though madness itself had taken form, bending reality in his presence. A mortal gaze could not measure him, could not accept him, and even glancing toward him for more than a breath filled my head with a dull, oppressive pressure, as if the edges of my mind were unraveling.

I looked away almost immediately, my vision swimming. Even in the corner of my eye his presence shifted like an ocean current, vast and eternal, his madness stretching beyond the walls, beyond the hall, beyond all reason.

A single long soundless motion stilled the air. His hand rose slowly, and the room seemed to bow with it.

"Well done," the King said, his voice slow and deep, layered, as if multiple voices spoke in unison. The sound felt as though it vibrated through my chest, pressing against my ribs, filling the very air with a weight that was almost suffocating.

"A living man," he said again, his tone curling strangely, like someone savoring a rare taste. "A living man wounds the one I trust above all. Rare. Very rare. Entertaining."

The Ambassador remained bowed, his mask tilted downward. His distorted laugh rose softly, broken and jagged, curling with pleasure despite the weight of the King's words. "A gift, Majesty. I let him play for you. He was amusing."

The King's presence shifted slightly, and the madness that was his gaze seemed to turn. Though I did not look directly at him, I felt it settle on the Ambassador. The air grew heavier for a moment.

"You amuse me, Ambassador," the King said slowly, every syllable stretched with strange, deliberate rhythm. "But you are not invincible. Remember that."

The Ambassador's laugh cracked once more, lower now, subdued, though I could still feel the pleasure twisting in every sound. "Always, Majesty."

Then the King's attention turned to me.

It was like being submerged in a cold current. My heart stuttered as his unseen gaze pressed against me, and for a single terrible moment I felt as though he was inside my thoughts, shifting through them as one might thumb through pages in a book. My grip tightened on my saber, my body locked in place.

"Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood," the King said, his tone strange, almost sing-song, as though he tasted every syllable. "You have spirit. You fought when you knew you would lose. That is a rare thing in this place. That amuses me. That is enough."

I drew in a steady breath, lowering my head slightly. "I am honored, Majesty."

The King gave a sound that might have been laughter, or perhaps only a sound that resembled it by accident. It was impossible to tell.

"You will return to your world now," he said. "You have danced for me, and that is enough."

But I did not move.

I turned my head slightly, just enough to look at Bella.

She stood near the far edge of the hall, her silver gown catching the light in soft ripples, her long white hair glowing faintly like snow under moonlight. Though she wore the same delicate mask, her eyes behind it were fixed on me, warm and unguarded. There was something about the way she stood, quiet yet commanding without speaking, that made her seem set apart from everyone else in the room, almost as if the air itself moved differently around her.

"Majesty," I said, raising my voice slightly. "If I may ask one thing more. Permit her to come with me."

The silence that followed was absolute.

The Yellow Lord's muttering stopped at once. The Red Lord froze mid-breath, his massive body rigid. The White Lord's hands tightened in her lap, her head lowering even further.

The King shifted. His presence seemed to turn toward Bella for a long moment, the air around her rippling faintly, before returning to me.

"She stays," the King said at last, his voice low, final.

I opened my mouth to speak again, but the sharp sound of heels cut me off.

Click. Click. Click.

The Ambassador stepped forward slowly, every movement deliberate, every sound echoing against the silent marble. He stopped at Bella's side, placing a gloved hand gently, almost reverently, upon her shoulder. His head tilted toward me, the sharp silver beak of his mask glinting under the chandelier light.

His distorted voice lowered, twisting with sick delight. "She will remain. The King trusts me to keep his court delightful. And she... is delightful."

Bella did not speak. Her masked eyes stayed on me, soft, pleading, her hands trembling slightly at her sides as the Ambassador's fingers lingered possessively on her shoulder.

I stepped forward, my saber tightening in my grip, but the King's voice filled the room again, louder, heavier, enough to make the air seem to buckle.

"You leave now."

The world shifted instantly.

The last thing I saw was Bella's eyes locked on mine, bright and desperate, and the Ambassador's mask tilting slightly as that broken, distorted laugh spilled from him once more, sharp and cruel, following me even as the court dissolved into nothing.

The rain whispered against the windows of my study once again. The fire crackled softly in the hearth, and the scent of wet earth returned as if no time had passed at all.

Deeds stood exactly where he had been, his sharp eyes studying me quietly.

"You are back," he said simply, his tone even.

I lowered my saber slowly, my hand trembling just slightly before I forced it still. "Yes. I am."

Deeds studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. "And was it worth it."

I looked at the rain sliding down the glass, the echo of that distorted laugh still sharp in my ears. "No," I said quietly. "Not nearly."

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood

Viscount, Naturalist, and Court Jester

The Flesh of Siberia

The cold in Siberia is not like the cold elsewhere. It is a living thing, a creeping weight that presses against the bones, slowing breath and thought alike until even motion feels like defiance. The Queen had requested my presence in this forgotten village, speaking of a relic whispered about in the oldest reports, an artifact of significant and possibly dangerous importance.

The village was little more than a cluster of sagging wooden houses clinging to the edge of a frozen forest, its narrow paths buried under snow that had turned grey with soot from the chimneys. The people watched me in silence as I passed, their faces hidden beneath fur lined hoods, their expressions unreadable.

I arrived at the largest of the homes, a long wooden hall that served as both meeting place and storage for what little the village could spare. I was received with quiet, suspicious courtesy, though even before I asked a single question I could sense their unease. Something in this place had frightened them deeply, and it was not merely the winter.

I spent the first day speaking with the elders, taking notes by the light of a single dim lantern. Their stories were vague, steeped in superstition, but all spoke of the same thing, a carved stone idol, black as obsidian and said to hum faintly in the dead of night. It was kept in an abandoned hunting lodge to the north, left there after three hunters who tried to carry it home disappeared. The elders also whispered of strangers who had been seen at the edge of the forest, men who spoke in harsh, guttural voices, their steps too quiet, their faces hidden. When I asked more about these strangers, the elders refused to speak further, muttering only that they were not men to be dealt with.

When I left the hall that evening, the sky was already dark, the stars sharp and cold against the endless black. I returned to the small house they had lent me, a cramped room with a straw bed and a single narrow window.

I sat at the table, writing what I had learned, when I heard the faintest creak at the window.

I looked up, my hand brushing the hilt of my saber, but what I saw was not a threat. A boy crouched outside the frost streaked glass, his breath fogging it in slow clouds. His coat was

patched and worn, his gloves torn at the fingers. His cheeks were red from the cold, and his wide eyes stared at me with a mix of awe and determination.

I stood and opened the door to the biting air. The boy flinched at first but did not run.

"You are far from home at this hour," I said.

The boy straightened, his thin shoulders stiff. "You... you Lord Blackwood," he said in broken English. "You big hunter... find things. I... want learn."

I studied him, leaning slightly against the doorframe. "And who are you?"

The boy hesitated, then lifted his chin. "Mikhail," he said. "I... want be like you. Go places. See things."

His voice carried no arrogance, only a desperate kind of hope, the kind born from a life where dreams were often crushed.

I stepped aside, opening the door wider. "Come inside before the cold takes you, Mikhail."

He nodded quickly and stepped in, shaking the snow from his torn gloves as he entered. I closed the door against the wind and motioned for him to sit by the small table near the lantern.

Switching to Russian, I asked, "You speak Russian better, I think."

The boy looked up quickly, his face brightening with relief. "Yes. Much better," he said, his voice steadier now. "English... not good. Hard for me."

I poured him a small cup of the bitter tea the villagers had given me, setting it before him. "Why are you here, Mikhail? Why follow me."

He wrapped his thin hands around the cup, letting the steam warm his fingers. "Because you are Lord Blackwood. You find things. You go to dangerous places. I want to learn how. I want to leave this place. There is nothing here for me."

"You are too young for this life," I said firmly, keeping my tone calm but leaving no room for argument. "The things I do are not for children. It is dangerous. Deadly, sometimes. You should go home to your family."

At that, he went quiet, staring into the cup for a long moment.

"You have a home, do you not," I asked, softening my tone slightly.

His hands tightened around the cup, and his voice lowered. "I have a house, yes... but not a home. Not anymore."

I studied him for a long moment but did not press further. The look in his eyes was enough to tell me that whatever answer he might have given would not have been a happy one.

"I am sorry," I said quietly. "But this is still not a place for you. I will not allow a boy to follow me into danger."

He lifted his head, his dark eyes meeting mine, shining with quiet determination. "I am not afraid."

"You should be," I replied evenly. "Fear keeps men alive. Go home, Mikhail. You belong here, not in the things I do."

The boy said nothing more, only nodded once, though the look in his eyes told me he had no intention of giving up so easily.

Later, after he had left, I stood near the window watching the snow fall outside. His small figure disappeared into the dark, but I could not shake the feeling that I would see him again before this was over.

The morning broke with a weak grey light that barely touched the snow. I left the village quietly, preferring to avoid drawing attention. The path north toward the hunting lodge wound through a thinning stretch of trees, half buried beneath the night's snowfall. My breath lingered in the cold air as I moved, each step sinking deep into the frost packed earth.

The forest loomed ahead, its branches heavy with ice. There was no sound except the groan of wood shifting under the weight of snow. I carried only what was necessary, a small pack with rations, my saber at my side, and my rolling block pistol resting beneath my coat.

I had been walking for nearly an hour when I stopped. The silence felt heavier than before. I knelt and studied the snow, brushing aside a layer of frost with my glove. Another set of footprints trailed behind mine. They were small, light, and placed unevenly, as though whoever made them was doing their best to move quickly.

I straightened, my eyes narrowing at the tree line.

"Mikhail," I said aloud, my voice carrying across the stillness.

There was no answer.

I turned toward the nearest stand of pines, scanning the shadows between their trunks. "Come out, Mikhail. It is too cold for hiding."

For a moment there was nothing. Then a small figure stepped hesitantly from behind a tree, snow clinging to his coat. His eyes were wide, but he did not look afraid.

"I told you to go home," I said, switching to Russian.

"I could not," he replied quickly, his Russian much clearer than his English. "I want to help. I know this forest. I am not useless."

I exhaled slowly, studying him. His boots were soaked, his gloves thin, and his cheeks bright with cold. He had been following me for some time.

"This is no place for a child," I said firmly. "Turn back before it becomes worse."

He shook his head, his thin shoulders stiff. "I cannot go back."

Something in the way he said it made me pause. His voice carried no defiance, only quiet finality.

"You have a home," I said.

His eyes lowered. For a long moment he said nothing, then his voice came soft, almost too quiet to hear. "No. Not anymore."

The weight in his tone stopped me from pressing further. The silence of the forest seemed to grow heavier around us.

Finally, I crouched slightly so that we were at eye level. "If you follow me, you listen to everything I say. If I tell you to run, you run. If I tell you to hide, you do not move until I return. Do you understand?"

He nodded quickly, his dark eyes brightening with a faint light of hope. "I understand."

I rose to my feet, glancing toward the northern trail. "Then keep close, Mikhail. And keep quiet. There are others in these woods who are not as patient as I am."

The boy followed a step behind me as we began to move through the forest. His steps were careful, his small frame almost vanishing among the trees.

As we walked, he spoke again, his voice low. "You think they are here too, the bad men."

I glanced at him. "What do you know of them?"

He hesitated, his breath misting in the cold air. "They come sometimes at night. People say they take what they want. No one stops them. They... they took..." His words faltered and he shook his head quickly, falling silent.

I said nothing, only placed a hand briefly on his shoulder before we continued on.

The path ahead grew darker as the trees thickened, and for the first time I wondered what kind of danger this boy had already seen long before I arrived.

The trees thickened as we moved deeper into the forest, their frozen branches bending low under the weight of snow. The air felt heavier, as if the silence itself were waiting for something to break it. Mikhail kept close behind me, his small boots sinking into the prints I left in the snow, his breath soft and measured.

We reached the old hunting lodge just before nightfall. It stood crooked among the trees, its roof sagging beneath a thick layer of frost, its walls warped by years of neglect. The windows were clouded with ice, and the front door hung half open, creaking softly whenever the wind stirred.

Mikhail stepped beside me, staring at it with wide eyes. "It is cursed," he said quietly in Russian. "People say spirits live there. They take men who stay too long."

"Spirits or not," I said, studying the building carefully, "we need to see what is inside."

The boy hesitated. "If the bad men are near, they will not like you being here."

"Which bad men," I asked, glancing at him.

Mikhail's face tightened. His voice was soft, almost a whisper. "The ones who took my mother and father."

I crouched slightly so I could look at him directly. "Mikhail," I said gently, "who were they?"

He hesitated, his small hands tightening into fists. "They come from the forest at night. They wear strange clothes, red and black. They cut people. Say it is for their god. They took my parents. No one helped. Everyone was too afraid."

The words settled in the cold air like ash.

I placed a hand on his shoulder, steadying him. "I am sorry."

The boy looked down at the snow, his breath misting. "I do not cry anymore. But I hate them."

His voice held no childish tone, only quiet resolve.

"Then we will be careful," I said. "If they are here, they will not take anyone else tonight."

We moved toward the lodge, our boots crunching softly in the snow. I pushed the door open slowly, its old wood groaning under my hand. The inside smelled of rot and damp wood. The walls were lined with broken antlers and cracked hunting trophies, the remains of meals long abandoned scattered across the floor.

In the center of the lodge was a table, and on it sat the idol.

It was carved from black stone, smooth and cold, its surface covered in faint markings that twisted when I tried to follow them with my eyes. It hummed softly, almost too quiet to hear, but the sound pressed against my skull like a dull ache.

Mikhail stayed close to me, staring at it with wide eyes. "That is it," he whispered. "That is what they want."

I stepped closer to the table, examining the idol without touching it. "It is older than this village," I said quietly. "Perhaps older than the forest itself."

A sound outside made us both freeze. Snow crunched softly beyond the walls, slow deliberate steps.

I raised a hand to Mikhail, signaling him to stay still. His eyes widened, but he nodded silently.

The door creaked.

Voices murmured outside in a language I recognized immediately, harsh and guttural, the kind used in old Sarkic rites.

Mikhail's breath caught, his small hands trembling. He looked up at me, whispering almost soundlessly. "It is them."

I drew my saber slowly, the sound of the steel sliding from its scabbard soft against the heavy silence. I looked at Mikhail. "Stay behind me, and do not move unless I tell you to."

The door opened wider, and three men stepped inside, their faces half covered with strips of cloth stained dark. Their coats were patched with strips of what looked disturbingly like skin, and faint crimson markings were painted across their exposed hands. Each carried a curved blade carved with crude symbols.

One of them looked directly at the idol, his voice low with reverence. "The gift of Ion," he said to the others in that same guttural tongue. "It will be ours tonight."

Their eyes turned to me.

The three cultists stared at me with cold, unblinking eyes. Their faces were painted with streaks of dried blood, their breaths rising in soft clouds of steam as they stepped further into the lodge. The humming of the idol grew louder as they approached, as if it responded to their presence.

One of them tilted his head, his voice low and harsh in Russian. "You should not be here, stranger. This place does not belong to you."

I kept my stance steady, my saber angled low but ready. Switching to their own guttural tongue, I answered evenly, "And it does not belong to you either."

The words stopped them for a moment. Their eyes widened slightly. The tallest of the three narrowed his gaze, his expression hardening. "You speak the words of flesh," he said slowly. "How does a man of the old world know them?"

I did not answer.

The cultist's lips curled into a grin, though there was tension in his voice now. "Perhaps you are not just a hunter. Perhaps you have listened to the truth and denied it. Ion will have you either way."

The others circled slowly, their curved blades glinting in the dim light. Mikhail pressed himself against the wall, his hands gripping the wood tightly, his breath quick and shallow.

"Stay where you are, Mikhail," I said firmly, keeping my eyes on the cultists.

The first cultist lunged. His blade came low, quick, aiming for my ribs, but I stepped aside and parried, the clash of steel sharp in the heavy silence. He hissed and struck again, but I twisted my wrist and drove the edge of my saber into his arm. Blood splattered the wooden floor as he stumbled back with a snarl.

The second moved in immediately, swinging wide. I turned my body, letting the strike glance off the flat of my blade, then stepped in close, driving the hilt into his jaw. He crashed against the table, knocking the idol slightly. The humming rose in pitch, vibrating against my chest.

The third rushed me, faster than the others, his curved blade cutting across my coat. I felt the sting as it grazed my side, but I pushed through the pain and drove my saber upward, tearing across his forearm.

They regrouped quickly, their faces no longer calm.

The tallest cultist spat a curse in their tongue. "You should not know these words. The old world has no right to them."

Still in their tongue, I replied, "I know enough to understand what you are. And enough to know you are cowards hiding behind gods you do not understand."

For the first time, there was anger in his eyes. "You will not leave this place alive."

Behind me, I heard Mikhail whisper something. His voice was soft at first, almost like a prayer.

The tallest cultist lunged again. I met his strike head on, turning his blade aside, but one of the others darted past me, rushing toward Mikhail.

"Mikhail, run!" I shouted, swinging to intercept, but I was too far.

The boy did not move.

His small hands were raised, trembling, his eyes wide and fixed on the rushing cultist. His lips moved quickly now, speaking words that were not Russian. They were sharp and strange, carrying a weight that filled the air.

The cultist froze mid-step, his body locking as though gripped by unseen hands. His blade slipped from his fingers, clattering against the floor. His limbs convulsed, his skin shifting as if something beneath it twisted unnaturally, and with a choked gasp, he collapsed.

The idol hummed louder, almost a cry, as if answering what Mikhail had done.

The remaining two cultists stared in shock.

The one closest to me whispered, his voice unsteady, "The boy... he speaks the old words without learning."

The other's face twisted into fear, his composure breaking. "He is marked. Ion has touched him."

I did not give them time to recover. My saber flashed once, clean and final, dropping one of them. The last bolted through the door and vanished into the forest, his footsteps fading quickly into the snow.

The lodge fell silent except for the hum of the idol.

I turned to Mikhail. His hands were still slightly raised, his breath ragged, his eyes locked on the fallen cultist.

"Mikhail," I said gently, stepping closer, "what did you do."

The boy shook his head quickly, his voice trembling. "... I do not know. It just happened. I only wanted him to stop."

I crouched beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You saved us both. You were brave."

He lowered his hands slowly, his voice soft. "I do not feel brave."

"Bravery rarely feels like anything," I said. "It only feels like surviving."

The idol continued to hum, deeper now, almost as if it were listening.

I looked at it for a long moment, then glanced back at Mikhail. "We need to leave. More of them will come, and they will not stop until this is over."

The boy nodded quickly, stepping close to me, his small figure tense but determined. "Then we stop them."

I looked at him, seeing no trace of fear in his dark eyes now, only resolve.

"Yes," I said quietly. "We stop them."

The snow had begun to fall heavier by the time we left the lodge, the soft flakes carried by a slow, whispering wind. The forest around us felt alive, as though every branch and shadow waited for something to move. Mikhail stayed close at my side, his small steps quick to match mine. He no longer looked frightened, only focused, though every now and then his eyes darted nervously to the trees.

We carried the idol wrapped in a thick cloth I had found in the lodge, binding it tightly before placing it into my pack. Even hidden, the strange hum vibrated against my back, low and constant, as though it resented being taken.

"They will follow," Mikhail said quietly in Russian, his breath misting in the cold. "They always follow."

"They will try," I replied, my eyes scanning the tree line. "But if we keep moving, we may reach the village before nightfall."

Mikhail glanced at the pack on my back, his small brow furrowed. "You should destroy it. Throw it in fire."

"It is not that simple," I said. "The Queen requested this. It may be dangerous, but it is knowledge. And knowledge can save lives if used wisely."

The boy looked away at that, though he said nothing. His hands tightened slightly at his sides, as if he wanted to argue but could not find the words.

We moved in silence for another hour before the forest gave its first warning. The caw of a crow echoed sharply across the trees, too loud, too sudden, followed by the crunch of boots in the snow.

I stopped, placing a hand on Mikhail's shoulder.

They came from the trees on both sides, stepping out of the shadows with quiet, practiced movements. Six of them this time, all wearing the same crude markings across their coats, their curved blades glinting in the pale light. Their leader was taller than the rest, his face painted completely black except for a single red streak down his forehead.

His eyes fixed on me first, then shifted to Mikhail.

"You survived," he said in their tongue, his voice low and amused. "And the boy speaks with the gift. That is rare. The flesh has chosen him."

I answered him in the same guttural tongue, my voice steady. "The flesh has chosen nothing. He is a boy, nothing more."

The leader tilted his head slightly, his lips curling in a grin. "You know the words well. But you do not understand them. He belongs to Ion, whether he wishes it or not. Give him to us, and you may leave with your life."

Mikhail stepped closer to me, his small hands clenched tightly. "I am not going with them," he said quietly in Russian, his voice shaking but resolute.

I kept my eyes on the leader. "You will have to take him from me," I said in their tongue.

The leader's grin widened, showing broken teeth. "Then we will."

The first of them charged, blade raised, and I moved to meet him. My saber flashed, parrying his strike before driving through his chest in one clean motion. He fell without a sound, his blood dark against the snow.

The others closed in quickly. I fired my rolling block pistol once, the crack loud in the still forest, and another fell, clutching his throat. I opened the breach to reload, but they were too fast.

"Mikhail, stay behind me!" I shouted, swinging my saber to block another strike.

The boy did not listen.

His small hands rose again, his lips moving in that strange language, the same unnatural cadence as before. The air grew heavy, thick, as if the trees themselves held their breath.

One of the cultists lunged for him, but his body locked mid-step, his limbs twisting sharply as though pulled by invisible strings. Another stumbled, his eyes widening as his own blade turned in his hand, cutting into his arm before he collapsed.

The leader snarled, rushing forward, his blade coming low. I moved to intercept, meeting his strikes in a flurry of steel. He was stronger than the others, faster, his blows heavy and precise, but his focus was split between me and the boy.

I pressed the advantage, blocking one strike and driving my blade into his side. He staggered, his breath hissing, but even as he fell, his eyes stayed on Mikhail.

"He will never escape us," the leader hissed in his tongue, blood filling his mouth. "The flesh remembers. He belongs to us."

Then he collapsed, his body stilling in the snow.

The forest grew quiet again. The last of the cultists fled into the trees, their footsteps vanishing quickly into the distance.

I lowered my saber slowly, breathing heavily. Mikhail stood still, his hands trembling, his wide eyes staring at the fallen men.

I stepped to him, placing a hand gently on his shoulder. "It is over," I said softly.

His eyes lifted to mine, filled with quiet fear. "They will come again."

"Perhaps," I said. "But you will not be here when they do."

The boy blinked, confused. "What do you mean?"

I crouched so we were eye level. "You are coming with me, Mikhail. You cannot stay here. There is nothing for you in this place, and you are far more than they could ever understand."

His eyes widened, his lips parting slightly as if to speak, but no words came.

I tightened my grip gently on his shoulder. "If you want, I will teach you. You will learn to protect yourself. You will learn to survive, and perhaps even to live beyond surviving. But you will never have to face this alone again."

For the first time since I had met him, the boy gave a true smile, small but real. "... will go with you."

I nodded once, standing. "Then let us return to the village. England will be cold, but not like this."

Mikhail looked back at the fallen cultists one last time, his expression unreadable, then followed close behind me as we began the long walk back through the forest.

The train from Vladivostok to London was long and quiet, the hum of the wheels against the rails a constant companion. Mikhail sat beside me, staring out the window, his breath fogging the

glass as snow drifted past outside. He had hardly spoken since we left Siberia, and when he did, it was in quiet, careful words, almost as if he feared saying too much.

I tried to read him as I always did with those who had been through tragedy, but there was something different about this boy. He had saved my life with powers he did not understand, and now he seemed to carry a silence that was heavier than before.

When we finally reached London, the mist hung low over the streets, curling around the carriage wheels as we made our way to Buckingham. Mikhail sat stiffly, his eyes darting to every passing stone building, every horse drawn cab, watching as though he were not sure what was real.

The Queen awaited us in her study, her presence as commanding as ever despite the wear of years. She looked from me to Mikhail as we entered, her sharp gaze lingering on him longer than I expected.

"Lord Blackwood," she said calmly. "You have returned."

"Yes, Your Majesty," I replied. "The artifact you requested is secured and will be transferred to your care. However, I must ask something of you in return."

The Queen set her pen aside, her hands folding neatly. "You rarely ask for anything."

I glanced to Mikhail, who stood beside me, silent, his posture straight despite the tension in his small hands. "The boy is gifted. His abilities manifested when the Sarkic cult attacked us. He saved my life. If left untrained, he will become dangerous to himself and others. I request permission to take him to Three Portlands so that he may study properly and learn to control what he has."

The Queen's gaze sharpened. "The Order will not approve of this. A child with such abilities under direct training will raise questions."

"I know," I said. "But this boy is not a weapon. He is a child who deserves the chance to be more than what those cultists wanted for him."

For a long moment, the Queen said nothing, her eyes never leaving Mikhail. Finally, she leaned back slightly, her expression softening by the smallest fraction. "Very well. Take him. But you will do something for me in return. Another matter that requires only your particular talents. Complete it, and the boy remains under your care."

I inclined my head. "Then you have my word, Your Majesty."

"Good," she said simply. "See to it you do not disappoint me."

We departed shortly after, returning to my London estate. The heavy mist clung to the windows as we entered, the fire in the hall crackling softly. Deeds was waiting, as always, his posture straight and precise.

"Welcome home, sir," he said smoothly, though his sharp eyes shifted immediately to Mikhail, studying him carefully. "And this young gentleman is?"

I placed a hand on Mikhail's shoulder, guiding him forward slightly. "This is Mikhail. He will be staying with us. He will be my pupil."

Deeds gave a small nod, his expression unreadable but polite. "Very good, sir. I will have a room prepared for him immediately."

Mikhail glanced between us, his lips parting slightly, unsure how to respond. He finally gave a small nod of thanks, his voice quiet. "Thank you."

As Deeds led him toward the stairs, I caught the boy's eyes for a moment.

They were not the same.

In the light of the hall, I saw it clearly for the first time. His dark brown eyes were no longer wholly brown. A faint ring of violet shimmered near the edge of his irises, catching the firelight strangely.

I watched him disappear up the stairs, my thoughts still lingering on that detail. Had they always been that color? Or had something changed when he spoke those words in the lodge?

I stood for a long while in the quiet hall, the faint hum of the fire the only sound, before finally turning toward my study.

The boy's life had changed forever. And I wondered if, in some small way, so had mine.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood

Viscount, Naturalist, and Caretaker

The Golden Cave

The mountains in this part of the world held a silence different from the Siberian forests or the Amazonian jungles. It was an older quiet, the kind that settled into stone and never left. The Queen had requested this cave be charted, though she gave no hint of why. There had been no talk of relics or danger, only its sheer size and the lack of any proper maps.

For that reason, I decided to bring Mikhail.

The boy had been restless in London, his curiosity far outweighing his years. Two months had passed since Siberia, and though he had adjusted to life at my estate with surprising discipline, there was a constant edge to him. His mind absorbed everything, his eyes always sharp, his questions endless.

When I told him of this trip, he had only nodded, though I noticed the way his hands tightened slightly at his sides. He still carried that quiet weight, but here was something safer, something I believed would teach him patience and focus without risk.

"This will be different from Siberia," I said to him as we prepared our supplies that morning. "We are not hunting relics or fighting cults. We are mapping. This is quiet work, steady work. There is no danger here."

Mikhail adjusted the satchel across his shoulder, his violet-ringed eyes meeting mine with quiet determination. "I will do what you say. I want to learn."

The entrance to the cave was half hidden by pine and layered stone, a great mouth of darkness from which cold air drifted steadily. We stood at its threshold for a time, the lantern light in my hand flickering as if reluctant to cross.

The first steps inside were narrow and rough, the ground littered with broken stone and scattered pools of water that reflected our lights in fractured ripples. The air smelled of wet stone, heavy and ancient, and the silence was so complete that each drip of water from the ceiling echoed like a falling coin.

Mikhail followed close, his smaller lantern casting long shadows against the walls. He stopped once, crouching to run his fingers along a faint line of scratches. "These are not from animals," he said in Russian, his voice steady. "Too straight. People made these."

I knelt beside him, studying the marks. "Old travelers, perhaps," I said. "Or miners. This cave has been known to someone long before us."

We pressed further, marking our path with chalk, noting each bend and chamber as we descended deeper. Mikhail wrote every detail I spoke with care, his handwriting steady despite the rough terrain.

The cave widened and narrowed again in strange patterns, the walls at times smooth as river stone and at other times jagged like broken glass. Stalactites hung above us in rows, dripping in slow, rhythmic beats that echoed through the passages.

For hours we walked, the cold growing sharper as we descended. At times I would stop to explain the formation of certain rock patterns, and Mikhail would listen intently, his eyes bright with curiosity.

But then the walls changed.

The rough stone gave way to something smoother, something that glimmered faintly under the lantern light. Thin streaks of crystal lined the walls, catching the light and scattering it in pale gold reflections. Mikhail reached out, his gloved fingers brushing one of the crystal veins.

"It glows," he whispered.

"Not on its own," I said, though I frowned, for even without the lantern the crystal seemed to hold a soft glow deep within, as if something inside it remembered sunlight.

The path widened into a tunnel large enough for three men to walk abreast, and the air grew warmer, almost gently so, as if something alive breathed deep within the stone.

Mikhail glanced at me, his expression unreadable. "You feel it too."

"Yes," I said.

We continued down the tunnel, our footsteps quiet against the soft layer of fine dust that coated the stone. The deeper we went, the more the crystal veins grew, twisting along the walls like roots.

And then the passage opened.

Before us stretched a vast chamber, the largest I had ever seen underground. The ceiling rose so high that our lantern light could not reach it, vanishing into a haze of darkness. Massive stalagmites surrounded the chamber in great spiraling offshoots, each of them glowing faintly with golden light. The air shimmered with it, warm and heavy, and the silence felt sacred, as though we had stepped into a place where even sound was not permitted without respect.

At the center of the chamber was a single figure.

A man knelt in the middle of the open space, his hand carefully brushing at the base of a small white flower that grew alone in the stone. He wore armor of black and white with golden accents that caught the glow of the crystals, his posture straight and steady as if his every movement was deliberate.

His head tilted slightly when he heard us approach, but he did not rise. His eyes turned to us, and in the faint light they glowed softly, golden and bright, reminding me instantly of Lexington.

Mikhail stopped beside me, his breath caught in his chest.

The man looked directly at him then, his voice calm and clear, speaking in perfect Russian. "You are young to be here. But it seems this place remembers even you."

Mikhail swallowed, his voice small. "Who are you?"

The man returned his gaze to the white flower, his fingers brushing its delicate petals. "No one important," he said. "Only someone who tends to what is left behind."

His eyes lifted to me for the first time, their glow steady, piercing, yet not unkind. "This is a burial site. The memories of those who lived should never be forgotten."

The silence hung heavy after his words, the glowing crystals shimmering faintly as if they too listened.

For a long moment, I said nothing, letting the quiet of the chamber linger. There was a weight to this place, something that demanded stillness and respect. The man remained kneeling by the white flower, his hand moving gently over the stone as if cleaning dust from a sacred monument. The golden crystals that lined the walls glimmered faintly, their light softening the shadows.

Mikhail shifted beside me, his voice low and hesitant. "Burial... of who," he asked in Russian.

The man glanced at him briefly, his glowing eyes calm, patient. "People," he said simply. "Once they lived, loved, fought, and then they were gone. But memory remains if you let it."

"Why here," I asked, stepping forward slightly, my voice steady but quiet. "This place is far from any settlement."

The man looked back to the flower. "Because they chose it. The living have always built monuments to their dead. Some raise stone. Some raise songs. And some, like these, gave themselves to the earth, letting the stone hold their memory. This place remembers them because they wanted it to."

I studied him carefully, his posture perfectly composed, the golden glow of his eyes unwavering. There was no weapon near him, no sign of tools or food, as though he had been here for days or perhaps longer without need for either.

Mikhail took a step closer to him, his voice quiet but curious. "Do you stay here always."

The man's lips curved slightly, though not quite into a smile. "I come when I must. Someone should. Too many have forgotten what came before."

There was something in his tone, a heaviness, as if he carried more than just words.

I crouched slightly, examining the glowing crystals that surrounded the chamber. Their light was warm, almost alive, pulsing faintly as though in rhythm with the air itself. "These crystals," I said, "they are not natural formations, are they."

The man looked at them briefly. "Natural? Perhaps once. Now they are memory. What you see are echoes. The stone remembers when it is asked to."

Mikhail crouched beside one, his small fingers hovering near its surface but not quite touching. "It feels warm," he whispered.

The man looked at him again, his voice softer now. "You hear it, do you not. The stone speaks if you listen. It tells you what it has seen."

Mikhail frowned slightly, his head tilting as if he were indeed listening to something beyond what I could hear. "I... think I do," he said quietly. "It feels... sad."

The man nodded once. "Then you understand more than most."

I watched the boy carefully, noting how his violet-ringed eyes seemed almost to shimmer in the golden light. "Mikhail," I said gently, "do not touch anything."

He nodded, stepping back toward me, though his gaze lingered on the crystals.

The man rose then, his movement smooth and unhurried. Standing, he was tall and broad-shouldered, the black and white armor catching the light as if it had been polished recently despite the dustless air. His golden eyes locked with mine again, and for a brief moment I felt the same strange sensation I had felt when standing before Lexington, a quiet weight that was neither hostile nor friendly, only ancient and certain.

"You have come far for something that cannot be taken," he said.

"I came only to chart this cave," I replied evenly. "I had not expected to find... this."

He inclined his head slightly, the faintest gesture of approval. "Then chart it, if you must. But remember this place is not yours, nor the Queen's, nor anyone's. It belongs to those who came before, and to those who remember them."

I held his gaze for a moment, then nodded once. "I understand."

The man looked to Mikhail again, speaking in Russian, his tone soft but carrying a strange gravity. "Take care, little one. You carry more than you know. The world will ask much of you, and it will not always be kind."

Mikhail hesitated, his small voice quiet. "Will I... come back here?"

The man crouched slightly so they were eye level, his golden eyes bright in the shimmering light. "Perhaps one day. But not yet. Your path leads elsewhere."

Mikhail nodded slowly, as though he understood more than I did.

The man rose again, turning back to the flower. He knelt once more, tending to it with the same gentle care as before, as though we had ceased to exist.

I placed a hand on Mikhail's shoulder, guiding him back toward the tunnel. "Come. We should leave him to his work."

The boy glanced back at the man one last time, his expression unreadable, then followed me silently as we made our way back through the golden-lit chamber and into the narrowing tunnels beyond.

For a long time neither of us spoke, the only sound the crunch of our boots against the stone and the fading hum of the crystals behind us.

The tunnels felt different as we retraced our steps. The walls no longer seemed merely stone. The faint streaks of crystal that lined them now felt purposeful, like veins carrying quiet memories through the mountain. Mikhail walked close to me, his lantern swinging softly, his violet-ringed eyes reflecting the faint gold glow that lingered even in the narrower passages.

For a long time neither of us spoke. The silence was heavy, but it was not uncomfortable. It was as though the cave itself demanded quiet, as though words would disturb something that had been undisturbed for too long.

It was Mikhail who finally broke it, his voice soft in Russian. "Who was he."

I glanced at him, though I kept my steps even. "I do not know."

The boy frowned slightly. "He knew this place. He spoke as if he... cared for it."

"He did," I said. "Some men devote themselves to memory, to tending what others forget. Perhaps he is one of them."

Mikhail looked down at the chalk marks we had left on the way in, following them with careful steps. "He did not feel like a man."

I stopped briefly, turning to look at him. His face was thoughtful, his brow furrowed. "What do you mean."

The boy hesitated, his words slow as if he were choosing them carefully. "When he looked at me, it was like... he saw everything. Not just me, but everything I was. Everything I would be. It felt... warm, but heavy. Like he knew something I did not."

I watched him for a long moment, then began walking again. "You have a good instinct, Mikhail. Never ignore it."

He nodded slightly but said nothing more.

The air grew colder as we moved closer to the surface. The golden veins of crystal faded from the walls, replaced by the rough grey stone we had seen before. The soft hum we had felt deep in the chamber was gone now, replaced by the quiet drip of water and the whisper of distant wind through the upper tunnels.

As we neared the entrance, Mikhail spoke again, his tone quiet but certain. "He was not lying."

"About what," I asked.

"About remembering," the boy said. "I could feel it. The crystals... they were like voices. Sad ones. They wanted someone to know they were still there. That they lived once."

I glanced at him, his face illuminated faintly by the lantern light. His eyes seemed brighter than before, the violet ring catching the glow. "You heard them."

"Not words," he said quickly, shaking his head. "Just feelings. Like whispers you cannot make out, but you still know what they mean."

I did not answer. There was little I could say to that, though the idea lingered in my mind long after we stepped back into the pale light of the afternoon.

Outside, the air was crisp and cold, the snow untouched around the mouth of the cave. Mikhail stood for a long moment at the entrance, looking back into the darkness.

"Do you think we will see him again," he asked finally.

I adjusted the strap of my pack, glancing back once more into the shadows. "Perhaps," I said. "But if not, that may be for the best."

The boy frowned slightly, but he did not argue. Instead, he followed as we made our way back toward the forest, our steps quiet against the snow.

And yet, even as we walked away, I could not shake the image of the man in his black and white armor, kneeling by that single white flower beneath the golden crystals.

Whoever he was, he had not been lying. Some memories are not meant to be forgotten.

The journey back to London was quiet, the train's steady rhythm carrying us through forests and towns that passed like fading memories through the windows. Mikhail sat opposite me, his

notebook in his lap, carefully sketching the structure of the cave. His handwriting was neat, his diagrams precise, a testament to how seriously he took the task.

"You worked well," I said, breaking the silence. "For a first charting expedition, you showed patience. That is more important than many realize."

Mikhail looked up briefly, his expression calm but thoughtful. "It was not just a cave," he said.

"No," I replied, leaning back slightly. "It was not."

The boy hesitated, his fingers still against the page. "Do you think he was right. About remembering."

I looked out the window at the passing trees. "I think he was. The dead are not gone if someone still speaks for them, even if that someone is only stone."

Mikhail's violet-ringed eyes lowered back to his notes, though his voice was softer when he spoke again. "He looked at me like he knew who I was. Like he had seen me before."

I studied him for a long moment. "Perhaps he saw something in you. Or perhaps he sees everyone that way."

The boy's brow furrowed slightly, but he did not press further.

We arrived at my estate in the evening, the lamps already lit in the windows. Deeds was waiting in the main hall when we entered, his usual composed expression softening slightly at the sight of us.

"Welcome back, sir," he said, taking my coat as I stepped inside. His gaze shifted to Mikhail, who stood quietly beside me. "And how was the young master's first expedition."

I glanced at Mikhail, who stood straighter at the question. "He did well," I said. "Better than I expected. He listened, learned, and saw things most would overlook."

Mikhail gave a small nod, his voice quiet. "It was not just seeing," he said. "It was... feeling. The stones were not quiet. They were sad."

Deeds raised a brow slightly at that but said nothing, simply inclining his head. "A perceptive observation, young sir. Dinner will be ready shortly."

As Mikhail followed him toward the dining room, I remained in the hall for a moment, removing my gloves slowly.

I thought of the man in black and white armor, his golden eyes glowing softly in the light of the crystals, his hand gently brushing the single white flower.

He had said it was a burial site, that the memories of those who lived should never be forgotten. And though I had not asked his name, I knew there was far more to him than he allowed me to see.

I wondered if we would meet again, though a part of me hoped we would not.

As I finally stepped toward the dining room, I heard Mikhail speaking to Deeds in quiet Russian, his tone soft but certain. "I want to learn more," he said. "I want to understand places like that. The man said the world remembers. I want to remember too."

I allowed myself a faint smile at that. The boy was already on the right path.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood

Viscount, Naturalist, and Rememberer of Life

The Hunt For the Bhala

The morning air was cool and still, mist curling low over the estate grounds as we prepared to depart. The carriage waited at the gate, the horses shifting restlessly as Deeds stood at the doorway, his gloved hands clasped behind his back. His expression was as composed as always, though I caught the faintest shadow of concern in his eyes as he looked at Mikhail standing beside me.

"You have everything you need," Deeds said, his tone calm but weighted.

"As much as we can bring," I replied. "The Queen has requested this beast be killed. This is the price for Mikhail's entry into Three Portlands, and I intend to meet her request."

Deeds nodded once but kept his gaze on Mikhail. "You will listen to him," he said, switching to Russian for the boy's sake. "And you will come back."

Mikhail adjusted the strap of his satchel and nodded quickly. "I will," he said, his voice quiet but steady.

Deeds's eyes softened slightly before returning to me. "And if I may offer one thing, sir... greatness is not only measured by what you bring back. It is also measured by what you leave behind."

I inclined my head slightly at that, though the boy seemed to take it more seriously than I had expected. He glanced at Deeds thoughtfully, as if turning the words over in his mind, before I placed a hand gently on his shoulder.

"Time to go, Mikhail," I said.

The boy gave Deeds one last quick nod, and we boarded the carriage. As we passed through the gates, I looked back once to see Deeds still standing there, his sharp figure outlined against the mist, watching until we were gone.

The journey south was long. We traveled by carriage to the coast, then by ship, and then across long stretches of dry savanna and tangled jungle until we reached the edge of the village. Mikhail sat close to me for most of the trip, his violet-ringed eyes bright with curiosity, his questions coming more often the closer we came to our destination.

"What kind of beast is it," he asked in Russian as we rode through a stretch of dense forest.

"Reports vary," I said, keeping my gaze on the trail. "The villagers call it Bhala. Some say it is a lion, others say it is something far larger, a great cat with ivory-colored fur that glows in moonlight. There are stories that it drags oxen into the jungle without leaving a sound. Whether it is only a predator or something stranger, we will see soon enough."

The boy frowned slightly. "And you will kill it."

"If it can be driven off, I will not kill it," I said. "But if it threatens lives, we do what we must. That is what we are here for."

He nodded at that, his gaze dropping briefly to the weapon across my lap. I had brought my Sharps rifle, the long barrel polished and oiled, its stock worn smooth from years of use. Mikhail studied it curiously, though he had seen me clean it many times at the estate.

"It is like your pistol," he said quietly.

"In a way," I said. "The rounds I use in this are the same. Reality is not as rigid as most believe, Mikhail. A weapon is not just steel and powder if you know how to shape what passes through it. But it is not something to rely on too much. Knowledge and patience are better weapons than any rifle."

The boy nodded again, though his curiosity remained.

We arrived at the village at dusk. The settlement sat in a wide clearing surrounded by dense jungle, the huts made from woven reeds and clay, smoke rising gently from cooking fires. Children paused in their play to stare at us, and the adults watched with a quiet, hopeful caution.

The elder met us at the center of the village. He was an older man with deep lines in his face and sharp, tired eyes. He greeted us with a firm nod as I switched to his language, which I had learned long ago.

"You have come for the Bhala," he said, his voice low.

"Yes," I said. "We will do what we can to end this."

His gaze moved to Mikhail, his brow furrowing slightly. "The boy is young."

"He is learning," I said calmly. "He will stay close and follow my instructions."

The elder said nothing more, only nodded and gestured for one of the younger men to lead us to the hut prepared for us.

As we followed, Mikhail looked around, his expression thoughtful. "They are afraid," he said quietly in Russian.

"Yes," I said. "A village that has lost too much always is."

He hesitated before asking, "How many has it taken?"

"Enough that they sent for help from a world away," I replied, keeping my tone even.

That night, after we ate the food offered to us, we sat outside our hut near the fire. The sounds of the jungle filled the air, strange birds calling from the trees, and the firelight flickered across Mikhail's young face.

I placed my Sharps rifle across my lap and looked at him carefully. "You will carry my pistol tomorrow," I said. "Only use it if you must. It will work the same way it always has, but the first lesson of any hunter is restraint."

Mikhail blinked, his expression caught between pride and seriousness. "I will not waste it."

"I know," I said. "You are quick to learn."

He looked at the fire, his brow furrowed slightly. "You said before that a great adventurer is not just someone who finds things. What did you mean?"

I watched the flames for a long moment before answering. "A great adventurer and a great naturalist are not measured only by what they discover or kill. They are measured by what they leave behind. Helping those who need it is more important than any discovery. Humanity matters most, Mikhail. Never forget that."

The boy looked up at me then, his violet-ringed eyes reflecting the firelight, and he nodded slowly, his voice quiet but certain. "I will remember."

I nodded back, satisfied, before looking out toward the dark line of the jungle where the Bhala waited.

Tomorrow, the hunt would begin.

The sun rose pale and heavy over the jungle, its light bleeding through the mist that hung low over the village. The air carried the faint scent of wet leaves and distant flowers, but beneath it lingered something else, an unease that weighed on every villager who moved through the clearing that morning. Their eyes followed us as we prepared for the hunt, some hopeful, others resigned, as though they doubted even now that anything could stop the Bhala.

I checked the mechanism of my Sharps rifle, the polished barrel catching the early light. Mikhail stood nearby, holding my rolling block pistol carefully in both hands. His expression was serious, his small fingers steady despite the weight of the weapon.

"Keep it holstered unless you must use it," I said to him in Russian.

"I know," he answered quietly, his eyes never leaving the tree line.

The elder approached, his steps slow but purposeful. His sharp eyes lingered on the rifle before turning to me. "The Bhala came again two nights past," he said in his language. "It took one of the cattle and left no sound. Only prints in the earth remained."

I nodded. "We will begin there."

The elder hesitated, his gaze shifting briefly to Mikhail. "This is no hunt for a boy."

"He learns quickly," I replied evenly. "And he will stay close to me."

The elder gave a short nod, then gestured for one of the hunters to guide us. A tall man with a scar along his jaw stepped forward, carrying a long spear with a steel tip that glinted faintly in the sun. He introduced himself as Kande, his voice low and even, his expression calm but marked by the weight of someone who had lived too long on the edge of fear.

We left the village soon after, the narrow path leading us into the dense jungle. The air grew thicker as we moved, the sound of the village fading until only the quiet hum of insects and the rustle of distant leaves remained. The scent of the forest was rich and damp, full of wet earth and growing things, but beneath it lingered the faint tang of something animal, sharp and wrong.

Kande led us to a clearing where the ground dipped into soft mud. Large prints pressed deep into the soil, wider than my palm and longer than any natural cat I had ever tracked. The marks were fresh, the edges still sharp.

Mikhail crouched beside one, studying it with careful eyes. "It is huge," he said in Russian, glancing up at me. "Bigger than a lion."

"Yes," I said quietly, kneeling beside him. "And look here." I pointed to the edges of the print where faint grooves cut through the mud. "Claws. Long and curved. The weight is distributed strangely as well. It moves differently than most cats. Perhaps it does not stalk the way they do."

Kande crouched nearby, his spear resting across his knees. "The Bhala does not run like other beasts," he said in his language. "It moves quickly but without sound. Some say it can climb the trees and drop from them."

Mikhail's eyes widened slightly at that, though he kept his voice steady. "It is hunting clever."

"Very clever," I said. "It chooses when to be seen and when not to be."

We followed the tracks for hours, weaving through tangled roots and low-hanging vines. The jungle seemed to grow quieter the further we went, the usual calls of birds and insects fading until only our footsteps disturbed the stillness.

At one point, we came upon the remains of a large antelope dragged partially into the undergrowth. The carcass was torn open with precise strength, the flesh stripped clean in places, the bones splintered as though crushed by something far heavier than any cat's bite.

Mikhail stared at it for a long moment, his violet-ringed eyes reflecting the dim light under the canopy. "It kills fast," he said softly.

"And eats faster," I replied. "The way the ribs are broken... it was not just feeding. It was breaking them apart to get at the marrow. That means it needs more than meat. It needs what is inside the bone."

Kande's grip tightened slightly on his spear. "The Bhala kills not just for food. Sometimes it leaves the bodies. As if it enjoys it."

We moved on, the tracks leading deeper into the jungle where the air grew heavier and the canopy blocked most of the light. Mikhail stayed close, his small hands never straying far from the holstered pistol. Every so often, he would glance to me, his expression thoughtful rather than afraid.

At last, we reached a ridge overlooking a shallow stream where the tracks circled before vanishing into the dense brush beyond. I crouched low, studying the ground. There were more prints here, some overlapping, some twisting strangely as though the creature had turned sharply in place.

"It was here recently," I said. "Perhaps still is."

Mikhail knelt beside me, his voice barely a whisper. "Do you think it knows we are following."

I glanced at the tangled brush ahead, the silence of the jungle pressing down like a weight. "Yes," I said finally. "I think it has known for some time."

The jungle pressed in around us, thick and still, the air heavy enough to make each breath feel measured. The ridge where we crouched overlooked a shallow stream winding through the trees, its surface broken only by drifting leaves. The tracks of the Bhala circled the water, pressing deep into the soft mud, sharp claw marks cutting through the soil.

We waited in silence, Kande crouched a few paces away with his spear ready, his eyes scanning the trees. Mikhail knelt close beside me, his violet-ringed eyes fixed on the brush across the stream. He held the pistol carefully, both hands wrapped around the grip, but his finger stayed clear of the trigger just as I had taught him.

"Patience," I whispered in Russian. "We are here to understand before we act. Watch. Listen."

The boy gave a short nod, his eyes never leaving the clearing.

The jungle grew quieter still, as if every living thing sensed what approached. Then, from the dense wall of green across the stream, a shadow moved.

The Bhala stepped into view.

It was larger than any natural predator I had ever seen, its body long and lean but heavy with corded muscle. Its fur was pale ivory, almost white, catching what little sunlight broke through

the canopy and reflecting it faintly, making it seem to shimmer with its own light. Its shoulders moved with a slow, rolling power, and its claws sank deep into the mud with every step.

But it was its eyes that held me. They were not like a cat's. They were a deep golden amber, too bright, too intelligent, scanning the trees with deliberate care. This was no mindless killer. It was a hunter that chose when to strike.

Mikhail's breath caught softly, his grip tightening on the pistol. "It is... beautiful," he whispered.

"Yes," I murmured, keeping my Sharps rifle steady. "And dangerous. Look how it moves. It does not rush. It knows it is safe here."

The Bhala lowered its head to the stream, drinking slowly. Its ears twitched at every faint sound, its muscles tensing and relaxing with each slow movement.

Kande leaned close, speaking low in his language. "It has killed three this week. If we do not strike, it will kill again."

"Not yet," I said firmly, keeping my eyes on the beast. "We need to understand how it hunts. Rushing in blind would be foolish."

The Bhala lifted its head suddenly, water dripping from its jaws. Its ears swiveled, its golden eyes scanning the ridge where we hid. For a long moment it stared directly toward us, though I knew we had not made a sound.

Mikhail froze, holding his breath, his small frame perfectly still.

The beast sniffed the air, its gaze lingering on our position. Then, slowly, it stepped back into the brush, its movement almost silent despite its size.

When it was gone, the jungle slowly returned to its usual hum, though the weight of its presence lingered.

Mikhail let out the breath he had been holding, his voice quiet. "It knew we were here."

"Yes," I said, lowering my rifle. "And it did not run because it does not fear us."

Kande frowned, his grip tightening on his spear. "Then how do we kill what does not fear?"

"Not with rushing," I said. "This will take patience. It is not just an animal. It thinks."

Mikhail looked at me, his face serious. "So we think more."

I allowed myself a faint smile at that. "Exactly."

We remained there for some time, studying its tracks, noting the patterns of its movement before making our way back toward the village as the sun began to set. The jungle shadows stretched long and deep, and I could not shake the feeling that somewhere in that dense green, the Bhala was watching us still, waiting.

The village grew quiet as night settled, the fires burning low and the soft murmur of voices fading as the people retreated to their huts. The air felt heavy, the kind of stillness that precedes something inevitable. I sat outside our hut, cleaning my Sharps rifle by the light of a lantern while Mikhail watched closely, the pistol resting in his lap.

"We will not find it by chasing it," I said in Russian, my voice low but steady. "The Bhala chooses when to hunt, not us. So we will make it choose here."

Mikhail's eyes followed the slow movement of the cleaning cloth against the rifle's barrel. "We will make a trap."

"A lure," I corrected. "The trap will be the ground we choose. It has patterns, and patterns can be used against it. Predators are clever, but hunger always wins in the end."

The boy nodded, thoughtful. "What will we use?"

"Goats," I said. "The elder will lend us two. We will place them near the stream, where it hunts most often. And we will wait."

Mikhail hesitated, glancing toward the jungle where the dark trees swayed faintly in the night breeze. "It will come."

"It will," I said simply. "The Bhala is a hunter. It will not ignore easy prey."

The boy tightened his grip slightly on the pistol. "And if it is too fast?"

I met his eyes, the firelight reflecting faintly in the violet ring around them. "Then you do exactly as I taught you. You breathe, you wait, and you fire only when you must. Trust your patience. That will save you more than the pistol."

He gave a short nod, his small shoulders straightening.

We moved before dawn, taking Kande and two of the village hunters with us. The goats were tied near the stream where we had seen the Bhala's tracks the day before. The animals shifted nervously, their eyes wide as though they could already sense something approaching.

I placed Mikhail near a thick tree trunk overlooking the clearing, crouching beside him as I scanned the area. "Stay low," I said quietly. "Do not move unless I tell you to. Watch how it approaches."

Mikhail adjusted his hold on the pistol, nodding.

Kande and the other hunters waited a short distance away, their spears ready, their eyes fixed on the brush.

The jungle grew quiet again, that same tense stillness falling over everything. Minutes passed, then an hour, the sun climbing slowly, the light cutting through the canopy in thin, broken beams.

Then the silence shifted.

Leaves rustled lightly from the far side of the clearing, soft enough that it could have been wind, but there was no wind in that heavy air. The goats shifted, bleating nervously, their hooves scraping the dirt.

The Bhala emerged slowly from the brush.

Its ivory fur caught the sunlight, glowing faintly in the green shade, its golden eyes locked immediately on the goats. It moved low and deliberate, its shoulders rippling with quiet power. Every step was measured, its claws sinking into the earth without a sound.

Mikhail's breath hitched softly beside me, but he stayed still, his grip firm.

"Watch," I whispered. "Learn how it moves."

The beast crept closer, circling slightly, testing the air. Its gaze flicked briefly toward the trees, and for a moment it stopped, its ears twitching as it scanned the jungle around it.

It knew.

The Bhala's head lifted slightly, and in an instant, it moved.

The creature lunged, but not at the goats. Its body twisted sharply, leaping instead toward the trees where Kande and the hunters crouched. It moved so quickly that it seemed to blur, crashing through the brush with a snarl that shook the clearing.

"Kande, move!" I shouted, raising the Sharps rifle.

The hunters scattered, spears raised, but the Bhala was already among them, its massive claws slashing through the air. One of the hunters fell with a cry, blood streaking the leaves as the beast turned, teeth bared.

Mikhail stood then, his pistol steady despite the chaos. His violet-ringed eyes narrowed, and for a brief moment, I saw something in him I had not seen before a sharp focus that was far older than his years.

"Wait for it to stop," I said sharply, leveling the rifle. "Do not waste the shot."

The Bhala turned again, lunging toward Kande, who raised his spear desperately. I exhaled, my finger tightening against the trigger.

The rifle cracked.

The round struck the ground just in front of the beast, warping the air with a faint shimmer as reality bent for a fraction of a second. The Bhala recoiled, leaping back with a guttural snarl, its claws tearing into the earth as it twisted away from Kande.

"Mikhail, now!"

The boy fired, the crack of the pistol sharp against the clearing. The round struck the dirt near the beast's hind legs, shimmering briefly before forcing the ground to shift unnaturally beneath it. The Bhala stumbled, its balance breaking for only a heartbeat, but it was enough.

It snarled once, its golden eyes burning as it looked directly at us. Then, with a powerful leap, it bounded back into the jungle, vanishing into the thick brush as quickly as it had come.

The clearing grew silent again except for the heavy breathing of the hunters. Kande lowered his spear slowly, his chest rising and falling with sharp breaths.

Mikhail lowered the pistol, his small hands shaking slightly now that the moment had passed. He looked at me, his voice quiet. "We did not kill it."

"No," I said, lowering the rifle. "But we made it retreat. And now we know how it moves."

The boy swallowed, his eyes lowering briefly to the disturbed dirt where the Bhala had stood. "It looked at us. It knew who stopped it."

"Yes," I said. "And it will not forget."

The jungle around the village felt heavier that night, the air thick with a stillness that even the insects seemed to respect. Fires burned low in the clearing, the villagers huddled close to them, their voices hushed as they whispered prayers to spirits they hoped might protect them. The Bhala had not fled far after the failed ambush. It had stayed close.

I sat near the largest of the fires, my Sharps rifle resting across my lap. Mikhail sat beside me, his small hands carefully cleaning the pistol as I had taught him, his movements precise despite the tension in the air. His violet-ringed eyes stayed fixed on the jungle's edge, his ears alert to every faint rustle.

"It is watching," he said in Russian, his voice low but certain.

"Yes," I said, my gaze sweeping the dark tree line. "And it is learning. We forced it to retreat, and now it will test us before it strikes."

Kande approached quietly, his spear in hand, his expression grim. "The cattle are restless," he said in his own language. "It waits for us to grow tired. It knows we cannot watch forever."

"It will not wait long," I said. "The Bhala will strike when it thinks we are weakest. That will be its mistake."

The villagers kept close to the fires as we prepared. Kande and the other hunters took their positions along the outer edge of the clearing, while Mikhail and I stayed near the center, the better to move quickly if it chose to come through the huts.

Hours passed. The fires burned lower, the night deepening, the shadows stretching long between the huts. The villagers' fear pressed into the air like a living thing.

Then the silence broke.

A sharp cry split the night from the far side of the clearing, followed by the heavy crash of something large moving through the brush. The goats penned near the edge bleated in panic before the sound of wood splintering filled the air.

Kande shouted, his hunters rushing toward the noise, spears raised. I stood immediately, raising my rifle, Mikhail moving to my side with the pistol drawn.

"Stay close," I said sharply. "Do not run unless I tell you to."

The Bhala burst from the darkness in a flash of ivory fur, its golden eyes burning bright in the firelight. It moved with terrifying speed, leaping past the hunters and into the clearing, its massive claws tearing deep into the earth as it landed. Villagers screamed and scattered, the beast's head snapping toward them, its muscles coiling as it prepared to strike.

I raised the rifle and fired. The crack split the air, the round striking just ahead of it, bending the ground as the reality-warping round shimmered. The Bhala twisted mid-step, snarling, but it kept moving, darting toward the nearest hut where two villagers had fallen in panic.

"Mikhail, now!"

The boy's eyes narrowed, his hands steady despite the chaos. He aimed not at the beast, but at the ground just before it, the way I had shown him. The pistol cracked, the air shimmering as the ground beneath the Bhala shifted unnaturally, sending its claws sliding as its weight collapsed forward.

It roared, thrashing, and Kande rushed in with his spear, striking hard at its flank. The spear glanced off its thick hide, but it gave the villagers enough time to scramble to safety.

The Bhala turned sharply, its claws lashing out, and Kande barely rolled aside as it slashed through the dirt where he had stood.

I fired again, the round striking its shoulder. The shimmer of warped space rippled across its fur for an instant before it leapt back, snarling, its golden eyes locking on me and then on Mikhail.

The boy did not flinch. He stood his ground, breathing slowly, just as I had taught him.

The Bhala lowered its head, growling, its muscles tensing as if to leap again. Then, as quickly as it had come, it turned sharply and bounded back into the jungle, vanishing into the darkness with a single powerful leap.

The clearing fell silent again except for the ragged breathing of the villagers. Kande leaned on his spear, his chest rising and falling as he looked at me. "It will come again," he said, his voice steady but grim.

"Yes," I said, lowering the rifle. "But now it knows we are not easy prey."

I turned to Mikhail. The boy still held the pistol steady, his hands trembling only slightly now that the danger had passed. His violet-ringed eyes stayed on the jungle where the beast had vanished.

"You did well," I said, crouching slightly so we were eye level. "You thought before you fired. You aimed where it mattered most. That saved lives tonight."

Mikhail's gaze shifted to me, his voice quiet. "It is still alive."

"For now," I said. "But it will not give us another chance. Next time it will not run."

The boy nodded slowly, his expression serious. "Then next time we end it."

I looked toward the dark tree line, listening to the distant quiet of the jungle. "Yes," I said softly. "Next time we end it."

The night pressed heavy upon the jungle, the air thick with silence that seemed to hold its breath. Fires burned low in the village, the people huddled close, their voices hushed as if even speaking too loudly might draw the Bhala to them. We had prepared for this, but preparation meant little against something that could think as it hunted.

Kande stood at my side near the edge of the clearing, his spear gripped tightly in his calloused hands, his jaw set with grim resolve. Mikhail crouched just behind me, the pistol held close to his chest, his violet-ringed eyes scanning the tree line with the same sharp patience I had seen in him before.

The jungle whispered only once before the attack.

The Bhala burst from the dark brush in a flash of ivory, moving with a speed that defied its massive size. Its golden eyes locked instantly on Kande, who had stepped forward, raising his spear just as the beast lunged.

"Kande, move!" I shouted, but it was too late.

The Bhala struck, its claws swiping with terrifying precision. Kande managed to deflect the first blow with the shaft of his spear, but the second came faster, tearing through the wood and throwing him to the ground.

I did not think. I moved.

The Sharps rifle fell from my hands as I rushed forward, saber drawn in one fluid motion. Instinct, not thought, drove me as I closed the distance between us. The beast loomed over Kande, its claws raised for the killing strike.

I swung, the blade flashing in the dim light, cutting deep into its flank. The Bhala roared, twisting sharply to face me, its massive claws slashing in retaliation. I stepped back just enough, the edge of its strike grazing my coat as I held my ground.

"Mikhail, now!" I barked, keeping the beast's attention on me.

The boy rose from his crouch, his hands steady despite the chaos. He aimed low, just ahead of the beast as it shifted its weight to strike again. The pistol cracked, the air shimmering as the reality-warping round distorted the ground beneath the Bhala's front paws.

The beast stumbled, its claws sinking awkwardly into the warped earth. I took the opening, stepping forward despite the weight of its fury, driving the saber upward into its chest with all the strength I could muster.

The Bhala roared, thrashing, but I pressed the blade deeper, twisting as its massive body tried to shake me off. Its claws swiped past my shoulder, catching the edge of my coat, tearing fabric and skin alike, but I did not let go.

"Mikhail, again!" I called.

The boy fired a second time, striking near the beast's hind legs, warping the ground again and sending its balance faltering. The Bhala collapsed to one knee, its golden eyes flashing with rage as I wrenched the saber free and swung again, this time across its neck.

The blade bit deep, cutting through muscle and sinew. The roar that followed was short and guttural, ending in a heavy, final breath. The beast swayed once before collapsing to the ground, its massive body shaking the earth as it fell still.

The jungle fell silent except for the heavy breathing of those who stood around us.

I stepped back slowly, my saber dripping dark blood, my chest rising and falling with sharp breaths. Kande pulled himself to his feet, his spear broken, his face marked with both shock and gratitude.

"You saved me," he said quietly, his voice low and certain.

I shook my head, wiping the blade clean on the grass. "Any mortal man would do the same for his fellow. Nothing more."

Kande looked at me for a long moment before speaking again. "No generation of this village will forget what you have done. The spirits of our ancestors watched tonight. They have seen the warrior that lives in your heart."

I sheathed the saber, my voice calm and even. "I am no warrior. I am only a naturalist and an adventurer. The beast was a danger, and I did what had to be done."

Mikhail approached quietly, his pistol still in hand, his young face serious but steady. I looked at him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You did well, Mikhail. Your shots saved Kande, and they gave me the chance to end it. Remember this. A great hunter is not one who kills alone, but one who protects others."

The boy nodded slowly, his voice quiet but firm. "I will remember."

I gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze before looking back at the fallen Bhala, its ivory coat now stained dark against the soil.

"It is finished," I said.

Kande stood straighter, his gaze turning toward the village. "It is finished, and they will sing of you, Lord Blackwood. No child born here will forget your name."

I only shook my head at that, turning toward the path back. "Let them remember the lives saved, not the man who held the blade. That is what matters."

Mikhail followed close behind me, his violet-ringed eyes lingering on the beast one last time before he, too, turned back toward the village.

The morning after the hunt, the village stood quiet. Smoke rose gently from the cooking fires, and the usual voices of the children were hushed. The Bhala's body lay near the edge of the jungle where we had placed it, its ivory coat still striking even in death. Villagers gathered

around it, some watching with reverence, others with a quiet awe, as if they feared it might rise again.

I stood apart from them, my saber sheathed, my hands resting on the hilt as I looked at the fallen beast. Its golden eyes were closed now, and the great body that had once moved with such terrifying power lay still, no longer a terror, only a memory. Mikhail came to stand beside me, his voice soft in Russian.

"You are sad," he said quietly.

"Yes," I answered, my eyes still on the beast. "It hunted because that was what it was born to do. It was not evil, only a creature of instinct. Every life it took was survival to it, but that does not make those lives less worthy of being remembered."

I bowed my head slightly and closed my eyes for a moment. "For the beast," I said softly. "And for those it claimed. May neither be forgotten."

Mikhail lowered his head as well, holding the pistol close to his chest as if in respect. We stood there in silence for a time, letting the moment belong to the dead.

When I finally stepped back, Kande approached, his spear in hand. His expression was no longer grim but thoughtful, his voice quieter than I had heard it before. "You are different from other hunters," he said in his language. "They kill and leave, but you... you hold silence for what you take. The ancestors will see this."

I gave him a small nod. "A naturalist learns to respect what he studies, even when he must end its life. The Bhala lived as it was meant to. It deserves that much."

Kande glanced at the beast before looking back at me. "The village wishes you to take its pelt. It is tradition for the one who slays a great danger to carry a part of it away, not as a trophy, but as a reminder that life was given so others could live."

I hesitated for a moment before inclining my head. "Then I will accept, for that reason alone."

The hunters began their work, removing the pelt with great care as if afraid to dishonor the beast even in death.

I turned then toward the village, where the people were beginning to move with more life than they had in days. But even with the danger gone, I did not leave immediately.

The Queen's request had been fulfilled, yet Deeds's words echoed in my mind. Greatness is measured by what you leave behind. The village had survived the beast, but it still struggled. The nearest clean water was too far, a daily burden for those who lived here. So I stayed.

With Kande's help and the strongest of the villagers, we worked for three days digging near the center of the settlement. The ground was stubborn, the soil heavy, but with patience and careful knowledge of the land, we found what we sought.

The first rush of clean water bubbled up into the hollowed space on the morning of the fourth day. The villagers cheered, children ran to dip their hands into it, and for the first time since we arrived, I heard laughter in the clearing.

Mikhail stood beside me, watching them with quiet wonder. His hands were stained with dirt, his hair dusted with earth, but his smile was small and genuine.

"This is what I meant, Mikhail," I said in Russian, resting a hand on his shoulder. "A great adventurer and naturalist is not measured by what he takes or what he kills. It is measured by what he leaves behind. Saving lives, giving back... that matters more than any hunt."

The boy looked up at me, his violet-ringed eyes shining in the sunlight. "I understand now. Humanity matters most."

I nodded. "Yes. Remember that always."

Kande approached, his spear no longer in his hands, his expression lighter than I had seen it. "You came to kill a beast, but you gave us far more. You have left this village better than you found it. We will honor it as we honor you, Lord Blackwood.."

I gave him a faint smile. "If they do, let them remember the well, not me. The water will keep them alive long after I am gone."

Kande smiled back, though his eyes told me he did not believe my words.

As the sun dipped low, I looked once more toward the jungle, bowing my head slightly for the Bhala and those it had taken. Then I turned back to the village, where Mikhail stood waiting, the boy already learning what mattered most.

The journey back to England was quieter than the one that had taken us to Africa. The villagers had gathered to see us off, lining the edge of the clearing as we loaded the carriage

that would take us to the coast. The newly dug well stood full in the sunlight, and the laughter of children echoed faintly as they filled their jars with water.

Kande approached before we left, carrying the folded pelt of the Bhala wrapped carefully in woven cloth. He held it out with both hands, his expression solemn.

"Take this with you, Lord Blackwood," he said. "Not as a trophy, but as a memory of what was done here. It will remind you of the lives it once took, and the lives you saved."

I accepted it with a slight nod, tucking it into the carriage. "Thank you. I will keep it as such."

Mikhail stood beside me, watching the villagers wave as we left. His expression was thoughtful, almost distant, as if still turning over everything he had learned.

We spoke little during the long days of travel back across the savanna and onto the ship bound for London. The sea air was sharp, the endless horizon stretching out as the ship cut through the waves. Mikhail sat beside me on the deck one evening, the sun setting in streaks of orange and gold.

"You are quiet," I said in Russian, resting my hands on the rail.

"I am thinking," he said softly. "About what you said. That being a great adventurer is not about killing, but about leaving things better. I want to do that too."

I looked at him, the faint wind tugging at his hair. "You already have. Those shots you fired saved Kande's life. And you worked beside me to dig that well. You are learning faster than I expected."

The boy gave a small smile, though he still looked out at the water. "Do you think the spirits really watched us, like Kande said."

"Perhaps," I said, watching the sun sink into the horizon. "But even if they did, it does not change why we do these things. We do them because it is right, not because someone is watching."

Mikhail nodded slowly, his small hands gripping the railing. "Then I will keep doing them, even if no one remembers me."

I looked at him for a long moment before placing a hand on his shoulder. "That, Mikhail, is what will make you a better man than most."

We arrived at my estate several weeks later. The carriage pulled up to the front steps, the sky over London grey and familiar. Deeds stood waiting at the door, as precise and composed as always, though his eyes lingered on the both of us as we stepped out.

"Welcome home, sir," Deeds said evenly, taking my coat as I stepped inside. His sharp eyes moved to Mikhail, who carried the wrapped pelt carefully in his arms. "And how was Africa."

"Productive," I said simply, removing my gloves. "The Queen will have her request fulfilled. The Bhala will trouble no one again."

Deeds's gaze shifted to the pelt, his brow lifting slightly. "The villagers gave you that, sir."

"Yes," I replied. "A gift of remembrance, not pride."

Deeds nodded slightly, his expression softening by a fraction as he turned to Mikhail. "And you, young master, did you learn what you hoped to."

Mikhail straightened, his voice quiet but certain. "Yes. A great adventurer is not great because of what he kills. It is because of what he leaves behind."

Deeds's mouth curved into the faintest smile, a rare expression for him. "Then it seems Africa has taught you more than most schools could."

Mikhail glanced at me, his small smile matching Deeds's for just a moment before he turned back toward the hall.

As Deeds led him to his room, I remained in the main hall for a moment, the faint hum of the fireplace filling the quiet. My eyes lingered briefly on the folded pelt resting near the door before I turned away.

The villagers would remember the well, and that was enough.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood

Viscount, Naturalist, and Hunter Of The Bhala

The Welcoming Home

The morning was cool and bright as our carriage passed through the quiet streets of London toward Buckingham. The mist clung low to the ground, and though the sun had begun to climb, it did little to chase away the early chill. Mikhail sat beside me, his posture straight and his violet-ringed eyes calm but thoughtful, his hands folded neatly in his lap. He had grown much since Siberia, and yet, sitting there, he still looked very young.

Deeds had insisted the carriage be immaculate for the visit, though he himself remained behind at the estate, his final words to Mikhail measured but kind: *"The Queen is not to be impressed by bold words, young master. Listen before you speak. She already knows you, and she will know if you have learned from your time away."*

The boy had nodded at that, and now, as we stepped through the great doors of the palace, I felt no hesitation in his movements. The attendants led us through the halls, their boots echoing against polished stone, until we reached the Queen's private study.

The doors opened, and she sat waiting as she always did, her posture sharp and deliberate, the weight of the Crown in her every motion. She looked first at me, then at the boy. Her gaze softened only slightly when it landed on him.

"Mikhail," she said, her tone even but with a trace of approval. "You have returned."

The boy stepped forward, bowing slightly in that careful way he had practiced. "Yes, Your Majesty," he said in clear, if still accented, English.

Her sharp eyes studied him. "You have grown. Lord Blackwood tells me you played no small part in bringing down the Bhala. Tell me, was that his doing, or yours."

Mikhail hesitated only briefly before answering. "Both, Your Majesty. I did what he taught me."

The Queen's lips curved ever so slightly. "A careful answer. You learn quickly." She turned her gaze to me. "And the matter of the beast is settled."

"It is, Your Majesty," I said, bowing my head slightly. "The village will no longer suffer from its presence. And there is a new well in their square. It will outlast any memory of me."

Her eyes narrowed slightly at that, though there was the faintest trace of approval in her expression. "A naturalist's mind to the end. I expected no less." She paused, her gaze shifting again to the boy. "The boy. You wish him trained properly?"

"I do," I said. "His power is growing. Without guidance, it will be wasted or worse. Deer College can give him what I cannot."

The Queen was silent for a moment, her fingers steepled together. Her sharp gaze moved once more to Mikhail, who stood still under her scrutiny.

"You have always chosen your fights carefully, Lord Blackwood," she said at last. "You know what the Order thinks of sending our own to Three Portlands. But you have earned much trust, and I have seen the boy before. I believed he might grow into something valuable. It seems you are proving me right."

She looked back to Mikhail. "Do not waste this chance, child. The Crown does not often grant such favors."

"I will not," Mikhail said, his voice certain.

The Queen gave a short nod, her expression unreadable. "Then you will have access. You leave tonight. But understand, Blackwood, that this gift carries weight. I will call upon you again, and when I do, I expect the same results you have always given me."

"You have my word, Your Majesty," I said.

"Good," she said, returning her attention to the papers on her desk. "You may go. The gates will open for you at dusk. Do not be late."

By evening, the mist had thickened over the countryside where the Crown's crossing to Three Portlands shimmered to life. The runic circle glowed faintly in the gathering dark, the air humming with the low thrum of thaumaturgic energy. The pelt of the Bhala rested folded in a travel case beside me, its weight more symbolic than practical.

Mikhail sat close as we waited, his eyes wide but quiet, his mind already turning toward what lay ahead.

"You will see things tonight you have never imagined," I said in Russian, my tone calm. "Elven folk, orks, creatures you thought were only stories. Magic runs through the city like blood through

veins. But remember, no matter what they look like, they are people, just as we are. Treat them with respect."

"I will remember," Mikhail said.

The runes flared brighter, golden and violet light spilling across the ground. The gate opened with a rush of air that smelled faintly of copper and strange flowers, and the city beyond unfolded before us.

Three Portlands was alive.

Tall buildings of brass and stone lined the streets, pipes running along their walls, hissing steam that curled into the evening air. Lanterns flickered with thaumaturgical light, their glow soft and golden, illuminating the crowd below. Elven men in fine coats walked alongside orks carrying heavy crates bound with glowing sigils. Bird-headed people spoke quickly to robed witches, and a group of young thaumaturges levitated books through the air as they laughed together. Strange runes burned faintly on the cobblestones, guiding mechanical carriages that hissed as they rolled past.

Mikhail stared openly, his violet-ringed eyes wide with wonder. "It is... like a story," he whispered.

"In some ways, it is," I said, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder as we stepped through. "But remember, even here, rules and dangers remain."

The crowd parted around us as we moved down the main street, the boy keeping close as his head turned constantly to take in everything. A group of young students in long cloaks passed by, their hoods trimmed with silver thread, and Mikhail watched them with a quiet yearning in his eyes.

"There from Deer College," I said, following his gaze. "And by tomorrow, if the fates are kind, you will walk those halls yourself."

The boy looked at me then, his expression hopeful. "Truly."

"Truly," I said, allowing myself the faintest smile.

We pressed deeper into the city, the lights of Three Portlands glowing like stars in the gathering night, the hum of magic all around us.

The morning air of Three Portlands carried the hum of life, the steam-filled streets already alive with activity. Brass pipes hissed softly along the walls of tall brick buildings, runes carved into stonework glowing faintly in the mist. Mechanical carriages rolled along rune-marked roads, their pistons churning with thaumaturgical energy. Elven merchants called out prices for glowing powders, orks hauled crates strapped with magical seals, and children with birdlike heads darted between the crowd laughing as they chased floating sparks of light.

Mikhail kept close to me as we moved through the city, his violet-ringed eyes wide as he tried to take in everything. His head turned constantly, following the path of a witch who levitated a dozen books through the air, the flash of a warlock's glowing staff as he demonstrated some spell to a gathering crowd, and the soft hiss of a brass contraption unfolding into a mechanical bird that fluttered to a rooftop.

"It feels alive," he said in Russian, his voice hushed with wonder.

"It is," I replied, my tone calm. "Three Portlands breathes. But remember, not everything that shines here is safe."

The streets narrowed as we moved uphill toward a towering structure that stood apart from everything else. The buildings of Three Portlands were all brass, pipes, and gears, but here rose a great stone castle, its towers stretching high into the sky. It looked ancient compared to the rest of the city, its walls carved with intricate sigils and glowing runes. The spires gleamed in the early sun, and small lights floated around the towers like slow-moving fireflies.

"That," I said, following his gaze upward, "is Deer College."

The boy stared, his mouth slightly parted. "It looks like... a castle from the stories," he whispered.

"In many ways, it is," I said. "But it is also a place where power is forged. Remember that."

As we reached the gates, two robed figures stepped forward. One wore silver and blue, the threads at the hem of his cloak glowing faintly. The other's robe was dark green, marked with a subtle serpent coiled along the sleeve. His sharp eyes studied me for a moment longer than the other's, and there was something in his expression familiarity, though unspoken. I knew enough of that symbol to understand what it meant. The Serpent's Hand had its roots deep in this place, it was theirs after all perhaps even more so than the library itself.

The taller of the two stepped forward first. "You are expected, Lord Blackwood," he said, his voice smooth but measured. "The boy is to be appraised."

Mikhail straightened at the words, his hands folding before him. His calmness earned a brief nod of approval from the green-robed teacher, whose sharp gaze lingered on him for a moment longer than expected.

"Follow," the taller teacher said.

The gates opened with a low hum, the runes along the arch flaring to life as we stepped through. Inside, the College was even more remarkable. The halls were lined with tall windows of stained glass that shifted and moved as if alive, showing scenes of battles, old kings, and creatures I could not name. Floating lights drifted lazily near the ceiling, and great banners hung between towering stone pillars, each embroidered with glowing runes. Students hurried through the corridors, their long cloaks brushing against carved stone as books floated beside them or followed obediently on mechanical legs.

The green-robed teacher moved silently beside us, his sharp eyes watching Mikhail more than me. At one point, he spoke quietly, his voice lower than the other's. "The boy has potential. I can feel it already. Not many his age carry a natural weight of power."

I glanced at him briefly, but he said no more, turning his gaze forward again.

We stopped before a large set of doors engraved with runes. The taller teacher looked to me. "Only the boy is permitted beyond this point. You may wait here. The appraisal will take some time."

Mikhail looked at me, his violet-ringed eyes both excited and uncertain.

"Go," I said quietly, resting a hand on his shoulder. "Do as they ask, answer as I taught you. This is your first step."

The boy nodded firmly, following the teachers through the doors.

I remained in the entry hall, taking a seat on one of the carved stone benches. Students moved past, some glancing at me curiously, others ignoring me entirely. A group of young thaumaturges practiced levitating a brass sphere in the corner, their laughter echoing faintly under the high ceiling.

Time passed slowly, the sounds of the College filling the silence until at last the doors opened again. Mikhail returned with the green-robed teacher at his side, his face calm but his eyes alight with restrained excitement.

"The boy's appraisal is complete," the taller teacher said. "His potential is considerable. He will remain for further evaluation tonight, and tomorrow morning we will give you our final decision regarding full-term study."

The green-robed teacher inclined his head slightly, his gaze sharp. "You have brought us someone rare, Lord Blackwood. He could grow to be great, given the right guidance."

Mikhail looked at me, as if hoping for approval, but the taller teacher's next words were firm.

"You may not remain," he said. "Only those attuned to thaumaturgy are permitted beyond these halls. Return tomorrow. Until then, he will stay here."

I gave a short nod. "I understand."

Mikhail hesitated, his mouth opening slightly, but I placed a steady hand on his shoulder. "This is why we came, Mikhail. You are safe here. Learn all you can."

The boy's gaze softened, and he nodded. "I will."

The green-robed teacher's sharp eyes lingered on me a moment longer, then he led Mikhail back through the runed archway. I watched until they disappeared into the hall before turning away.

The weight of the city returned as I stepped back through the College gates, the sound of steam and magic filling the streets. I adjusted the case carrying the Bhala's pelt at my side. There was still work to do before I returned tomorrow. The boy deserved more than words to send him on this path. He deserved something worthy of what he would become.

And I knew just where to begin.

The city seemed louder now that I walked it alone. Steam hissed from brass pipes that curled along the buildings, mechanical birds fluttered across rooftops, and the runed streetlamps flickered in the misty air. Thaumaturgical machinery thrummed faintly beneath the cobblestones, almost like the pulse of a living thing.

I carried the Bhala's pelt in its travel case, weaving through the bustling streets. Elven men bargained for glowing herbs, an ork blacksmith hammered runed plating that shimmered with heat, and two witches in layered silk cloaks floated cauldrons behind them as they laughed. Three Portlands felt alive, every breath of the city steeped in magic and motion.

The shop I sought was nestled between two tall spires, its brass sign engraved with curling script that read *Harrow and Thorn, Thaumaturgical Appraisals*. The windows glimmered faintly with protective wards that pulsed in quiet rhythm.

Inside, the air smelled of polished wood, parchment, and old magic. Shelves lined the walls, stacked with humming crystals, relics wrapped in runed cloth, and jars of herbs that shifted as though alive. Behind the counter stood a thin man with silver spectacles, his long coat traced with faded sigils of authenticity.

"Lord Blackwood," he greeted with a slight bow of his head. "You have a habit of bringing me only the rarest of finds."

"I hope this will continue that tradition," I said, placing the folded pelt on the counter.

The man unfolded it carefully, his sharp eyes widening. "Bhala," he murmured. "So it was you who hunted this. You never cease to amaze me."

"Yes," I said simply.

He brushed his fingers along the fur, whispering a soft incantation as his hand glowed faintly green. The air shimmered for a heartbeat, then settled.

"It is extraordinary," he said, his voice low with admiration. "The creature absorbed natural thaumaturgical energy throughout its life. The fur resists harm, and the hide would accept enchantments easily. Woven correctly, it could become something far greater than a garment. A robe, perhaps, one that binds to its wearer's essence, growing as they grow and adapting to their form. It would be a guardian as much as clothing."

I looked at the pelt for a long moment. "Can you make it?"

The man adjusted his spectacles, studying me carefully. "I can. But for whom is it meant. You are not one to commission such a thing for yourself."

"For the boy I brought here," I said. "He begins his path tomorrow. I would see him begin it properly."

The man raised a brow, his surprise clear. "That is unlike you, Lord Blackwood. You have always been the man who walks alone, chasing creatures and mysteries across the world. Never one to stay still long enough to care for a child."

I held his gaze, my tone calm. "Perhaps it is time that changed. The boy deserves this."

The man watched me for a long moment before giving a small smile. "Then you are a better man than most. It will be ready by morning. I will work through the night."

"Thank you," I said simply, turning to leave.

The streets outside were as busy as ever, yet I felt a strange lightness in my chest. The boy would have something that would keep him safe long after I could not.

I had taken only a few steps from the shop when a voice caught my attention, one that pulled me back to a memory that still lingered quietly at the edges of my mind.

"Too expensive. That is robbery for a single pendant."

I turned toward the sound.

There she stood.

Bella.

She was at a small open-air stall, her white hair catching the glow of the runed streetlamps like moonlight. She wore black from head to toe, as she always had, the fine fabric of her coat lined with silver-threaded trim that caught the light with each movement. Even here, surrounded by the oddities of Three Portlands, she stood apart, her presence commanding without effort.

I stepped toward her, almost without thought.

"Still arguing prices, I see," I said.

She turned, and for a moment her expression softened, the fire in her eyes replaced by something warmer. "Lord Blackwood," she said, her voice smooth and familiar. "I should have known you would appear in a place like this."

"Perhaps," I said, my gaze steady on her. "But you seem far more at home here than I could ever be."

Bella laughed softly, tilting her head slightly as she brushed a strand of white hair back.

"Perhaps. But that does not mean I will let them charge me a king's ransom for a simple pendant."

I looked at the piece sitting on the merchant's counter, a small silver pendant etched with faint runes. Without a word, I placed several coins on the table, enough to settle the price in full.

Bella blinked, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "You did not have to do that."

"Consider it a gift," I said simply. "But I will ask something in return."

Her brow arched slightly, a teasing spark in her eyes. "And what would that be?"

"Spend the day with me," I said. "And the evening, if you are able."

For a heartbeat she studied me, then her smile softened, warm and genuine. "Very well, Lord Blackwood. You have bought more than a pendant today. Let us see if you can make the day worthwhile."

I allowed myself the faintest smile. "I shall try."

The streets of Three Portlands were shifting into the warmth of afternoon, the light filtered through mist and steam, casting a golden hue over the brass pipes and cobbled roads. Bella walked beside me, her black coat trailing slightly behind her, the silver threading catching the light with every subtle movement. Even here, surrounded by creatures and thaumaturgists and impossible wonders, she moved as though she belonged more than any of them.

We wandered without hurry, letting the flow of the city guide us. Mechanical carriages hissed past, their runes glowing faintly under their frames, while an ork barkeep at a street corner shouted over the chatter of customers lined up for glowing mugs of spiced brew. A flock of small brass-and-feathered birds whirled past overhead, darting between the floating runed lanterns that hummed lazily above the streets.

Bella's gaze moved with quiet interest, though I noticed how little surprised her. She had been here many times before; her expression lacked the wonder most first-timers carried.

"You know this city well," I said as we stepped past a market lined with stalls of enchanted trinkets.

Her lips curved slightly, a smile that held both amusement and something softer. "I have walked its streets more times than I can count. Three Portlands has its dangers, but it has its beauty too. It is one of the few places where the world feels free to be strange."

"And yet you still argued over the price of a pendant," I said.

Bella gave a small laugh, her white hair catching the sunlight. "A woman may live among wonders and still hate being cheated. Besides," she added, glancing at me, "you were there to pay for it, were you not."

I allowed a faint smile. "Perhaps."

We paused near a large square where thaumaturgical fountains spouted arcs of glowing water into the air, the streams bending and twisting into shapes of animals before collapsing into the pool below. A group of elven children chased the glowing shapes, laughing as the illusions shifted to their touch.

Bella watched them for a moment, her expression softening slightly. "Do you ever wonder what it would be like to have grown up in a place like this?"

"I would not have been the man I am if I had," I said. "My childhood was a cold and dreary house surrounded by woods. This city would have felt like a dream to me then."

Bella tilted her head slightly, studying me. "You speak of it like a man who still carries that cold with him."

I looked at the fountain for a moment, the shifting illusions reflected in the water. "Perhaps I do. But I have seen enough of the world to know that cold places shape strong men."

"And yet you are here," she said softly. "With a boy who calls you teacher, carrying the pelt of a beast you hunted not for glory but for his future. That is not the mark of a man shaped only by cold."

I glanced at her, but her gaze was already turned back toward the fountain.

We walked on, turning into one of the older streets where the brass gave way to stone, and the air smelled faintly of spices and parchment. Small shops lined the path, their windows full of strange items living vines that curled into glowing knots, stones that whispered faintly when touched, and glass jars that shimmered as if filled with captured sunlight.

Bella slowed at one shop, looking through the window at a row of intricately carved masks. "Do you remember," she said suddenly, "the gala."

I stopped for a moment, her words pulling me back instantly. "Yes," I said, my tone quiet. "I remember."

Her fingers brushed lightly against the windowpane as she spoke. "You stood before the Ambassador that night as if you had no fear. Most men would have begged for their lives."

"I did fear him," I said. "Any man would. But I did not have the luxury of showing it."

She turned to face me then, her eyes catching the faint glow of a runed streetlamp. "You are the only man I have met who calls standing against a creature like that nothing more than necessity. You always downplay what you do, Theodore."

I let the faintest smile tug at my mouth. "I am only a naturalist and an adventurer, Bella. Nothing more."

Her smile softened. "You keep telling yourself that, but one day you may believe otherwise."

We continued walking, weaving deeper into the quieter parts of the city. Bella moved with the ease of someone who knew every hidden corner, occasionally pointing out small details I would have missed: a brass gear embedded in the street that glowed faintly at every seventh step, an alley where the walls shimmered with runes carved so long ago they had nearly faded.

She spoke of her travels in small pieces, mentioning places I had only heard of in stories. She had walked the frozen streets of Yerenport, where entire houses were carved from living ice, and sailed the red seas near Korvala, where storms roared with voices that were not the wind.

"You have been everywhere," I said quietly.

"Not everywhere," she said, glancing at me. "There are still places I have not gone. But I have seen enough to know why you travel the way you do. The world is too large to stay in one place."

We stopped near a small café built from dark stone, its windows glowing warmly against the street. Bella looked at it for a moment, then smiled faintly. "Shall we stop for tea. It has been some time since I last sat in a place like this with someone worth speaking to."

I inclined my head. "Lead the way."

The café was warm compared to the cool mist outside, the scent of spiced tea and baked bread filling the air. The walls were lined with shelves of old books, their titles written in languages both familiar and strange, and runed lanterns floated lazily above each table, glowing with a soft

amber light. The hum of quiet conversation surrounded us, most of it in tongues I did not recognize, yet it all blended into a calm background murmur.

Bella chose a table near the window, its polished wood catching the faint shimmer of light from the street outside. She sat with her back straight, her black coat draped across the chair beside her. Even here, with all the oddities of Three Portlands, she drew glances from those around us. Her white hair framed her face as she looked toward the street, one hand resting lightly on the porcelain cup that a young elven server placed before her.

I sat opposite her, wrapping my hands around my own cup, the faint scent of cinnamon rising with the steam. For a long moment we said nothing, content to watch the busy street beyond the glass.

"You know why I came here," I said at last, my voice low but certain.

Bella turned her head slightly, her eyes meeting mine. "Do I."

"You have always known things you should not," I said. "You were at the gala in Alagadda. You stood at the court of the Hanged King and never once faltered. Now you are here, in a city that thrives on magic, at the same time I bring a boy to Deer College. That is no coincidence."

Her lips curved faintly, but it was not quite a smile. "Perhaps I simply enjoy good tea."

"You are evading the question," I said.

"Perhaps," she said again, her tone smooth and light, as if this amused her. She lifted the cup to her lips, taking a slow sip before continuing. "But must every meeting be weighed with suspicion, Theodore. Can we not share tea without turning it into a puzzle."

I watched her for a long moment, then allowed myself a quiet sigh. "Very well. But I will ask you again another time."

"I am sure you will," she said, her voice softer now.

The silence that followed was not uncomfortable. Bella looked out the window again, watching a group of thaumaturges adjust the glowing runes of a streetlamp as a pair of orks hauled brass crates across the road.

"You still move as if the world rests on your shoulders," she said finally. "Even here, in a city where you should be able to relax."

"I have seen too much to ever truly relax," I said. "And the boy deserves my focus. He will need it."

Bella's gaze lingered on me for a moment, something unreadable in her expression. "You care for him deeply. That surprises me."

"Why," I asked.

"Because you have always been a man who walks alone," she said simply. "A man chasing answers, hunting things most would not dare to name. You were not meant to carry someone else with you."

I looked down at the tea for a moment, the steam curling upward. "Perhaps I was not meant to. But he reminds me that there is still something worth protecting. The world is full of things that destroy, Bella. Someone has to teach him to build."

For a moment she said nothing, only watched me, her white hair catching the glow of the lantern above our table.

"You have changed since I first met you," she said softly.

"I do not feel changed," I replied. "I am still the same naturalist and adventurer. Nothing more."

Bella gave a faint laugh, quiet but warm. "You keep saying that, but you are wrong. Men who are nothing more than that do not care about leaving wells behind in distant villages or gifts that will grow with the boy who calls them teacher. Whether you admit it or not, Theodore, you are more than you claim to be."

I said nothing to that, only sipped my tea as I looked out the window.

For a time, we spoke of simpler things. Bella told me of a journey she had taken across the frozen wastes of Yerenport, where the air itself seemed to whisper warnings to travelers, and I spoke of the Mekhanite ruins in the Gobi, though I downplayed what I had faced there. She asked me about how I survived a Klavigaar, and I dismissed my part in it as little more than circumstance, though she smiled knowingly as if she could see through the modesty.

"You always speak as though you had no choice," she said.

"Because it is the truth," I answered. "A man does what he must when he is able. Nothing more."

"Perhaps," Bella said, leaning back slightly. "But I have seen men who could act and chose not to. That is what makes you different."

The sun outside began to dip lower, the golden light turning softer, stretching long shadows across the cobbled streets. Bella finished the last of her tea, setting the cup down with quiet grace.

"Shall we keep walking," she asked. "I would rather not end the day just yet."

I inclined my head. "Very well. I shall follow your lead.."

She smiled faintly at that, and together we rose, stepping back out into the misty streets of Three Portlands as the city shifted into evening.

The mist clung thick to the brass streets of Three Portlands, and the runed lanterns glowed softly, their light catching on the rising steam. Bella walked at my side, her black coat trailing behind her like liquid night, the silver trim catching occasional sparks of reflected glow. Her white hair shone faintly in the dim light, and her golden-yellow eyes watched me with quiet amusement.

"You know," she said at last, her tone calm but teasing, "that coat of yours has served you for too long."

"It has served me well," I replied, adjusting the collar slightly. "It is proper for a man of my position and has seen me through more than most coats ever could."

"I like it," Bella admitted, her golden eyes softening slightly. "It suits you when you are in the wild, hunting things that belong in whispered stories. But here, among these streets, you should look as though you belong. There are times for the coat of an adventurer, Theodore, and times for something else entirely."

I glanced at her, raising a brow. "And you mean to decide what that something else should be."

"Yes," she said simply, her lips curving with the faintest smile. "And you will let me."

I allowed a quiet sigh, though it was impossible to keep the corner of my mouth from lifting slightly. "Very well. Lead the way."

The shop she brought me to sat in a quieter corner of the city, its tall windows glowing with soft amber light. Runes carved into the stone frame shimmered faintly, and the air inside

carried the clean scent of pressed cloth and the faint spice of some enchanted polish. Racks of fine coats and tailored vests lined the walls, most of them in deep greens, rich browns, and muted blacks, their fabrics catching the light in a way that spoke of craftsmanship rather than extravagance.

The shopkeeper, a tall elven man with silver-threaded hair, greeted Bella with a small nod of familiarity, though his eyes lingered on me with quiet curiosity.

Bella moved through the racks with purpose, her fingers gliding over fabrics as if she already knew what she wanted. I stood quietly, letting her circle me like a hawk studying its prey, her golden eyes measuring my shoulders and height with silent calculation.

"You are tall, broad-shouldered, and yet you wear a hunter's coat as though you wish to vanish into the background," she said finally, her tone more thoughtful than teasing now. "That suits you when you are chasing creatures through the wilds, but not here. You should look like the man who commands respect simply by standing still."

"I have never cared for commanding respect," I said.

"You should," Bella replied simply. "Because whether you want it or not, you have it."

She pulled a coat from the rack, running her fingers along the dark forest green fabric trimmed with subtle black embroidery at the collar and cuffs. "This will suit you. The green will bring out your eyes, and the fit will remind everyone that you are not just a man with a rifle in the wilderness. Try it."

The shopkeeper adjusted the coat for me, his careful hands moving with practiced precision. When I slipped it on, the fabric felt strange at first, far lighter and finer than the sturdy coat I wore on my expeditions, but it fit perfectly. The mirror across the shop reflected a man who looked as though he belonged among statesmen and scholars rather than crumbling ruins.

Bella stepped back, looking me over with slow, measured consideration. Her golden eyes softened, and she gave the faintest approving nod. "Better. Much better. You look as you should."

I adjusted the collar, glancing at her reflection in the brass mirror. "You are satisfied then."

"For now," she said, the teasing smile returning for a moment. "But keep your old coat. I like it. It suits the man who rides into jungles and deserts to face things others cannot. But this..." Her

gaze lingered on me a moment longer, softer now. "This suits the man who has nothing to hide."

I looked at her, my voice calm. "Perhaps I will wear it only when you are around then."

Her smile deepened slightly, though she said nothing to that, only turned back toward the door. "Come. The evening is still young."

I followed her back into the misty streets, the new coat feeling strange against my shoulders yet not unwelcome. For once, I felt less like the wandering naturalist and more like the man Bella clearly saw when she looked at me.

The streets of Three Portlands grew quieter as we left the bustling markets behind. The mist settled thicker in the older districts, where the brass pipes gave way to ancient stone walls marked with faded runes that pulsed faintly like slow heartbeats. Lanterns floated lazily above the narrow streets, their glow soft and golden, casting long shadows on the worn cobblestones.

Bella walked beside me, her black coat brushing softly against her boots, her white hair catching every flicker of lanternlight. Her golden-yellow eyes wandered over the aged buildings, studying the faint etchings of older magic still clinging to the walls.

"You know this city well," I said, watching her as she trailed a finger along a carved rune.

"I know many places well," she said. "But this city has always been one of my favorites. It is alive in a way no other place is. Every brick and stone remembers the hands that placed it."

I glanced at her. "You speak like someone who has been here a very long time."

She looked at me, her golden eyes steady. "Perhaps I have. Perhaps I simply listen better than most."

"You seem to know much more than listening would allow," I said. "You knew I would be here. You were waiting for me."

Bella smiled faintly, but there was a carefulness in it. "Was I waiting, or is this city simply small for people like us?"

"That is evasion," I said evenly.

"And you still ask," she replied smoothly, her tone quiet but warm. "Why spoil a good evening with questions that have no satisfying answers."

I studied her for a moment before giving a small nod. "Very well. But you know I will ask again."

Her smile softened. "I would expect nothing less of you."

We turned a corner into a narrow street lined with old stone buildings. A brass gear embedded in the cobblestone glowed faintly as we stepped over it, and Bella glanced down at it with a knowing look.

"This part of the city was built before the College," she said, her voice soft. "The first thaumaturgists carved their spells into the streets themselves. The gears under these roads keep the city breathing even now."

I looked around, taking in the worn walls and weathered runes. "You speak of it as if you were there."

She only smiled slightly, her golden eyes flicking to me for a brief moment before turning ahead. "Perhaps I have walked here more times than you can imagine."

I let the silence settle between us as we continued.

We stopped at a small stone bridge overlooking a narrow canal where the water shimmered with faint thaumaturgical light, reflecting the lanterns above. Bella rested her hands lightly on the worn stone railing, her gaze softening as she looked at the rippling glow.

"You are quiet tonight," she said.

"I am thinking," I replied. "It is not often I find myself in the company of someone who knows the world better than I do."

Bella tilted her head slightly, her white hair falling over one shoulder. "You give me too much credit."

"No," I said. "You have seen things most could not even name. You knew what the Ambassador was, and you did not run. And you are here, speaking of this city as if it were an old friend. That is not chance."

She looked at me for a long moment, her golden eyes calm. "You are a very perceptive man, Theodore. But perception is not always the same as truth."

I studied her quietly. "And you will not tell me which this is."

"Not tonight," she said, her voice soft, almost kind. "Tonight should not be for that."

For a while, we stood together in silence, the soft hum of magic in the air and the faint ripples of water below filling the quiet.

At last, Bella straightened, turning back toward the street. "Come. There is a place nearby that serves the best wine in the city. If we are to speak of past adventures, it should be over a drink."

I once again inclined my head slightly. "Then lead on."

She smiled faintly, stepping ahead, and I followed, the mist curling around us as we disappeared deeper into the older streets of Three Portlands.

The winehouse Bella led me to sat at the end of a quiet street where the lanterns burned softer and the mist drifted low across the cobblestones. It was a small, stone-built place with arched windows, warm light spilling onto the road. The runes carved into its walls glowed faintly, not bright enough to draw attention but enough to keep the air within calm and private.

Inside, the space was quiet and inviting, lit by low-hanging lamps that flickered softly over tables of polished dark wood. The air smelled faintly of oak barrels and spiced fruit, and soft music played from a mechanical harp in the corner, its strings plucked by delicate clockwork arms.

Bella chose a table in the corner, far from the other patrons. Her black coat draped neatly over the back of her chair, the silver trim catching the glow of the lamp above us. Her white hair gleamed faintly in the warm light, and her golden eyes seemed softer now, less guarded.

The server brought us a bottle of deep red wine and two fine crystal glasses, placing them quietly before leaving us alone. Bella poured for us both with a steady hand, the wine catching the lamp's glow as it filled the glasses.

"You chose this place well," I said, leaning back slightly in my chair.

"It is quiet," she replied, sliding one glass toward me. "And quiet is rare in this city. People talk too much when they drink. Here, people think before they speak."

I took a sip, letting the rich taste linger before setting the glass down. "Then perhaps it is the right place for the questions I still have for you."

Bella's lips curved faintly, a teasing spark in her golden eyes. "You promised not to press me tonight."

"I promised not to ruin the evening with them," I said. "That does not mean I will stop trying to understand you."

She laughed softly, a sound that felt warmer than I expected. "You are relentless."

"I am curious," I said.

"And curiosity has always been your greatest strength," Bella said, her tone turning thoughtful. "Though perhaps also your greatest weakness."

I tilted my head slightly, studying her. "And which do you think I am showing now?"

She held my gaze for a long moment, her golden eyes calm. "Perhaps both."

For a while, we sat in comfortable quiet, listening to the soft hum of the mechanical harp. Bella traced the rim of her glass with one finger, her expression thoughtful.

"Tell me about the Warlock Hunt," she said suddenly. "The one in Austria. The red lord demanded that story from you once, but you left out the details when you told it. Tell it to me now, the way it happened."

I looked down at my glass, swirling the wine slowly. "It was nothing remarkable. A simple hunt, nothing more."

Bella's smile was soft but knowing. "You say that about everything. But you and I both know that hunts do not become legends by being simple."

I sighed quietly, setting the glass down. "The man we hunted called himself a warlock, though in truth he was little more than a frightened thaumaturge who had grown desperate. He had power, yes, but no control. We cornered him in the mountains, and he made his stand. He nearly killed three of us before I reached him. I only survived because he was too focused on his spells to see the blade coming."

"You make it sound like luck," Bella said, her voice quiet.

"It was," I said. "A man can be skilled, but he still needs luck when facing someone with more power than sense."

Bella studied me for a long moment. "You will never admit what you are, will you."

I raised a brow slightly. "And what is that?"

"A man who steps forward when no one else will," she said simply.

I said nothing, only sipped the wine again, letting the silence linger.

"And you," I said after a moment, setting the glass down. "What of your past hunts. Surely you have seen things stranger than a desperate warlock."

Bella's expression shifted slightly, a softness passing over it before she smiled faintly. "I have seen many things, yes. But I am not as willing as you to speak of them. Not because I cannot, but because some memories are better left unspoken."

"That is evasion," I said quietly.

"It is," she admitted without shame.

I leaned back slightly, studying her. "Then tell me one thing. Something simple. Something true."

Bella tilted her head just enough for the light to catch in her golden eyes. For a long moment, she was silent, and I thought she might give me another evasive answer, but her expression softened in a way I had never seen before. She set her glass down gently, folding her hands around its base as if steadying herself.

"Something true," she said at last, her voice quieter now, stripped of its usual teasing lilt. "I adore you, Theodore Thomas Blackwood. I adore everything you are. Not just the hunter of creatures, not the man who walks uncharted paths or faces monsters others run from. I adore the man who holds a moment of silence for a beast after killing it. The man who digs wells for strangers because no one else will. The man who downplays his own heroics because he cannot bear to think of himself as anything but ordinary. You are not ordinary. And I adore you for that."

I sat still, her words hanging between us, as soft and heavy as the music drifting from the mechanical harp. Very few people had spoken to me with such plain truth. None had ever said it this way.

I found myself holding her gaze, the golden warmth in her eyes steady on mine. "You speak as though you know me better than I know myself."

"Perhaps I do," Bella said, a faint smile returning to her lips. "Perhaps I see the parts of you that you refuse to acknowledge."

"And yet," I said quietly, "you remain a mystery to me."

Bella lifted her glass again, her smile softening but not fading. "Then enjoy the mystery for now. It is better than the truth most days."

I allowed a breath of quiet amusement, raising my own glass. "Very well."

The crystal clinked softly as our glasses touched, and we drank in silence for a moment, neither of us looking away. For that brief time, the rest of the winehouse faded. It felt as if the world beyond those walls had ceased to matter, as though the evening existed for no one but us.

When she set her glass down, Bella leaned slightly forward, resting her chin lightly on her hand as she watched me with that same soft warmth. "You are easier to speak to when you stop trying to solve me like a puzzle, Theodore."

"I will take that as a compliment," I said.

"It is," she replied.

She watched me for a moment longer, her golden eyes lingering as her lips curved into a playful smile. "And if you want another truth, I also adore that ridiculous mustache of yours. It suits you far too well for me not to."

I allowed myself a quiet laugh at that, shaking my head. "That is the first time anyone has ever called my mustache worthy of admiration."

"Then they have all been blind," Bella said smoothly, her smile widening just enough to soften her words.

For a while, we said nothing more, content to let the quiet linger between us. The soft hum of the harp filled the air, and for the first time in many years, I felt the weight of my life ease, if only for this one evening.

The mist outside had grown thicker by the time we left the winehouse, curling around the brass pipes and cobblestones as if the city itself were exhaling. The lanterns glowed soft and golden above us, their runes pulsing gently, casting long halos of light through the haze. The usual clamor of Three Portlands had quieted to a low hum, and the air smelled faintly of oil, old stone, and the sweetness of night-blooming flowers.

Bella walked beside me, her black coat brushing softly against her legs, the silver trim glinting whenever we passed beneath a lantern. Her white hair shimmered faintly in the glow, and her golden-yellow eyes seemed calmer now, warmed by something quieter than her usual sharpness.

For a while, we simply walked, letting the quiet streets guide us. Then, without a word, Bella reached out and took hold of my arm. Her grip was light but certain, and the way she rested her hand there felt almost natural, as if it had been waiting to happen.

I glanced down at her, raising a brow slightly. "And what brought this on."

Bella looked ahead, her golden eyes catching the faint light as the smallest of smiles curved her lips. "Perhaps I am afraid you will wander off if I do not hold you."

"I am not so easily lost," I said.

"Perhaps not," Bella replied, her voice carrying the faintest laugh. "But men like you always find trouble, even when you are not looking for it. Consider this... preventative."

"Preventative," I repeated, amused.

"Yes," she said smoothly, glancing at me now. "And besides, if I am to walk through the quiet streets of Three Portlands with someone, it might as well be someone who looks the part."

"You mean the new coat you insisted I wear," I said.

"Of course," Bella said, her smile softening, though her golden eyes glimmered with quiet teasing. "If I am to be seen wandering with Lord Theodore Blackwood, naturalist and adventurer, I must at least be sure he looks presentable."

I allowed myself a quiet breath of amusement. "And here I thought it was my company you enjoyed."

Bella's smile grew, warmer now. "Perhaps it is both."

The mist curled low around our feet as we continued, her hand still resting lightly on my arm. The lanternlight reflected in her golden eyes, and for a long while, the city seemed to fade away, leaving only the sound of our steps and the quiet hum of magic in the air.

Bella's golden-yellow eyes flicked to me as we walked, her expression relaxed, almost playful now that the winehouse and its quiet conversations were behind us.

"You still have not let go," I said, glancing at her hand on my arm.

Bella's lips curved into a sly smile. "I've already told you, I am worried you will wander into trouble if I do. You have a talent for finding it, even in the safest of places."

"I am not so careless as that," I said with a faint breath of amusement.

"No," she agreed, her smile widening. "But you are the sort of man who trouble finds anyway. Consider this my way of keeping you from running off to hunt something that does not need hunting."

I raised a brow. "And you think holding my arm will stop me."

"It might slow you down," Bella said, her tone teasing but her gaze soft. "And it gives me an excuse."

"An excuse," I repeated.

"Yes," she said, looking ahead with that same playful smile. "To keep you close, Theodore Thomas Blackwood. You are a difficult man to keep close. Even when you are standing still, your mind feels as though it is already somewhere else."

Her words made me quiet for a moment, and I found myself watching her instead of the street. Her golden eyes caught the lanternlight as she glanced at me, her smile softening slightly when she noticed.

"You seem to enjoy reminding me of all my flaws," I said.

"They are not flaws," she replied, her voice gentler now. "They are what make you who you are. And I told you before, I adore everything you are. Even the parts you try to hide."

I looked ahead, my voice calm but low. "You speak as if you know me better than I know myself."

"Perhaps I do," Bella said, her tone turning warm, almost affectionate.

For a time, we walked in silence, the mist curling lazily around us. The city felt as if it were holding its breath, leaving only the sound of our steps and the soft hum of the runed lanterns.

"Do you ever think," I said quietly, "that perhaps we could stop. That the world could be faced by others while we stayed still for once."

Bella glanced at me, her golden eyes thoughtful. "Is that something you want?"

I hesitated, then spoke honestly. "I do not know. But I know that if it were with the right person, I could imagine it."

Bella held my gaze for a long moment, her expression unreadable but her eyes warm. "And who would that right person be?"

I said nothing, but I did not look away.

Her smile grew slightly, softer than before, and she looked ahead again. "Perhaps you are not as far from stopping as you think, Theodore."

We passed under another lantern, the golden light catching her white hair like silver threads. Her hand remained on my arm, steady and sure, and for the first time in years, I felt that staying still, even for a moment, might not be such an impossible thought.

Bella broke the quiet after a time, her tone lighter again. "And if you ever do stop, you had better keep that mustache. I adore that mustache almost as much as I do the rest of you. It would be a tragedy to shave it."

I allowed myself a quiet laugh, shaking my head. "You truly think so highly of it."

"Of course," Bella said, her smile widening with mischief. "It is practically heroic on its own. It suits you far too well for me not to love it."

I gave her a look that held both amusement and quiet disbelief. "Then I suppose I must never change it."

"Good," she said simply, her golden eyes glinting with that same teasing warmth as she kept her hold on my arm.

The streets stretched ahead of us, soft and quiet, the mist curling in golden halos around the lanterns. For that moment, I allowed myself to believe that the night might never end.

The streets narrowed as we walked farther into the quiet districts, until at last they opened to a high stone terrace overlooking the city. The mist hung low over the rooftops, curling between the spires and pipes like soft smoke, and the lanterns below glowed in scattered clusters of gold. The city hummed faintly beneath us, the sound of gears and thaumaturgical engines little more than a whisper at this height.

Bella let her hand slip from my arm as we stepped toward the edge, her black coat trailing softly behind her as she leaned against the stone railing. Her golden-yellow eyes reflected the glow of the city lights, warm and thoughtful as she looked out across the mist-covered streets.

"This is my favorite place in Three Portlands," she said quietly. "When I was younger, I would stand here for hours, watching the city breathe. It felt alive then, like a creature dreaming. It still does."

I stood beside her, resting one hand lightly on the railing. "It is peaceful. You were right earlier. The city feels as though it is holding its breath."

Bella turned her head slightly, her golden eyes watching me now instead of the city. "And do you feel strange, standing still with me, when the rest of the world is moving?"

"Strange," I said honestly. "But not in a way I mind."

A small smile curved her lips. "That is as close to a confession as I suspect you will ever give."

I looked at her for a long moment, the quiet stretching between us. "Perhaps."

She shifted closer, her shoulder brushing lightly against mine as she looked out at the city again. "You know, Theodore, you are not nearly as impossible to read as you think you are. You act like a man who lives only for duty and curiosity, but you are not. You live for people, whether you admit it or not. For the boy you brought here. For the strangers you help without ever asking for thanks. And, whether you will say it aloud or not, for moments like this."

I was silent for a moment before speaking. "Perhaps I am not as far from stopping as I thought."

Bella's golden eyes softened as she looked up at me. "Perhaps not. And if you ever do stop, I imagine you will still call yourself only a naturalist and an adventurer."

"Because that is what I am," I said quietly.

Her smile grew slightly, warm and knowing. "No, Theodore. That is simply what you tell yourself. But I will not argue tonight. Tonight you can be whatever you wish to be."

The quiet stretched again, filled only by the soft hum of the city below. For a long while we stood together, neither speaking, both watching the lanterns flicker in the mist.

Then, without warning, Bella turned toward me fully. She stepped close enough that I could see the faintest glimmer of light in her golden eyes, soft and steady.

"You know," she said, her voice quieter now, almost playful again, "I was serious about the mustache. I truly do adore it. It makes you look like the man everyone already thinks you are."

I allowed myself the faintest smile. "And what man is that?"

Her smile softened, and for once there was no teasing in her voice. "The man who could make even me believe the world still has good men in it."

Before I could answer, she leaned in and kissed me. It was not rushed or demanding, only warm and certain, a kiss that carried more truth than any words could.

When she stepped back, her golden eyes lingered on mine for a moment longer, and then she smiled faintly. "We will meet again, Theodore Thomas Blackwood. I promise you that."

Before I could reply, she stepped back into the mist. One moment she was there, her black coat trailing softly behind her, and the next she was gone, leaving only the faint ripple of fog where she had been.

I stood there for some time after, looking out over the city, the hum of its engines low and steady beneath the lantern glow. For the first time in many years, I let myself imagine what it might be like to stay still.

And for the first time, I did not dismiss the thought.

The mist had thinned by the time I returned to the small room I had taken for the night, but its weight still lingered in the air like the last breath of a dream. The city outside my window

glowed faintly, its lanterns burning low, the hum of thaumaturgical engines soft and steady beneath the quiet.

I sat at the edge of the bed, my new coat folded neatly over the chair beside me, my thoughts not on the city, nor on the tasks that awaited me in the morning, but on her.

Bella.

The warmth of her kiss lingered in my mind, not for the act itself but for what it had carried. She had looked at me in that moment as though she saw something in me I had never believed existed. She had spoken of me as if I were more than I claim to be, and for the first time in many years, I had not argued.

I could still see her golden eyes catching the lanternlight, still hear the soft, playful warmth in her voice when she spoke of my mustache, and still feel the quiet certainty in her promise that we would meet again.

For a long while, I sat in silence, letting the city hum below me. My life had been built on movement, on leaving places before they could ever feel like home, yet tonight I allowed myself, if only for a moment, to imagine a world where I stayed.

But morning would come, as it always does, and duty would come with it.

I lay back, letting the sound of the city fade, holding onto the memory of her for just a little longer before sleep claimed me.

Morning came slow to Three Portlands, the mist hanging lower than the rising sun could burn away. The city stirred gently, its quiet hum growing as brass pipes released measured bursts of steam and the runed lanterns dimmed to faint glows.

I stepped out into the cool air with the first light touching the rooftops, the streets already alive with soft murmurs. Elves swept their stoops while orks hauled carts of brass crates, and the scent of fresh bread mingled with the faint metallic tang of thaumaturgical workings. The city, for all its strangeness, felt more like a waking creature than stone and brass.

Harrow and Thorn sat waiting at the end of the narrow street, its windows glowing softly in the pale light. Inside, the familiar scent of parchment and polished wood lingered, and the shelves hummed with quiet magic as if the relics themselves were rousing for the day.

The thin man with silver spectacles was already behind the counter, and when I stepped inside, his sharp eyes lifted to meet mine. A smile tugged at his lips as he reached below the counter, pulling free a carefully wrapped bundle of dark cloth.

"You are a man of your word, Lord Blackwood," he said. "And I, of mine. It is finished."

He unfolded the cloth to reveal the robe.

The Bhalai's pelt had been crafted with astonishing care, its deep, rich fur worked into flowing layers that shimmered faintly under the soft light. Subtle runes, sewn in thread no thicker than a strand of hair, glowed briefly before fading, their magic already bound to the weave. The shoulders and cuffs were trimmed to give strength while the fabric itself remained supple, built to grow and shift with the boy who would wear it.

"It will protect him," the man said. "More than most armor could. And, as you requested, it will grow with him, tied to his essence now. It will be his as long as he lives."

I ran a hand lightly across the robe, feeling the faint hum of its enchantments beneath my fingers. "It is finer than I expected."

The man adjusted his spectacles, watching me carefully. "You truly care for this boy. That is still unlike you."

"Perhaps," I said simply. "But he deserves it."

The man smiled faintly and folded the robe again with care. "Then may it serve him well."

I thanked him and stepped back out into the misted streets, the robe carefully tucked under my arm.

The courtyard was already full of students, their robes marked with sigils. Some carried books that floated beside them, others whispered incantations that sparked faintly in the air. But I saw only Mikhail, standing near the fountain, waiting for me. His plain brown coat made him look out of place among the others, yet he stood straighter than I had ever seen him.

When he spotted me, he ran forward, his boots splashing lightly against the damp stone. He spoke quickly, in Russian, his words tumbling over themselves with excitement. I answered him in the same, the language far easier for him than English.

"They are letting me stay," he said, his voice catching. "They said I belong here. I will learn, I will become strong."

"You do belong here," I told him. "This is where you are meant to be."

He hesitated, his hands tightening at his sides before he looked up at me. "But... I can still come home, yes. To you. To Deeds."

"Of course," I said, keeping my tone steady. "Every summer and winter, you will come home. The estate will always be your home, and I will always be there."

His eyes glistened, and he tried to look away, but I crouched so we were level. "Do not be ashamed of this," I said quietly. "It is no weakness to care for what you leave behind."

"I will make you proud," he said suddenly, his voice trembling but certain.

"You already have," I said.

I held the robe out to him. His eyes widened as he stared at it, almost afraid to touch it. "This is for you. It will grow with you, protect you, and remind you of what we faced together. It is yours."

He reached for it slowly, his fingers brushing over the fur like he thought it might vanish. "I have never had something like this," he whispered.

"You earned it," I said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "And one day you will do things with it that even I cannot imagine."

His violet eyes shimmered faintly in the morning light as he looked up at me. "I will always come home."

"I know," I said softly. "And I will always be waiting."

He stepped forward suddenly and hugged me, his small arms tight around me. I returned it, letting him hold on for as long as he needed. When he finally pulled back, his face was brighter despite the tears he tried to hide.

A teacher in a green robe with a serpent stitched into the hem approached then. His sharp eyes flicked to me, and he gave a single approving nod before calling Mikhail over.

The boy looked at me one last time, the robe clutched to his chest. "I will do everything right," he said.

"You already are," I said.

I stood there until the great doors closed behind him, the mist curling around the courtyard as if the College itself breathed. Only when he was gone did I turn back toward the city.

The Queen would be expecting me soon. The world, as always, would not wait.

The return to England was quiet, the journey long but without incident. The misted streets of Three Portlands gave way to the calm, familiar countryside, and by the time my carriage rolled up the drive of my estate, the sun was dipping low behind the trees. The house stood as it always had, its windows glowing warm against the coming dusk.

Deeds was waiting at the door, as he always was, his hands neatly folded behind his back. His expression was as unreadable as ever, but the slight arch of his brow told me he had been expecting me for hours.

"You are later than I expected, my lord," he said as I stepped inside. "I assume your business was successful."

"It was," I said, removing my gloves and handing them to him. "Mikhail has been accepted into Deer College. He begins immediately."

Deeds gave a single approving nod, though his eyes studied me for a moment longer than usual. "You care for the boy more than you would admit to anyone else. It is... unusual for you, my lord. You are not known for staying still long enough to care for anything that is not tied to your expeditions."

I gave a short breath of amusement, glancing at him as I removed my coat. "Yes, I keep hearing that. Everyone seems to think I'm incapable of such a thing and that I am something remarkable. I keep telling them I am only a naturalist and an adventurer, but no one listens."

Deeds' lips curved into the faintest smile, his tone dry. "Perhaps because they see something you do not."

"Perhaps," I said, though my voice carried no argument.

Deeds inclined his head slightly. "Then I shall prepare his room properly. The boy will be returning in the summers and winters, I presume."

"He will," I said. "This is his home as much as mine now."

"Very good," Deeds said, giving a small nod. "The house will feel livelier for it."

I crossed to the chair by the fire, resting my new coat neatly over its back. The flames crackled softly, filling the room with warmth.

Deeds watched me a moment longer before speaking again. "You are quieter than usual. Did something else occupy your time in Three Portlands?"

I looked into the fire, my voice calm. "Yes. I saw someone."

"Someone important, I take it."

I allowed a small smile at that. "Important enough. She is... unlike anyone I have ever met. And she has a way of making one think that perhaps staying still would not be such a terrible thing."

Deeds gave a measured nod, his expression neutral, though his eyes held a flicker of curiosity. "Then I expect we will hear more of her in time."

"Perhaps," I said, though the warmth of that night in Three Portlands lingered in my mind far longer than I admitted aloud.

Deeds stepped back toward the doorway. "I will have dinner prepared, my lord, and the boy's room readied for when he returns."

"Thank you, Deeds," I said.

When he left the room, I sat by the fire, letting the quiet of the estate settle around me. My thoughts wandered between the boy and the promise in Bella's golden eyes. For a long while, I allowed myself that peace before turning my mind back to duty.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood

Viscount, Naturalist, and Adored

The Pest of The Library

The evening was quiet at the estate, the kind of quiet that seemed to settle into the bones of the house. The fire burned low in the sitting room, throwing soft orange light across the shelves, and the faint scent of ash mixed with the old wood of the walls. Deeds moved about with his usual measured precision, his hands steady as he placed the day's letters on the side table.

I sat by the fire, a journal open on my knee, my thoughts on writing rather than wandering for once. The boy was away at Deer College, the estate grounds had been still all day, and I had begun to believe, perhaps foolishly, that I might enjoy a few more evenings of peace before the Queen found a way to interrupt it.

The knock at the door shattered that thought immediately.

It was not the kind of knock I welcomed. Sharp, quick, deliberate, with none of the politeness of a courier or the patience of a guest. Deeds paused mid-step, glancing toward the door, then set the letters down neatly before going to answer.

When he opened it, the man standing there was as far from ordinary as anyone I had seen outside my usual travels.

He was tall and lean, with a long green coat faded from years of wear, the faint mark of a serpent stitched into its hem. His boots were scuffed, his dark hair tied back with little care, and his sharp eyes scanned the room quickly before settling on me.

"Lord Theodore Blackwood," he said, his voice low and certain.

I closed my journal and set it on the arm of the chair. "You have found him."

He stepped inside, glancing once at Deeds, who remained by the door with his usual unreadable stare. "I am from the Serpent's Hand. I would not come here without reason. We need your help."

I leaned back slightly, studying him. "And what does the Serpent's Hand need from me. You are not known for asking for favors."

The man did not flinch under my gaze, though he seemed restless, his weight shifting slightly as though he was unused to standing still. "The Wanderer's Library has been compromised. Creatures have entered, and we cannot risk them causing more damage than they already have. We need someone with experience tracking and removing such things. Someone... like you."

I sighed quietly, running a hand along the arm of my chair. "The Library is no hunting ground. It is not a place for blood to be spilled, not if it can be helped. You understand that."

"I do," he said quickly. "That is why we are asking you. You are known for removing things without leaving... chaos behind."

Deeds looked at me then, his brow arching slightly. "A quiet evening ruined by strange creatures in a library," he said dryly. "I can hardly think of anything more fitting for you, my lord."

I stood slowly, adjusting my cuffs and setting my coat neatly around my shoulders. "You always know how to make it sound inviting, Deeds."

The Serpent's Hand man gave a short nod of gratitude. "We leave at once."

As I passed Deeds, I said quietly, "Tell the boy, when he writes, that he had best be busier with his studies than I am with mine."

Deeds allowed the faintest smile. "Of course, my lord. Try not to burn the Library down. I imagine they would be very cross with you."

"I will keep it in mind," I said.

The Serpent's Hand man led me out into the cool night, the mist curling low along the estate grounds. We traveled in silence, moving quickly to the hidden portal tucked in a narrow alley of Three Portlands. The shimmering oval rippled faintly, runes shifting like liquid across its surface.

"After you," the man said.

The air changed the moment I stepped through.

The Wanderer's Library was everything the stories claimed and more. Endless rows of towering shelves stretched in all directions, filled with books that seemed to hum quietly, as though whispering to one another. The air smelled of old parchment, candle wax, and ink, with a

faint metallic edge of lingering magic. Floating lanterns drifted lazily between the shelves, their golden light spilling across carpets and ancient tables piled with scrolls.

The Serpent's Hand man lowered his voice as we moved deeper into the endless stacks. "The creatures were last seen in the eastern section. We sealed the area to keep them contained, but they have been... difficult to track."

"Difficult how," I asked, my eyes scanning the floor.

"They are small," he admitted, "but fast. We believe they are scavengers of some kind, and they have already overturned several shelves looking for something."

I crouched near a section of disturbed dust where a shelf had been pushed aside. Tiny prints, scattered and uneven, dotted the ground. I brushed my fingers over one, noting its shallow depth.

"These are not predators," I said, standing again. "Too light, too scattered. They are not hunting. They are searching... or playing."

The man frowned. "You are certain."

"As certain as I can be without seeing them."

We followed the trail, weaving through the stacks until soft squeaks reached us. The sound grew clearer as we turned a corner, and there they were.

Half a dozen gnomes no taller than my knee darted nervously around an overturned pile of books. Their hats were mismatched scraps of cloth, their clothes patched with bits of twine and buttons, and they squeaked at one another as they pawed through pages, their tiny hands moving quickly.

I crouched slightly, watching them. "Gnomes," I said simply.

The Serpent's Hand man stared. "Gnomes. All this panic... for gnomes."

"They are harmless," I said, stepping forward slowly. The gnomes froze, their tiny black eyes wide. One squeaked loudly and darted for a nearby shelf.

I moved quickly, reaching out and catching it gently by the back of its tiny coat, lifting it into the air. It kicked and flailed, squeaking furiously, its little arms swinging uselessly.

"Calm yourself," I said, though it did not understand me. "We are not here to hurt you."

The others panicked, squealing as they scattered, knocking into a precarious stack of books. Several toppled to the floor, pages fluttering open.

Then one hit the ground hard, its cover snapping wide, and the air changed immediately.

The pages glowed bright red, runes twisting like living things. A low, guttural growl rumbled through the shelves as the light pulsed outward, warping the air around it.

The Serpent's Hand man cursed under his breath, stepping back. "What did it just open."

I set the gnome gently on the floor, its squeaks rising into terrified chirps as it darted for cover. "Nothing good," I said, watching the runes twist across the pages.

The growl deepened, the air thick with heat and the sharp scent of burning ink. Shadows stretched unnaturally long across the shelves.

Whatever had been bound to that book was coming through, and it was no gnome.

I glanced at the Serpent's Hand man, my voice calm but firm. "You might want to step back."

The air split open like torn paper, and something began to crawl through.

The air tore like parchment, splitting in jagged seams as the red light from the book spilled out in waves. The runes on its pages twisted and crawled across the floor, creeping up the sides of the shelves like living vines. The gnomes squealed and darted into hiding, their small feet pattering frantically over the wooden floor.

The growl grew louder, thick and wet, like something breathing through too many throats at once. I moved carefully, stepping between the fallen books as the Serpent's Hand man backed away, his hand instinctively tightening around the hilt of his blade.

From the tear in the air, a long, slick limb forced its way through. It was shaped vaguely like an arm but covered in mottled hide that reflected the lanternlight like wet stone. Another limb followed, and then a head forced itself through, long and stretched, with no eyes, only rows of sharp teeth curving along a jaw that opened too far to be natural.

The Serpent's Hand man spoke low under his breath. "That is not from any bestiary I have ever seen."

"Because it is not supposed to be here," I said, keeping my voice even as I stepped forward. "It is bound to that book. It has been released by accident."

The thing dragged itself free of the rift with a wet, tearing sound, its body long and serpentine, limbs sprouting unevenly along its sides as if they had been pulled from different animals and stitched together. Its skin pulsed faintly, almost breathing.

The gnomes huddled behind a fallen shelf, squeaking in terror, their small hands clutching their patched hats. One peeked over the edge with wide, frightened eyes.

The creature turned its head toward the noise, teeth gnashing as it pulled itself forward, claws scraping harshly against the floor.

I drew my saber, its edge catching the soft golden light of the lanterns, and slid my rolling block pistol free with my other hand. Loading a single round into the chamber, I snapped it shut with a smooth motion.

The Serpent's Hand man glanced at me sharply. "Careful. A stray shot will bring half this section of shelves down."

"I am aware," I said, my eyes fixed on the beast.

It lunged without warning, its body slamming into a shelf and sending a rain of books to the floor. I stepped in, my saber flashing upward to meet it, cutting across one of its limbs. Dark ichor sprayed, sizzling as it touched the wood but leaving no fire.

The creature reared back, letting out a guttural scream that echoed through the rows.

The Serpent's Hand man moved to my side, his blade drawn though his stance showed more caution than confidence. "What do you suggest, Lord Blackwood. It will not stay in this section for long."

"Drive it back to the book," I said. "It is tethered to the thing. If we can force it near enough, I can end it."

The monster lunged again, swinging one long clawed limb at me. I stepped aside just in time, the claw slamming into the ground where I had stood. My saber struck again, slicing across the base of its arm and sending another spray of that dark fluid to the floor.

The gnomes squeaked loudly from their hiding place, one braver than the rest darting out suddenly and throwing a loose button at the beast as if it could help. It squeaked furiously, stamping its tiny feet.

"Brave little thing," I muttered, raising my pistol. I fired, the reality warping round striking the creature's shoulder. The flesh twisted unnaturally, tearing itself apart as if erased from existence. The beast recoiled, thrashing wildly, its tail knocking into another shelf but not toppling it entirely.

The Serpent's Hand man struck at one of its limbs, his blade biting shallowly into its slick skin. "It will not hold much longer."

"Then keep it distracted," I said, reloading another round into the pistol with quick precision. "I only need one clear shot at the book."

The creature roared, lunging again. Its claws tore into the ground as it dragged itself forward, closer to me, closer to the glowing book lying open among the scattered tomes.

I stepped back, letting it follow, guiding it with careful steps as it snapped at me, its teeth clashing together in frustration. The gnomes huddled close to one another, watching wide eyed as the fight drew nearer to the cursed pages.

The runes on the book flared brighter, sensing its creature drawing close, the air warping again around us as if eager to reclaim what had been let loose.

It was time to finish this.

The creature's body twisted unnaturally as it dragged itself closer, its claws carving deep gouges into the wood. The runes on the book pulsed faster, glowing like a heartbeat, pulling the beast toward it even as it fought against the tether. Its rows of teeth clashed together with a wet grinding sound, snapping inches from my face as I stepped back, keeping my saber raised.

The Serpent's Hand member moved to my side, his hands glowing bright green as runes spiraled up his arms. He muttered in his tongue, his voice harsh and strained, before slamming his palms to the ground. Thick vines of shimmering energy erupted from the floor, curling around the beast's legs and midsection, binding it to the spot.

The monster shrieked, its body convulsing as it tore against the bindings, ichor splattering to the ground with each violent thrash.

"Hold it steady," I said, reloading my pistol and snapping the chamber shut with practiced precision.

"I am trying," the Serpents Hand member said through gritted teeth, sweat dripping down his brow. "This thing is stronger than anything I have bound before."

"Then hold it tighter," I replied, stepping closer to take aim.

The creature roared, snapping one of the bindings with a violent twist. The magical vines cracked apart, scattering glowing fragments of light. It lunged toward me, its teeth clashing shut a hand's breadth from my face as I ducked to the side and slashed across its shoulder with the saber.

The gnomes squeaked in terror from their hiding place, one of them tossing a stray feather quill at the beast as if it might help.

The Serpents Hand member cursed sharply under his breath, his hands glowing brighter as he slammed them into the floor again. Another set of bindings shot upward, wrapping around the beast's limbs and neck, holding it back.

I reloaded my pistol with another round, aiming at the cursed book glowing beneath the toppled shelf. "Almost there. Keep it still."

The man growled, his teeth clenched. "Do it quickly. I cannot keep this up."

The creature roared again, tearing free another binding with a sickening crack of magical energy. The Serpents Hand member staggered, catching himself against a shelf as the beast lunged forward, dragging him several feet.

I stepped in quickly, blocking its path with my saber raised. The creature hissed, its teeth snapping at me, its hot breath carrying the stench of rot.

"By the way," I said, keeping my saber between us as I glanced at the Serpents Hand member, "what is your name."

He stared at me as though I had lost my mind. "Now. You are asking me now."

"If you die," I said, sidestepping as the beast's claw slammed into the ground, "I should at least know what to have carved into a stone for you."

The Serpents Hand member muttered something that was no doubt insulting before snapping, "Sergei. My name is Sergei. Now finish this."

"Very well, Sergei," I said, raising my pistol.

The creature lunged again, its body slamming against the bindings, dragging itself closer to the glowing book. Its long limbs twisted wildly, claws tearing chunks of wood from the floor.

The runes on the book flared violently, as if sensing the beast's nearness. The air rippled with heat, the magical tether pulling tighter.

"Just a moment longer," I said, taking careful aim at the book.

Sergei strained, his hands pressed to the floor, the magical vines glowing so brightly now they painted the shelves with green light. "Do it now, Blackwood."

The beast snapped free of another binding, lunging forward with a roar that rattled the shelves. I fired.

The reality warping round streaked through the air, striking the edge of the book. The runes pulsed brighter for an instant, twisting violently as if trying to reclaim the beast, but the creature fought harder, its limbs clawing at the floor, resisting the pull.

Then everything changed.

The air grew heavy, and a silence fell so sudden it felt wrong. Long pale fingers stretched from between two shelves, impossibly long, smooth and faceless. The Librarian had arrived.

Its elongated arm reached out and pressed one hand gently to the beast's back. The creature froze instantly, its roar caught in its throat. The Librarian's other arm rose slowly, its fingers weaving through the air in a slow, deliberate pattern. The runes on the book flared gold, twisting back into place, pulling the creature toward it like a tide pulling a broken ship back to sea.

The beast shrieked, thrashing once more before its limbs bent unnaturally, folding in on themselves as its body was drawn into the glowing pages. The book slammed shut with a heavy thud, the glow fading to nothing.

The Librarian remained for a moment, its featureless head turning toward us. It replaced the book neatly back on the shelf, aligning it perfectly, before gliding silently away into the endless rows of books.

Sergei collapsed to one knee, his hands falling to his sides as the last of his magic faded. He looked at me, breathing hard. "Well... that could have gone worse."

I sheathed my saber, sliding the pistol back into its holster. "Yes. But I think we can both agree we were fortunate the Librarian decided to care."

The gnomes peeked from their hiding place, squeaking nervously. One stepped forward, tipping its patched hat in a strange, apologetic gesture before darting back to its companions.

I glanced at Sergei. "Shall we escort them out before they cause more trouble?"

Sergei pushed himself to his feet, shaking his head with a dry laugh. "Yes. And next time someone asks me to fetch you for help, I will remember this moment."

"Good," I said. "Because I will likely say yes again."

The Library settled back into its strange rhythm, the quiet hum of unseen magic returning as though nothing had happened. The shelves stood undisturbed once more, save for the scattered books lying near the fight's edge. The gnomes squeaked among themselves in rapid, high pitched chatter, their tiny hats bobbing nervously as they huddled close.

The Serpents Hand member straightened, brushing dust from his coat as he adjusted the serpent marked sleeve. His breathing was steady again, though his brow was still damp from the strain of his thaumaturgy. He glanced toward the gnomes and then at me. "We should get them out before another accident occurs. The Librarians may not be as merciful next time."

I crouched slightly, resting the tip of my saber against the floor as I spoke to the lead gnome. It squeaked up at me with wide black eyes, tugging at its patched hat like a child caught stealing sweets. "You came here for a book, yes," I asked, my voice calm.

The gnome squeaked rapidly, gesturing with its tiny hands, pointing to the overturned shelves.

The Serpents Hand member translated, though he shook his head with an incredulous look. "They came here for a gardening book. Their soil has gone bad, and they hoped to find something to help their crops grow. They did not mean to summon that thing."

I raised an eyebrow. "A noble intention, though one would hope they would try asking for help rather than rummaging through cursed tomes."

The gnome squeaked again, softer this time, lowering its head.

"They are apologizing," the Serpents Hand member said, his voice losing its sharp edge.

I stayed crouched, watching them for a long moment before resting one knee fully on the ground so I was level with their small black eyes. "Your soil fails because you have been planting too much in the same ground, yes. You must rest the soil, allow it to breathe. Mix crushed bones of fish or animal, and scatter ash from burned wood to give it strength again. If you cannot find bone, use ground-up shells if you live near water. Do this for two seasons, plant only light-rooted vegetables first, then return to grains. It will grow strong again."

The gnomes blinked at me, silent for a moment before breaking into a chorus of excited squeaks. One tipped its patched hat deeply, almost falling over as it did so.

The Serpents Hand member gave me an odd look. "You are giving gardening lessons to gnomes now."

"Why not," I said, standing again. "They risked everything to save their food. The least I can do is give them a proper answer."

The gnomes squeaked again, bouncing slightly in place as though eager to leave and try what I had said.

"Let us get them home before they summon another monster," I said.

After a moment, Sergei spoke again. "You are not what I expected, Lord Blackwood. Most people speak of you as a reckless man who thrives on danger. Some even claimed you would refuse to help simply because the Serpents Hand asked."

"Yet here I am," I said.

Sergei gave a short laugh, shaking his head. "Yes. You are here. You fought a nightmare without hesitation, kept the gnomes alive, and somehow did it without burning half the Library down. I can see now why your name was suggested."

"I did not realize I was spoken of so often in your circles," I said, glancing at him.

"You are," Sergei said. "For better or worse. Many think you are a nuisance. Some think you are a fool. But others call you the only man outside our own ranks who respects the places he steps into. They were right."

"I am simply a naturalist," I said. "And a naturalist ought to care for life when he can."

Sergei looked at me, his expression unreadable for a moment before he smirked faintly. "Perhaps that is exactly why you are spoken of the way you are."

The gnomes formed a clumsy little line behind us, waddling two by two as we began making our way through the endless shelves. The soft golden lanterns floated lazily above us, casting warm light along the wood, and the quiet murmurs of distant pages turning drifted in the air.

After a moment, the Serpents Hand member spoke again. "You know... you could have left. No one would have blamed you. But you stayed, fought, and now you are helping gnomes with their crops. Why."

"Because it matters to them," I said simply. "And that is enough."

The gnome who had tipped its hat earlier squeaked again, tugging at my boot as we walked. The Serpents Hand member translated quietly. "It says thank you."

I nodded, crouching briefly to meet its gaze. "Keep to your gardens. That is adventure enough."

The gnome squeaked happily, pulling its hat down shyly before scurrying back to its companions.

We reached the shimmering portal that marked the exit to the Library. The Serpents Hand member turned to me, his green eyes catching the lanternlight. "I will see them home from here. You have done more than enough."

"Good," I said, sheathing my saber. "Then I will leave them in your care. Try to keep them from opening anything glowing red next time."

The Serpents Hand member gave a rare, genuine smile. "I will try. And Blackwood..." He paused for a moment, almost hesitant. "It was an honor."

I inclined my head slightly. "Take care. May your next summons be less troublesome."

As he led the gnomes through the portal, their tiny feet pattering softly, the Library fell quiet again. The soft hum of pages turning returned, as though nothing at all had happened.

I glanced once toward the rows where the Librarian had vanished, giving a small nod of respect before turning back the way I had come.

Another quiet evening ruined, but at least the books, and the gardens, would be safe.

The walk back to the estate was quiet, the evening air cool and still. By the time I reached the familiar gravel path, the sun had already sunk low, leaving the sky washed in deep orange and violet. The windows glowed warmly against the coming night, and the soft hum of life within the house was a welcome return after the strange, endless whisper of the Library.

Deeds was waiting at the door, as he always was. His posture was as precise as ever, hands folded neatly behind his back, though there was something in the way his brow lifted that suggested he had been waiting to confirm a prediction.

"I take it the Library still stands," he said as I stepped inside.

"It does," I said, handing him my coat. "Though not for lack of trying on the gnomes' part."

Deeds blinked once, tilting his head slightly as he took the coat. "Gnomes."

"Yes," I said, removing my gloves. "They broke into the Library to find a gardening book. Their soil is failing, and they thought a book might hold the answer. Instead, they managed to summon something with far too many teeth."

Deeds' expression did not shift, though the faintest hint of amusement touched his voice. "I assume you dealt with the creature."

"With help," I said, lowering myself into the chair near the fire. "The Serpents Hand thaumaturgist bound it as best he could, though we nearly lost it entirely before the Librarian stepped in and dragged the thing back into its book."

Deeds gave a single nod. "Fortunate that the Librarian chose to intervene."

"Fortunate indeed," I said.

Deeds was silent a moment longer before his gaze shifted toward me, his tone quiet but pointed. "And the gnomes. I imagine you did not simply leave them to their own devices."

I glanced at him, arching an eyebrow. "You sound certain of that."

"Because I know you, my lord," Deeds said, adjusting the coat in his arms. "You have never been able to stop at simply fixing a problem. You care too much to leave anyone in the state you found them."

I let out a short breath, something close to a laugh. "Yes, well, they will not be raiding the Library again. I told them how to restore their soil. Bone meal, ash, ground shells if they can find them. Light crops first, then grains after a few seasons. They were... very grateful."

Deeds raised one brow slightly higher. "Of course they were. Few would risk their lives to save a crop, and fewer still would stop to teach them how to fix it."

I gave a small shrug, leaning back in the chair. "It mattered to them. That is enough."

Deeds gave the faintest sigh, though there was something softer in it than disapproval. "You will never stop doing this, will you."

"Probably not," I said, my eyes on the fire. "The world does not seem to let me stop, and even if it did, I doubt I could ignore it."

Deeds nodded once, his face as calm as ever. "Then I will have supper prepared. I assume you will want something warm after saving gnomes, a library, and, by extension, their gardens."

I gave a faint smile. "Thank you, Deeds."

As he moved toward the door, I sat back, letting the warmth of the fire wash over me. My thoughts lingered briefly on the tiny gnome tipping its patched hat and on Sergei, who had risked himself without question. In a world of ancient books and terrible creatures, sometimes it was the smallest things—patched hats and garden soil—that stayed with you the longest.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood

Viscount, Naturalist, and Gnome Pest Control

The Gentlemen Cowboy

The summons from the Queen carried the weight of duty heavier than most. Delivered at first light, the letter bore the careful handwriting of her private secretary, every word chosen with precision. A painting of considerable value, both artistically and anomalously, had been stolen from a royal collection. The curator assigned to its care had fled with it, vanishing across the Atlantic and, as the Queen's sources believed, disappearing into the growing frontier towns of America's west.

It was not my first time setting foot in America, but I had never traveled so far west. The last time I crossed the ocean, the world here felt raw and wild, but already the rails and cities had begun to carve into its heart. According to the letter, I would not be seeking the curator in a city. He had hidden himself among the rougher settlements where sheriffs kept loose order and men carried their laws in holsters at their hips.

When I set the letter aside, Deeds was already standing with his hands behind his back, watching me with his usual calm.

"You already know what it says," I said, folding the paper neatly.

"I suspected," Deeds replied. "The Queen does not send morning couriers for matters of leisure."

"No, she does not," I said, rising from the chair. "The curator has taken the painting to America. The west, no less. I suspect he thinks it the perfect place to hide. Few ask questions there, fewer still care about a single man or what he carries."

Deeds inclined his head slightly. "I recall you once spoke fondly of America's wilderness, though I cannot imagine you are eager to meet its outlaws."

"I will not deny I would rather be cataloging its animals than chasing thieves," I said, adjusting my cuffs. "But it is my task, and I will see it done."

"I will have your travel trunk prepared," Deeds said smoothly. "And your pistol, I assume."

"Yes," I said. "And the Sharps rifle as well. A man does not ride into the west unprepared."

Deeds gave a faint, approving nod. "Will you be traveling alone?"

"I will," I said. "It will be simpler that way. A stranger draws enough attention on his own without dragging another into it."

"As you wish," Deeds replied. His voice softened just slightly as he added, "Take care, my lord. The west is far from the quiet halls you are accustomed to."

I gave a faint smile, though it held no humor. "Quiet has never been my way, Deeds."

The preparations were made swiftly. Within a day, I was aboard a steamship bound for New York, the crossing as restless as the waves themselves. From there, a train carried me westward, the landscape changing slowly from the settled cities to open plains, then mountains, and finally to the dry, sun-baked lands that stretched toward the horizon.

The town where I arrived was small and harsh, built of sun-bleached wood and dust. Horses stood tied along the street, and men watched one another from shaded porches with the quiet suspicion born of hard living. A single telegraph pole clicked faintly as I stepped off the stagecoach, my boots crunching against the dry earth.

I felt the weight of the place immediately. This was a town that tolerated strangers only so long as they kept to themselves.

The Queen's informant had given me a name. A man had been seen buying supplies here weeks ago, a man who fit the curator's description. He had not stayed long but had asked too many questions about abandoned mines in the nearby hills.

If he was hiding, he had chosen well. The west had no shortage of places for men to disappear.

I found a room at the only inn and set my things down before stepping into the saloon. The air smelled of whiskey and dust, and the piano in the corner played quietly, its keys struck by a tired musician. I drew little attention as I entered, save for a few lingering glances at my coat, which was far too fine for this part of the world.

I ordered a drink and took a seat near the back, watching the room. Men spoke in low voices, hats tipped low over their eyes. A few cards slapped against tables, and the clink of glasses punctuated the conversations.

When the barkeep brought me my glass, I slid a coin across the counter and spoke quietly. "I am looking for a man. Older, with spectacles and a nervous habit of wringing his hands. He would have passed through a week or two ago, asking about mines."

The barkeep eyed me for a long moment before shrugging slightly. "Might've been someone like that. Folks who ask too many questions about the hills don't stay long. Heard he was heading north, maybe toward the old Whitcomb Mine. Aint much left up there but rust and rocks. Folks say it's haunted. Can't say I believe it, but I ain't riding up to see for myself."

"Thank you," I said simply, finishing my drink before rising.

The Whitcomb Mine. It was a start, and in this country, a start was more than most men could hope for.

As I stepped back onto the street, the sun had begun to set, painting the dry land in long streaks of gold and shadow. Somewhere out in those hills, the curator sat with the painting, hiding from the world. Whether he fled out of fear or guilt, I would soon know.

And if he was hiding in a place men called haunted, he would not be hiding alone.

The evening sun had dipped lower by the time I stepped out of the saloon, painting the dusty street in long shadows. The air smelled of dry earth and horses, the faint sound of boots scuffing over wood porches mixing with the low hum of talk from behind swinging doors.

I adjusted my coat as I descended the steps, already aware of how much I stood out here. My clothing was too fine, too carefully kept, my posture too proper for a place where most men wore weariness like armor. I caught more than one lingering glance as I stepped into the road, boots crunching in the dirt, and I knew full well how foreign I looked against the backdrop of sun-baked timber and faded hats.

Then I saw her.

Standing near the hitching post by the general store, her white hair caught the dying sunlight, glowing faintly against the gold. Bella. She wore attire suited for the west now, a black riding skirt and a fitted blouse beneath a dark, dusted coat, the silver trim catching the light when she shifted. Her golden eyes scanned the street casually, but even in this crowd she moved with a quiet grace that seemed to set her apart, as if the place bent around her presence.

I stopped for a moment without meaning to, surprised at how quickly recognition struck. The last time we had spoken, it had been among misty streets and warm light in Three Portlands, and now here she stood, among dust and grit, as if she belonged here entirely.

Her gaze slid across the street and caught mine. There was the smallest flicker of something in her expression, a soft recognition, and then that faint, knowing smile I had come to expect from her.

"Well," she said as I approached, her voice warm but with its usual quiet amusement. "I did not expect to see you so far from your fine halls and polished manners, Theodore. You stand out here like a coin in the dirt."

"I suspected as much," I said, coming to stand beside her. "But you seem to have adapted perfectly."

Bella gave a light shrug, her golden eyes glinting faintly in the setting sun. "I make a habit of blending in where I need to. Something you might consider, unless you enjoy every pair of eyes in this town wondering who you are."

I allowed the faintest smile. "I had not planned on announcing myself, but it seems my coat does so for me. Perhaps I should have left it in England."

"Perhaps," she said, her smile softening. "But I cannot say I mind seeing you look so out of place."

"And what brings you here, Bella," I asked, studying her carefully. "You are not the type to wander without purpose."

Her smile lingered, but she looked toward the street instead of answering directly. "America has its charms. Even the west. And perhaps I am simply curious about what you are doing here."

I gave her a measured look. "Then you already know why I am here."

Bella tilted her head slightly, the sunlight catching in her hair as she glanced back at me. "I might. But you will tell me anyway."

"I am looking for a man," I said. "An older curator who fled with a painting. The Queen wants him back, along with the piece."

"And you came all the way here to find him," Bella said, her voice quiet. "You do enjoy chasing things no one else would bother with."

"It is my duty," I said.

Bella studied me for a long moment, her golden eyes softer now. "It is more than duty with you, Theodore. You chase because you cannot stop yourself. You cannot leave things undone, even when no one would blame you for turning away."

I said nothing, only gave a faint breath, somewhere between agreement and dismissal. "Do you know anything of him?"

"Perhaps," she said, her smile curling slightly again. "But information is rarely free, and you are very easy to bargain with when you want something."

I raised a brow. "And what would you ask for?"

Bella looked at me for a long moment, her golden eyes glimmering with quiet mischief. "A simple thing. You will walk with me for a while. No talk of paintings or curators. Just you, here, in this strange little town, for as long as I decide."

I gave her a long look, but there was no hesitation in her gaze, only that same quiet confidence she always carried.

"Very well," I said finally.

Bella smiled, a warmer one this time, and gestured toward the street. "Then let us walk. You can look like you belong to this place for once, even if only for an hour."

And so I walked with her, my fine coat gathering dust as the last light of the sun stretched across the western horizon.

The sun was sinking lower by the time Bella led me toward the general store, the sky painted in streaks of red and gold that seemed to set the whole dusty street alight. The townsfolk moved lazily now, finishing their errands before retreating indoors for the night. Bella walked beside me with an ease I could not match, her boots kicking up little puffs of dust with every step, her golden eyes glancing toward me now and again with quiet amusement.

"You really do look like you stepped off a steamer this morning," she said finally, her lips curving faintly.

"I did," I replied.

"Exactly," she said, tilting her head toward me. "And everyone can tell. You walk too straight, your coat is too fine, and your boots are polished. You look like a man who thinks this is a brief stop before returning to something better."

"Perhaps because it is," I said.

Bella gave me a knowing look, the corners of her mouth lifting. "Then humor me. Come inside for a moment."

Before I could ask, she stepped into the general store, pushing the door open as the little bell above it chimed. I followed, finding the inside warm and cramped, lined with shelves of tools, canned goods, and folded stacks of clothing. A man behind the counter nodded to Bella, who returned the gesture with a polite smile before sifting through a row of hanging ponchos.

She pulled one free, holding it up against me critically. It was a simple brown, patterned faintly with darker stripes, nothing remarkable, but it looked far more suited to the west than my fine traveling coat.

"I am not wearing that," I said, raising a brow.

"Yes, you are," she replied without hesitation, already tossing it at me. "Put it on."

I caught it, giving her a measured look. "And why, exactly, am I wearing this?"

"Because you stand out, and it will help you blend in," she said. "And because I want to see you in it. Go on."

There was no use arguing. I draped the poncho over my shoulders, adjusting it slightly as Bella stepped back to look me over. Her golden eyes glinted with obvious amusement, and she plucked a wide-brimmed cowboy hat from a nearby shelf, setting it on my head before I could protest.

She smiled then, the first genuine, unguarded smile I had seen from her in some time. "Well now, you sure are looking the part."

I gave her a flat look, though a faint hint of amusement tugged at me despite myself. "Are you pleased with yourself?"

"Very," Bella said. "If I did not know you, I might almost believe you were born here. Almost."

"I find that hard to believe," I said, adjusting the hat slightly.

"Do not," she said. "You are charming enough to fit in anywhere if you bother trying. You simply choose not to."

I glanced at her, though she was already pretending to study the shelves. "And what does that mean."

She shrugged lightly. "It means you are always moving. Always chasing something. You never stop long enough to let a place feel like it belongs to you. Not England, not Three Portlands, and certainly not here."

I considered that for a moment, watching her as she moved past me toward the counter. "And you. Do you feel like you belong anywhere."

Bella hesitated just for a fraction of a second before smiling faintly. "Sometimes. But belonging is not always about staying. Sometimes it is about how long you let yourself pretend."

She paid for the poncho and hat herself, handing the shopkeeper a few coins before turning to me.

"You did not have to do that," I said.

"I know," she said, her smile softening. "But I wanted to."

We stepped back out into the cooling evening, the air heavy with the scent of dust and faint woodsmoke. The sky was turning a deep purple now, lanterns beginning to glow in the windows.

"Do you hate it here," Bella asked after a quiet moment, her gaze sweeping over the street.

"No," I said truthfully. "It is not England, but there is something honest about this place. Harsh, but honest."

Bella nodded slowly, her golden eyes watching me as if measuring the sincerity of my words. "I thought you might say something like that."

We walked in silence for a while after that, the town slowly settling into night around us. For the first time since arriving, I felt almost unnoticed, though I suspected that had less to do with the poncho and hat and more to do with her presence beside me.

The sun was nearly gone by the time we left the town behind, the dusty streets giving way to open land bathed in the deep red and violet of the evening sky. Bella walked ahead with an easy confidence, her black coat brushing lightly against dry brush as she led us toward a rise just beyond the edge of town. I followed, my boots crunching against the earth, the poncho and hat she had insisted I wear drawing far fewer stares now than my usual coat would have.

She glanced back at me once, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "You are starting to look the part now, Theodore. Almost like a man who belongs here."

"I will take that as praise," I said.

"It is," she said with a light laugh. "Though you still walk like someone who expects the Queen to appear at any moment to judge you for the dust on your boots."

I shook my head slightly, but a small smile found its way to me despite myself.

We reached the top of the rise after a few minutes, the ground evening out into a rocky overlook. Below us stretched an endless expanse of desert, rolling with soft dunes and dotted with jagged stone outcroppings that cast long shadows in the fading light. The air smelled of dry earth and faint sage, and the silence carried a strange, serene weight, broken only by the whisper of wind across the rocks.

Bella settled onto a flat stone near the edge, sitting with one knee drawn up slightly, her coat pooling behind her. I joined her, lowering myself to the rock beside her, resting the Sharps rifle across my lap as I looked out over the view.

"This is not England," she said after a long moment, her golden eyes scanning the horizon.

"No, it is not," I replied.

"It feels honest here," Bella continued, her voice quiet. "Untamed, harsh, but honest. No kings, no courts, no one to care about who you are or what you have done. Only the land deciding what you can and cannot be."

"Does that suit you," I asked.

Bella tilted her head slightly, her golden eyes catching the last streaks of sunlight. "I do not belong anywhere, Theodore. But here, at least, I can pretend."

I looked at her, my voice softer. "And do you think I belong anywhere."

Bella turned her gaze toward me, a faint smile curling at the corner of her mouth. "You belong everywhere and nowhere at once. That is your problem."

Before I could answer, she shifted slightly closer, leaning until her head rested gently on my shoulder. Her white hair brushed against my poncho, glowing faintly in the dim light.

I glanced at her, one brow lifting slightly. "Comfortable, are we?"

"Very," Bella said without lifting her head, her tone warm and teasing. "Besides, you wear this ridiculous poncho far too well. It would be a shame not to use it as it was meant to be used."

"As a pillow," I asked, glancing down at her.

"As something softer than rocks," she replied with a quiet laugh. "You should be flattered. I do not make a habit of resting on every man dressed as a cowboy."

I shook my head slightly, though I felt a rare, quiet amusement in her words. "Then I shall take it as an honor."

"Good," Bella said simply, her golden eyes half-closed now as she watched the horizon.

We sat there as the last light faded, the desert bathed in silver under the first stars. For once, there was no talk of stolen paintings or curators, no chasing of duties or distant promises. Just the quiet sound of the wind and Bella resting against my shoulder as if, for this moment, the world had no need of us at all.

The stars had begun to scatter across the darkening sky, pale and quiet, as we sat together on the rocky overlook. The desert stretched endlessly below us, silvered by moonlight, the ridges and cliffs cutting long shadows that looked almost like sleeping beasts sprawled across the land.

Bella had not moved her head from my shoulder, and I had grown accustomed to the faint weight of it against me, the quiet rise and fall of her breathing as she stared out over the horizon. The Sharps rifle rested loosely across my lap, though for once my hands were still, my thoughts less restless than they had been in days.

"This is almost strange," I said after a long silence.

She made a soft sound, almost questioning, without lifting her head.

"Sitting here, doing nothing," I clarified. "No pursuit, no plan, just this."

Bella's golden eyes shifted slightly to look at me, though she did not lift her head. "You sound surprised to find you can stop for more than a breath."

"Because I rarely can," I admitted. "Even now, I keep thinking of what I should be doing."

"And yet you are here," she said simply. "Which means some part of you wanted this. Even if you will not admit it."

I gave a quiet breath, almost a laugh, but said nothing.

Bella's eyes softened, the teasing edge in her voice giving way to something quieter. "You do not have to chase everything alone, Theodore. Sometimes letting someone else stand beside you does not make you weaker."

I glanced at her then, but she was looking back out at the desert, her expression unreadable in the moonlight.

"You speak as if you plan to stand beside me," I said.

"Perhaps I do," she replied, her tone lightening again, though there was something warmer beneath it. "Perhaps I already am."

For a while, we let the silence stretch again, the cool wind brushing across the rocks, carrying with it the dry scent of sage and dust. Then, without lifting her head, Bella spoke again, her tone casual, but her words deliberate.

"Tell me Theodore, What is it you fear the most?"

I would be caught off guard by such a question, my mind began flickering for an answer but I suppose I already knew it all too well "If I feared for anything it would be losing this moment here and now with you... Perhaps forgetting you entirely would shake this naturalist heart of mine."

She smirked at this as if the answer was satisfactory for her. Then in a moment she moved on from why answer and responded back with "You should head for the old mine in the hills,"

I turned slightly to look at her. "So you do know."

Her golden eyes flicked to me briefly, glinting faintly in the starlight. "I know many things. But yes, the man you are looking for is there. He has been hiding for days. You are not the only one looking for him, though."

"Bandits," I guessed.

Bella's faint smile returned. "Clever as always. They think he has more than a painting. They are half right."

"And how do you know all of this," I asked.

Bella finally lifted her head from my shoulder, sitting up straighter as she brushed a stray lock of white hair behind her ear. "Because I listen. And because people speak more than they should when they think no one is paying attention. You should thank me for saving you the trouble of asking every drunk in that saloon."

I gave a small, wry smile. "Then thank you, Bella."

"You are welcome," she said, her smile softening. "Though I doubt you would have sat here so long if I had told you earlier."

"You are probably right," I admitted.

Bella rose smoothly from the rock, brushing the dust from her coat. She looked down at me, her golden eyes warm but glimmering with their usual quiet mischief. "You should get some rest, Theodore. Tomorrow will not be quiet. Those bandits are not the kind to talk first."

"And you," I asked, standing as well.

Bella tilted her head, that same knowing smile curling her lips. "I might see you there. Or I might not. But either way, you will manage. You always do."

Then, as she stepped closer, she leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to my cheek. It was brief, almost casual, but her golden eyes lingered on mine for just a moment longer than needed.

"Consider that for luck," she said, turning away before I could respond.

I watched her as she started back down the path toward town, her black coat catching faint streaks of moonlight as she walked. I adjusted the rifle on my shoulder, my gaze turning toward the dark hills in the distance.

The curator was waiting. And so, it seemed, were others.

Tomorrow would not be quiet indeed.

Dawn crept slowly across the desert, painting the sands in soft shades of gold and pale rose. I set out before the sun had fully risen, my Sharps rifle slung across my back and the poncho Bella had insisted I wear draped lightly over my shoulders. The air was cool still, though the promise of heat already hung on the horizon.

The trail to the old Whitcomb Mine wound through dry gullies and sparse brush, the ground marked by wagon ruts long abandoned. The town had been right. This place had been dead for years. The wooden scaffolds of the mine stood black against the rising sun, leaning like old bones against the hillside. It looked quiet, but the kind of quiet that felt staged, as if the land itself were holding its breath.

I dismounted at the edge of the mine's outer camp, tying my horse to a half-broken post. There were tracks in the dirt. Not just one man's. Too many boots, too recent. Bandits. Bella had been right.

I moved slowly, keeping to the edges of the scattered shacks. My boots crunched lightly over the ground as I climbed a low rise overlooking the mine entrance. From there, I saw them. Five men, maybe six, gathered near the main shaft. They were rough-looking, wide-brimmed hats pulled low, their guns glinting faintly in the morning light. One had a rifle slung lazily over his shoulder, while the rest carried revolvers.

The curator was with them, bound at the wrists and sitting near the mine entrance, his spectacles cracked, his coat torn, his face pale but alive. One of the bandits grabbed him by the collar, shouting something I could not hear from this distance, before striking him across the face and sending him sprawling.

I adjusted my grip on the Sharps rifle. They had not noticed me yet, but time was running thin. I needed to act before they decided they no longer needed the curator alive.

I crept closer, keeping low among the rocks, until I had a clear shot. The Sharps was a single-shot weapon, powerful but slow. It would have to count. I steadied my breathing, the sun cresting fully over the horizon as I took aim at the man standing nearest the curator.

The shot cracked through the still morning air. The bandit dropped instantly, thrown back into the dirt. The others spun around, shouting, weapons already drawn.

I ducked behind the nearest crate as bullets tore into the wood, splinters flying. The sound of those revolvers was sharp and fast, far quicker than I had anticipated. I broke open the rifle, sliding in another round as bullets kicked up dirt around me.

I rose just enough to fire. Another bandit fell, clutching his chest as he crumpled to the ground. The others began spreading out, trying to flank me. Smart men, or at least experienced killers.

I shifted positions, reloading quickly before holstering the rifle. The bandits' revolvers barked again and again, their rhythm relentless, and I could feel just how outpaced I was by the sheer speed of their weapons. My rolling block pistol came free in one hand, my saber in the other.

The first bandit came around the side, revolver raised. My pistol cracked, dropping him before he could fire. Another rushed in from the opposite side, and my saber met him in a sharp arc, cutting across his arm and shoulder. He stumbled back, firing wildly, but his shots went wide.

A third charged, swinging his revolver like a club. I stepped in, knocking it aside with the saber before striking him with the hilt, sending him sprawling into the dirt.

The last man fired twice, the bullets striking so close I felt the heat of one graze past. I fired once in return, my single shot taking him in the chest. He dropped instantly, the revolver slipping from his grasp into the dust.

The camp fell silent except for the faint creak of the mine scaffolds in the morning breeze.

I lowered the pistol, sliding it back into its holster, and glanced around at the fallen bandits. For a moment, I simply stood there, listening to the echo of my own breathing. Then I crouched beside one of the men, picking up his revolver.

I turned it in my hand, studying the fine mechanism, the weight perfectly balanced for quick use. Its cylinder still held three rounds, and even in the low light, I could see the careful craftsmanship in its design.

"I did not realize how powerful these things truly were," I said quietly, almost to myself. "Samuel Colt was one hell of an inventor."

I slid the revolver into the empty holster at my side, its weight fitting easily against my hip. "I think I will keep this. It would be a shame not to see what I can do with it."

The curator stirred weakly near the entrance, drawing my attention back. I crossed the distance, cutting the ropes at his wrists.

"You are here for the painting," he managed, his voice hoarse.

"I am," I said simply. "You are fortunate to still be alive to tell me where it is."

"They took it inside," the curator said, rubbing his wrists shakily. "They thought it was cursed, but they wanted to sell it anyway. I told them not to open it."

"Then we had best not linger," I said, glancing toward the yawning mouth of the mine. "Stay here. I will bring it out."

The curator nodded weakly, his hands trembling too much to argue.

I adjusted the poncho Bella had chosen for me, resting the new revolver at my side, and tightened my grip on the saber. The bandits had been bad enough, but the way the curator had spoken of the painting carried a weight that was harder to ignore.

I stepped into the shadowed mouth of the mine. The air was colder inside, unnaturally so, and carried a faint hum that almost sounded like whispering words I could not understand.

Whatever lay waiting in the dark, this was far from finished.

The air in the mine was heavy, colder than the desert outside should ever allow. Each step I took stirred fine dust from the ground, and the sound of my boots echoed unnaturally against the stone walls. The deeper I went, the more I felt it, that low hum in the air, pulsing faintly like a heartbeat muffled by stone.

The wooden beams above creaked under their own age, shadows stretching unnaturally long in the lanternlight I carried. My hand stayed close to the revolver at my hip, the weight of it a quiet reassurance. After seeing what these weapons could do in the hands of men, I found myself more impressed than I cared to admit. Samuel Colt had created something extraordinary. Brutal, efficient, and far faster than anything I had carried before. I could not help but wonder what a man of science and patience might do with such a design refined further.

I pressed deeper into the mine, the lantern's glow painting the narrow walls in wavering gold. The air grew colder with every step, carrying a smell of rust and something older, something that felt like it had waited far too long in silence.

The passage opened into a larger chamber at last, and the whispers grew stronger, curling faintly around me like words spoken just out of reach. The painting was there, propped against a crate, its frame catching the dull light.

It was no ordinary work. The image shifted almost imperceptibly as I drew closer, as if my eyes could not hold it still. At one glance, it seemed to show a great stone hall with high arches, at another, the shapes twisted into something else entirely, into shadows shaped like limbs that seemed to move when I was not looking.

A dead bandit lay nearby, his body sprawled unnaturally, his face frozen in terror. Whatever had killed him had not needed to touch him.

I approached carefully, saber in one hand, the revolver still holstered but ready. The closer I came, the colder it felt, the hum rising in pitch until it bordered on something almost like a whisper. For a brief moment, the image seemed to shift again, showing a tall, thin figure standing in the distance of that painted hall. Its head turned toward me, as if aware.

"You are only paint and canvas," I said quietly, my voice steady despite the chill crawling at the back of my mind. "And you are coming with me."

The hum surged for a moment, almost angry, but I ignored it. I wrapped the poncho tightly around the frame, and the air shifted immediately, the cold beginning to fade, though I could still feel something lingering beneath the weight of it.

Turning back, I left the chamber without looking behind me. The silence that followed felt almost deliberate, as if the mine itself were watching me leave.

The curator was where I had left him, sitting slumped against a broken beam. Relief flickered in his tired eyes when he saw the wrapped painting in my arms, though his hands trembled as he spoke.

"You have it," he said hoarsely. "You should not have touched it. You do not know what it does."

"I wrapped it," I said simply, setting it briefly against the wall. "It is not going to harm me for carrying it."

The curator shook his head slowly, his expression grim. "It does not need to harm you now. Sometimes it waits. Sometimes it lingers."

I studied him for a long moment before lifting the painting again. "Then we will not linger either. We are leaving. The sooner it is back where it belongs, the better."

The curator nodded weakly, forcing himself to his feet. His legs were unsteady, but he followed as I led him back toward the light.

Outside, the sun had risen fully, casting long golden streaks across the desert. The warmth felt almost alien after the cold of the mine. I secured the painting carefully to my horse, tightening the straps so the canvas would not shift.

The curator climbed onto the horse behind me, holding on weakly as I adjusted the reins. The sun glinted off the wrapped poncho that held the painting, and for a brief moment, I thought I felt it hum again.

"Let us hope," I said quietly, "that this trip home will be quieter than the ride here."

The horse started forward, hooves kicking up dry dust as we rode back toward town, leaving the mine and its secrets behind us in the golden light of morning.

The journey back to England was long and quiet, marked only by the steady creak of the ship's timbers and the soft rocking of the waves. The curator spoke little, spending most of the voyage staring out at the sea as though his thoughts were trapped somewhere within that cursed painting. I did not press him. There were some burdens a man had to settle with himself before he could speak of them.

The painting remained wrapped in the poncho Bella had given me. I kept it near, never letting it out of my sight, though I was careful not to stare at it for too long when I checked the straps. Even covered, there were moments when I thought I felt it pulse faintly, as if some unseen thing inside the canvas was waiting, watching.

By the time we docked at Southampton, the air felt different, heavier with the familiar damp of home. A carriage waited for us, arranged by the Queen's orders, and we traveled directly to the royal collection where the painting had once hung.

The Queen herself was waiting when we arrived, standing at the far end of the private gallery. She was as poised as ever, her presence commanding without a single word spoken. The curator stepped forward first, bowing deeply before taking his place near the guards who had been sent to escort him for questioning.

I set the painting down carefully before her, unwrapping it only enough for the frame to be visible. Her eyes lingered on it for a long moment, unreadable, before she finally spoke.

"You have done well, Lord Blackwood," she said, her voice calm but carrying that familiar weight of authority. "This will keep the Order satisfied. You understand how important this piece is."

"I understand," I said simply.

She studied me for another long moment, as if searching for some unspoken detail in my face. "You have been to America before, but never this far west. Did you find it changed?"

"Much has changed," I said. "But not its honesty. It is still a land that keeps little hidden, even when its people try."

The Queen gave a faint, thoughtful nod. "Then you have done the Crown a great service once again. I thank you."

With that, she gestured for the guards to take the painting to its sealed chamber. As they carried it away, I felt a faint chill pass through the air, though it might have been only my imagination.

When all was done, I returned to the estate. Deeds was waiting at the door when I arrived, his usual calm expression softening just slightly when he saw me.

"You have returned in one piece," Deeds said, taking my coat as I stepped inside. "And with no strange injuries this time, I hope."

"Nothing that will not fade," I replied, setting the revolver I had taken from the bandits onto the table.

Deeds eyed it briefly, his brow lifting a fraction. "A new acquisition, my lord."

I gave a small nod, loosening the poncho from my shoulders. "To think man could have such power in his hands with one of these. I simply must see what I can do to improve it."

Deeds gave the faintest hint of a smile, though his tone remained measured. "I hope you do not plan to make a habit of adopting every weapon you find interesting."

"Only the ones that might be useful," I said, lowering myself into the chair by the fire.

Deeds folded my coat neatly over his arm, studying me for a moment. "You care for this work more than you admit, my lord. Most would have left the curator to his fate, yet you brought him back alive, and with the painting intact. I suspect few would thank you for the effort."

I leaned back, glancing toward the fire. "Perhaps not. But it mattered, and that is enough."

Deeds inclined his head slightly, the faintest trace of approval in his eyes. "I will have supper prepared. It seems you have earned it again."

"Thank you, Deeds," I said, letting the quiet of the estate settle around me.

For the first time since I had left for America, I allowed myself to relax fully, the warmth of home replacing the dry chill of the desert and the hum of that cursed painting. Whatever waited for me next, for tonight at least, the world could wait.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood
Viscount, Naturalist, and English Cowboy

The Tea Party

The shot had been clean, a sharp punch of heat that tore through me before I even realized it had struck. One moment, there had been shouting, the clash of metal and the crack of gunfire, and the next there was only the taste of iron in my mouth as I staggered back. The world tilted sharply, then faded. I remembered falling, the cold of the earth against my cheek, and then nothing.

When I opened my eyes again, I was no longer on that field.

The room I found myself in was impossibly white. There were no walls, no ceiling, just a blank endlessness that stretched out in every direction. The chair beneath me was simple and wooden, perfectly crafted but unremarkable, and in front of me sat another chair already occupied.

The man sitting there wore armor of steel and bronze, aged but polished in deliberate care, and marked with faint Latin inscriptions along the plates. His helmet was still on, its surface gold and bronze, the gaps between its plates painted a deep scarlet. A cross was etched boldly across the front, catching the soft glow of the lightless room. His eyes glowed faintly from within, bronze and calm, as if they were embers behind a grate.

Between us sat a small wooden table, perfectly set for tea. A polished kettle steamed quietly, and two cups rested upon fine saucers.

The man tilted his head slightly as I stirred, his voice carrying an unmistakable Australian accent, smooth and grounded, almost casual despite the strangeness of our surroundings.

"Ah, you are awake," he said, lifting the kettle and pouring a steady stream of amber liquid into one of the cups. "Took you long enough. Thought you might sleep through the whole thing."

I sat straighter, keeping my posture composed though my mind was still catching up to what had happened. "And what thing is this exactly?"

He set the kettle down, his bronze-gloved hand gesturing lightly to the table. "Tea. What else would it be."

I stared at him for a long moment, taking in the strange mix of solemnity and ease that surrounded him. "You will forgive me if I am not entirely at ease. I was shot moments ago."

"Moments ago for you," he replied, sliding one of the cups toward me with deliberate calm. "But time works differently here. You are not dying. Not yet anyway. So drink. Might as well enjoy the wait."

I did not touch the cup, my attention fixed on him. "Who are you."

There was a faint pause, and then he leaned back in his chair, bronze eyes glimmering faintly through the slit of the helmet's cross. "Boston."

One of my brows lifted slightly. "Boston. That is an odd name for a man with an Australian accent."

He chuckled softly at that, the sound low and unbothered. "I get that a lot."

I finally lifted the cup, though I did not drink yet, studying him carefully. Whoever he was, whatever this place was, nothing about him felt ordinary. He watched me steadily, his posture relaxed, almost as if he had all the time in the world to wait for my questions.

And in this place, perhaps he did.

Boston lifted his cup with an easy grace that seemed entirely at odds with the heavy armor he wore. The steam curled lazily upward as he took a slow sip, his bronze-lit eyes watching me from behind the cross-marked helmet.

"You may as well drink," he said after a moment, setting his cup back down with a soft clink against the saucer. "I promise it is not poisoned. I would not waste good tea like that."

I studied him for another long moment before raising the cup to my lips. The tea was warm, fragrant, surprisingly smooth, and when I set it back down, Boston tilted his head slightly, as if satisfied by the gesture.

"Better," he said. "I have always found it easier to talk with someone when they have tea in hand."

"And what exactly do you wish to talk about," I asked, keeping my tone measured.

Boston leaned back in his chair slightly, the faint light glinting off the scarlet-painted gaps in his armor. "You, of course. You have done quite a lot, and I cannot say it has not been entertaining to watch."

My eyes narrowed faintly. "You speak as if you have been watching me for some time."

"Perhaps I have," Boston said, his tone light, almost amused. "Or perhaps you simply have a way of being noticed. Men who throw themselves at warlocks, hunt cursed relics, and lecture gnomes about soil tend to leave an impression."

That earned him a long, level look from me. "You know much more than you should."

Boston gave a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "I know enough. And I like to think I am a good judge of character. You are not like most men I have seen. You care, even when you will not admit it. You are a curious thing, Theodore Blackwood. Always moving, always chasing, even when it is not for yourself."

"You speak as if you know me better than I know myself," I said.

"Not better," Boston replied, bronze eyes glinting faintly behind the cross-marked slit of his helmet. "But sometimes an outside view is clearer. You do not see how much weight you carry because you never stop to look."

I gave a quiet breath through my nose, lifting the cup again. "And you are telling me this because."

"Because I like tea," Boston said, his tone suddenly playful, though his gaze stayed steady on me. "And because it is not often I get to sit across from someone who reminds me that some people still do what they do simply because it is right."

I tilted my head slightly, watching him carefully. "You are an odd man, Boston. You sit in a room like this, wearing armor fit for a knight out of legend, and you speak like a wandering farmer."

Boston laughed again, the sound rich and genuine. "That is the first time anyone has called me a farmer. I think I like it. Better than some of the other names people have given me."

"And what names are those," I asked.

He lifted his cup again, his posture easy. "Names you would not believe if I told you."

There was a quiet moment after that, the two of us drinking in silence, the steam curling between us. Despite the strangeness of it all, there was a strange calmness to the scene. For a man who radiated the presence of something far greater than himself, Boston's manner was disarmingly ordinary, almost kind.

Finally, I spoke again. "How long will I be here."

Boston glanced toward me, setting his cup down. "Not long. You are not meant to stay. Just long enough to drink your tea and to think about how much you are still willing to give to the world that asks for so much of you."

"And if I said I am tired of giving," I said quietly.

Boston's bronze-lit eyes watched me, unblinking. "Then I would say you are lying. You are too stubborn to stop now. It is not in you to leave things undone."

I let out a breath, almost amused despite myself. "Everyone seems to say that lately."

"Perhaps they are right," Boston said simply, leaning back with an almost knowing smile.

For a while after that, we said nothing, only sat with the quiet and the tea. The room was endless and empty, but somehow, it felt... peaceful.

The tea between us had grown cooler by the time Boston spoke again. His bronze-lit eyes studied me quietly, the glow faint but steady behind the cross-marked slit of his helmet.

"You are quieter than I expected," he said at last, swirling the last of his tea gently in its cup. "Most men who end up here do not stop talking. Questions, demands, prayers, you name it. But you... you sit and think."

"I prefer to think before I speak," I said. "Especially when I am... wherever this is."

Boston chuckled, leaning back slightly in his chair. "Good answer. Most men would not admit to being unsettled."

"I am not unsettled," I said, keeping my tone steady. "Curious, yes. But not unsettled."

"Of course you are," Boston said with quiet amusement. "You are Theodore Blackwood, Viscount, naturalist, explorer, and the man who never admits when he is shaken. You wear that composure like armor even now."

I regarded him calmly. "And you know this how."

Boston lifted his cup and took a sip before answering. "Because I pay attention. I always pay attention."

The silence stretched for a moment, and then Boston leaned forward slightly, resting his gauntleted hands on the table. "Tell me, why do you keep doing it."

"Doing what," I asked, though I knew what he meant.

"All of it," Boston said simply. "Running toward danger, risking yourself for things most men would never care to save. You could have turned away a long time ago. You could live quietly, like the nobility you were born from. But you do not. Why."

I held his gaze, my hands resting lightly around the cup. "Because it matters. Because someone has to."

Boston smiled faintly behind the bronze-lit visor. "There it is. You did not even pause to think before saying it. That is why you are here. That is why men like you matter, even when you will never admit it to yourself."

"I am no hero," I said flatly.

"No," Boston said, tilting his head slightly. "You are not. You are something better. Heroes chase glory. You chase what is right. You will never see the difference, but I do."

I let out a quiet breath, looking down briefly at the tea before me. "You sound very certain of what I am."

"Because I am," Boston said, his tone calm, almost warm. "Men like you are rare. Too rare. The world tips one way or another because of people like you, even when you do not realize it. You are balance, whether you know it or not."

There was something in the way he said it, something deliberate, but he gave me no time to press him further. Instead, he leaned back again, his relaxed tone returning.

"You should be proud of what you are," Boston said. "But of course, you will downplay it, as you always do."

I gave a faint, dry smile at that. "It seems everyone lately has something to say about who I am."

Boston chuckled again, the sound rich and almost fond. "Because it is true. But that is fine. The world needs men like you to pretend they are nothing special. It keeps things... steady."

I tilted my head slightly, watching him. "You speak as though you have seen the world shift many times."

Boston's bronze-lit eyes glinted faintly as he looked back at me. "Perhaps I have. Perhaps I have seen more than you could imagine. But that is not your concern. Your only concern is to keep doing what you do best."

"And what is that," I asked.

"Being you," Boston said simply, lifting his cup in a small gesture, as if toasting me. "That is all that is ever asked of you."

We sat in silence for a long moment after that, the endless white room around us impossibly still, the faint steam of the tea curling lazily between us. Despite his words, despite the mystery of who or what he was, there was a strange comfort in sitting here with him, as though some quiet part of me believed him entirely.

Boston broke the silence once more, his tone softer now. "You will wake soon. But for now, drink your tea. You will not taste tea this fine again for quite some time."

I lifted the cup again without another word, the warm liquid settling easily as the silence stretched between us.

"You have been very calm through all this," Boston said, setting his cup back onto the saucer with a soft click. "Most men are not. Most fight against it. They demand answers or beg to return. But you simply sit."

"Because sitting is all that can be done," I replied. "I have been in enough situations to know that panic achieves nothing."

Boston tilted his head slightly, the bronze light in his eyes glinting faintly. "And that is why you are you. Always measured, always ready to endure what is placed in front of you. You do not realize how rare that is."

I gave him a faint look over the rim of my cup. "You speak as though you expected me to be here."

Boston paused for only a fraction of a second before leaning back in his chair, his tone calm, almost casual, but the weight of his words felt deliberate. "Everything is going according to the script."

My eyes narrowed slightly. "Script."

"Yes," Boston said simply, lifting his cup again. "Everyone has one, whether they know it or not. You have been following yours your entire life. You think you are wandering, chasing things out of curiosity, but every step you take falls exactly where it should. You are not meant to die today, Theodore Blackwood. That much has been written already."

"Written by who," I asked, my voice low.

Boston's bronze eyes held mine, unwavering, but his tone softened into something almost kind. "That is not something you need to know. Not yet."

I studied him for a long moment, but he simply drank his tea again, as if the conversation had drifted to something as trivial as the weather. His calm was unshakable, his presence grounded in a way that felt ancient.

"Do you truly believe all things are written," I asked finally.

Boston chuckled softly, setting his cup down. "Written, yes. But even a script can change depending on the man who speaks the lines. You have changed more of yours than you think. That is why I enjoy watching you."

"Watching me," I repeated.

He gave a quiet, almost amused hum. "I have an interest in balance. And you, for all your stubbornness, bring balance wherever you go, even if you do not mean to."

I tilted my head slightly, my voice steady. "And you are balance."

Boston's eyes glimmered faintly, but he gave no answer to that. Instead, he looked down into his cup, swirling what little tea remained, his tone quieter now. "I told you before, you are not staying. You will wake soon. But know this, Theodore Blackwood—keep walking the way you do. The script depends on it."

The room around us seemed to grow brighter, the endless white humming faintly now, as if something unseen had begun to pull me away. Boston sat as calm as ever, his bronze lit eyes fixed on me, the faint steam of his tea curling lazily upward.

"You will not remember everything I have said when you wake," he added, his tone almost playful again. "But something in you will carry it, whether you know it or not."

The brightness grew stronger, and for the first time, Boston gave me something that felt like genuine warmth in his voice.

"It has been a pleasure having tea with you, Theodore. Until next time."

The light swallowed everything.

The brightness faded slowly, replaced by the soft creak of floorboards and the faint smell of herbs and clean linen. My eyes opened to a ceiling of plain wooden beams, and for a moment, the quiet hum of that endless white room lingered in my mind before slipping away, leaving only fragments. A bronze glow. The taste of tea. And the name Boston.

I stirred slightly, and a soft voice cut through the haze.

"Easy now, do not move too quickly."

I turned my head to see a woman in a simple healer's apron tending to a bandage wrapped tightly around my side. Her hands were steady, her voice calm. "You were lucky," she said as she adjusted the wrappings. "The bullet passed clean through. Another inch, and you would not be speaking to me right now."

"Fortune favors the stubborn," I said quietly, my voice rough but steady.

The healer gave me a small, approving smile before stepping back to check a bowl of fresh water. "You will live, but you need rest. No lifting, no running off for at least a week."

"I will try to restrain myself," I replied, leaning back against the pillow.

The room was quiet for a long moment, the soft sound of her work filling the space. My mind drifted despite myself, back to that white room, to the figure in steel and bronze, to the soft hum of his voice as he spoke. The memory felt dreamlike, distant, but it lingered with a strange weight, as if some part of me knew it had not been a dream at all.

Everything is going according to the script.

I let out a slow breath, closing my eyes briefly before opening them again. Whatever that meant, it would have to wait.

By the next morning, I was strong enough to sit upright on my own. The healer checked me once more before allowing me to leave, though not without a stern look. I promised her I would take it slow, though both of us knew I would not.

The carriage ride home was quiet, the sun setting low over the fields by the time the estate came into view. The familiar sight of its stone walls brought a calm I had not realized I needed until that moment.

Deeds was waiting at the door, as he always was. His expression was unreadable, though his eyes flicked briefly to the bandages beneath my coat.

"You have returned, my lord," Deeds said, taking my hat and coat as I stepped inside. "Though not without incident, I see."

"Nothing I will not recover from," I said, easing into one of the chairs near the fire.

Deeds set the coat aside neatly before turning back to me. "You seem quieter than usual. Did something happen?"

I glanced into the fire, the faint bronze glow of it stirring that memory again. "I had tea with a man named Boston."

Deeds tilted his head slightly, his brow raising. "Boston. That is an unusual name."

"So I told him," I said, leaning back in the chair.

Deeds watched me for a moment longer before nodding slightly, his voice calm as ever. "Whoever he is, I hope he was good company."

I gave a faint smile, still staring at the fire. "He was. More than I expected."

Deeds inclined his head, his tone measured but softer than usual. "Then perhaps it was time well spent, my lord. You could use more quiet moments like that."

I let out a quiet breath through my nose, a rare ease settling in me as the fire crackled softly. "Perhaps I could."

Deeds gave a small, knowing nod before excusing himself to see to supper, leaving me with the firelight and my thoughts.

Everything is going according to the script.

I did not know what that truly meant, not yet, but somehow I believed it.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood
Viscount, Naturalist, and Humble Guest

The Pupil and his Master

The estate had been quiet all morning, save for the faint chirp of birds perched along the garden walls. Deeds had been in the study, as he often was this time of day, sorting through letters and organizing them by urgency. I had been reviewing a map spread across the table in the sitting room, marking possible routes for a botanical expedition I had been planning for the coming spring.

The knock at the front door broke the silence, sharp and deliberate. Deeds moved to answer, but I already knew who it was before the door even opened.

When it did, Mikhail stepped into the entryway, his dark hair falling slightly into his eyes, his posture straighter now than when I had first brought him here. He was taller, his frame lean but stronger, his boyish awkwardness beginning to give way to the makings of a young man. He wore the robe I had given him all that time ago, the one crafted from the pelt of the beast we had hunted in Africa. The material shifted slightly as he moved, its faintly shimmering threads still alive with the protective thaumaturgic energy it had been designed to hold.

"Welcome home, Mikhail," I said, setting the pen aside as I rose to meet him.

Mikhail's face brightened slightly, though he still carried that careful politeness he had learned at Deer College. "It is good to see you again, Lord Blackwood."

Deeds inclined his head politely from where he stood. "I trust your studies have gone well, Master Mikhail."

Mikhail gave a small nod, his words more confident now than they had been before. "They have. I... I have learned much."

I studied him for a moment, taking in how much he had changed. There was a steadiness to him now, a quiet strength that had only been hinted at when I first took him in. "I can see that. Sit. Tell me about it."

He sat with me in the sitting room, Deeds bringing tea as Mikhail spoke about his training. He told me of lessons in shaping reality through delicate manipulations, of channeling energy to reinforce physical strikes, of the focus it took to control even the simplest threads of thaumaturgy. His words carried a restrained pride, though he never once bragged.

When he finished, I leaned back slightly, my gaze on him. "You have come far, Mikhail. More than I imagined when I first found you."

He gave a faint smile, lowering his eyes briefly. "I had a good teacher before I ever went to Deer College."

Before I could answer, there was another knock at the door, this one hurried and uneven. Deeds moved quickly to open it, and a man in travel-worn clothes stepped inside, his face drawn with worry.

"My lord," he said, bowing quickly. "Forgive the intrusion, but we need your help. A girl has gone missing. No one can find her. There are... strange things happening in the woods near the village."

I straightened immediately. "What strange things."

The man hesitated, his voice dropping lower. "The trees move where they should not. People hear voices in their own heads. Some say it is witchcraft. Others say something worse."

Mikhail looked at me, his purple eyes glinting faintly under the soft light.

I nodded once, rising to my feet. "Deeds, prepare the horses. Mikhail and I will leave within the hour."

Deeds inclined his head without question, already moving to make the preparations.

Mikhail stood as well, his voice steady. "You think it is a thaumaturge."

"Perhaps," I said. "Or something more dangerous. Reality bending is a delicate thing, and those who abuse it rarely understand the consequences."

Mikhail adjusted the robe slightly around his shoulders, the protective runes along its trim catching a faint shimmer as he moved. His voice was firm, determined. "Then we will stop them."

I looked at him for a long moment, then gave a small nod of approval. "Yes. We will."

As the horses were prepared, I could not help but glance at him again, taking in how composed he was, how different he had become from the boy I had once found wandering the snow. There was something reassuring in it, though a quiet part of me still hoped this would not push him too far.

The girl was missing, and whatever had taken her, we would find it. But if this was truly a reality bender, then even for Mikhail, it would be no simple task.

The ride to the village was quiet for most of the morning, the winter air sharp against our faces as the hooves of the horses kicked up the frost-bitten dirt road. Mikhail rode beside me, his robe catching the sunlight with faint glimmers as we rode, the runic threads shifting like living veins of silver. He held himself straighter now, more assured, though every so often I caught him glancing toward the woods with that same cautious curiosity he had as a boy.

When we arrived, the village was tense with unease. People moved quickly between their homes, whispering in low tones. Curtains shifted as we passed, and the sound of a baby crying somewhere in the distance seemed to carry sharper than it should have.

Two bobbies stood near the square, their hands resting tensely on their truncheons. A small crowd lingered nearby, murmuring to each other until they saw me dismount. One of the officers stepped forward, his face pale and tight with worry.

"My lord Blackwood," he said quickly, bowing his head slightly out of habit more than respect. "We are grateful you came so quickly. A girl vanished this morning. Just after sunrise. We have men searching the woods now."

Mikhail dismounted beside me, his robe falling neatly as he stepped forward. His purple eyes glimmered faintly as he looked toward the woods. I addressed the bobby directly, keeping my tone level. "Tell me what you know. Every detail."

The officer hesitated before answering. "She went missing while gathering kindling at the edge of the trees. Her brother heard her scream, but when he reached the spot, there were no tracks leading away, no signs of a struggle. Only... only the ground."

"The ground," I asked.

The bobby shifted uncomfortably. "It was soft. Like wet clay. Her footprints just... sank into it, then vanished. It looked wrong, my lord. Not like normal soil."

The second officer, standing slightly behind the first, spoke then. "The woods have been strange all day. The sunlight barely touches past the first trees. Some of the men swore they heard her voice calling deeper in, even though no one saw her."

Mikhail exchanged a look with me, his expression calm but sharp. "A reality bender," he said quietly, just loud enough for the officers to hear. "And untrained."

The first bobby's face tightened further, though he did not speak. I glanced back toward the trees. Even from here, I could feel it a subtle shift in the air, as if the forest itself was pulling inward on itself, breathing in a way no living wood should.

"Pull your men back," I said firmly. "If this is what I think it is, you will lose more than a girl if you go any deeper without understanding what you are facing."

The bobby hesitated, but after a moment, he nodded, gesturing to one of the younger officers to run off and recall the search party.

Mikhail stepped closer to me, his hands resting calmly in the sleeves of his robe. "We should move quickly. The longer he bends reality this way, the harder it will be to bring her back."

I studied him for a long moment. His voice was steady, controlled, far different from the nervous boy who once struggled to even look me in the eye when he spoke. There was a quiet strength to him now, something that made me proud even as a quiet worry grew in the back of my mind.

"Stay close to me," I said.

He gave a single nod, his purple eyes glinting faintly in the low light. "I will."

We stepped toward the tree line together. The air grew colder the moment we crossed into the shade, the sunlight behind us dimming unnaturally. The bobby who had spoken first called after us, his voice uneasy.

"My lord... will you bring her back?"

I looked back at him briefly, then forward again. "Yes," I said simply. "We will bring her back."

The forest loomed ahead, quiet and wrong, and as Mikhail and I stepped deeper, the first hints of that warped reality began to stir around us.

The moment we passed beyond the first line of trees, the air changed. The forest felt alive in a way no forest should. The trunks seemed to lean, their shadows stretching unnaturally across the ground, and the sunlight above dimmed until it was no more than a pale haze filtered through twisted branches.

The earth was soft beneath our boots, each step sinking slightly as if the ground were clay. The smell of damp soil hung thick in the air, but beneath it was something stranger, something like iron and old wood.

Mikhail walked beside me, his movements deliberate. His robe shifted faintly with every step, the protective runes woven into its seams glowing ever so slightly as if reacting to the warped air. His purple eyes scanned everything with focus, flicking from the trees to the ground to the distant brush.

"This is worse than I thought," he said quietly. "The distortion is bleeding outward. It is not just bending reality. It is unraveling it. If this keeps up, parts of this forest may not stay."

I looked at him briefly. "You have learned enough to hold it back."

Mikhail gave a small nod, his expression firm. "Yes. For now."

The deeper we went, the stranger the forest became. Paths shifted when we looked away, roots moved slowly like worms beneath the soil, and the air hummed with a low vibration that pressed against the ears.

Then came the voices.

At first, they were distant, faint echoes that could have been the wind. But as we walked further, they grew clearer, more distinct. A child's voice, soft and pleading, called from ahead. "Help me... please, help me."

Mikhail slowed, his eyes narrowing. "It is not real."

I listened, tilting my head slightly. "You are sure."

The voice shifted suddenly, changing tone, becoming deeper, more commanding. "This way. Follow."

Mikhail lifted one hand slightly, the air around his fingers rippling faintly with thaumaturgic energy. "It is a pull, designed to lead us away from the source. He is trying to confuse us."

I nodded, trusting his assessment, but still, the sound of the girl's voice tugged at me. There was something so desperate in it, so painfully human.

We moved forward carefully, ignoring the false trails. As we pressed on, the trees began to bend inward, twisting as though growing toward us, their bark cracking in strange patterns.

Mikhail stopped suddenly, kneeling to touch the soil. His fingers glowed faintly, the robe's runes shimmering in response.

"This part of the forest is almost gone," he said quietly. "The threads are thin here. I can hold it, but only for a while."

I crouched beside him, glancing at the dirt. The footprints appeared again, faint and smudged, but they were real this time. Smaller than mine, uneven, like a child had stumbled.

"She is close," I said.

Mikhail nodded, then pressed his palm against the ground. His eyes glowed faintly as he whispered a short string of words under his breath. The forest around us stilled, the trees pausing in their slow inward movement, and the hum in the air quieted slightly.

"That should hold for a while," Mikhail said, rising to his feet.

I studied him, feeling that quiet sense of pride again. He had changed so much from the boy I had found in Siberia, not just in skill, but in how he carried himself.

But there was still that quiet worry lingering at the back of my mind. This was dangerous, even for trained thaumaturgists, and I could not help but feel the weight of what it would mean if something went wrong.

"Good work," I said finally.

The forest ahead grew darker as we moved deeper, the footprints leading us toward a faint shimmer in the air, like heat rising from stone. Somewhere beyond that shimmer, I could hear the girl's voice again, softer now, almost crying.

The shimmer ahead grew stronger as we approached, bending the air like a mirage on a summer road. The trees around it twisted unnaturally, their trunks spiraling upward in impossible angles, and the ground beneath our boots pulsed faintly, as though it were breathing.

Mikhail's pace slowed, his purple eyes glowing softly in the dim light as he studied the shifting space ahead. "The rift is unstable. He is pulling too much at once. If this tears open any further, she might be lost between places."

I looked to him. "Can you still keep holding it?"

He gave a soft nod, "Yes Sir."

We stepped closer, the hum of the air turning into a dull thrum that pressed against the inside of my skull. Beyond the shimmer, a figure stood half-hidden in the distortion. He looked disheveled, his clothes torn, his hands twitching at his sides as if pulling invisible strings. His face was pale, his eyes bloodshot, darting from one twisting shape to another like a man caught between terror and ecstasy.

The girl sat several feet away from him, curled into a ball, her face buried in her knees. The earth around her was wrong, sinking inward like a whirlpool of dirt and stone, tugging at her as though trying to swallow her whole.

I stepped forward carefully, my hand already on my saber. "You there," I called, my voice cutting through the hum. "You need to stop this now."

The man's head jerked toward me. His mouth twisted into a smile that did not reach his eyes. "You do not understand. This is freedom. Here, I can make things as they should be. I can make her safe forever."

"Safe," I repeated, keeping my tone steady as I edged closer. "You are tearing reality apart around her. You are going to kill her."

He laughed suddenly, a sharp, broken sound, and lifted both hands. The air around us shuddered violently, the trees twisting further as the ground buckled beneath our feet.

Mikhail stepped forward then, his robe shimmering faintly as he raised both hands, his voice calm but firm. "I will hold it. Get the girl."

I nodded once, trusting him, and moved quickly toward her as Mikhail planted his boots firmly into the soil. His eyes glowed brighter now, the runes along his robe flaring to life as streams of energy rippled outward from his palms, locking against the invisible threads of the bending space.

The man turned toward Mikhail, his face contorting in anger. "You are ruining it. You are just like them. Always trying to stop me."

The forest howled as if in response, branches twisting wildly as the ground split open in thin cracks. Mikhail did not flinch. His voice was steady, quiet, even as the distortion pushed harder against him. "You are not saving anyone. You are drowning yourself in your own fear."

The man screamed, lunging forward as if to attack, but the air rippled violently around him, bending inwards toward Mikhail's barrier. The ground buckled again, but Mikhail held fast, his fingers curling slightly as he pushed back against the bending space.

I reached the girl, crouching beside her. She looked up at me with tear-streaked cheeks, her eyes wide with terror. "You are safe now," I said firmly, lifting her into my arms.

The man shrieked again, thrashing against the distortion as if he were caught in his own web. Mikhail's eyes burned brighter, his voice low and sharp now as he focused, the space around the man tightening like cords being pulled taut.

"Blackwood," Mikhail said through gritted teeth, his focus unwavering. "Get her out now."

I nodded, lifting the girl fully and moving back toward the edge of the shimmer. The air around us shook, the hum rising to a near deafening pitch, and I glanced back just in time to see Mikhail push both palms outward, his entire body glowing faintly now with controlled energy.

The man screamed once more, the distortion snapping inward on itself with a sound like glass shattering underwater. The shimmer folded, crushing in on him as he vanished into the collapsing rift, leaving only the stillness of the forest behind.

Mikhail stood there, his breathing heavy, his hands still outstretched until the last flicker of the shimmer faded away. Then, slowly, he lowered his arms, his shoulders relaxing only slightly as he exhaled.

I set the girl down gently near the edge of the woods before stepping back to him. He looked at me, his expression calm but his eyes tired.

"You did well," I said quietly.

Mikhail gave a small nod, his voice soft but steady. "We saved her."

I looked at him for a long moment, the weight of it all pressing quietly in my chest. "Yes. We did."

But as I looked at him, standing there in his robe, already so powerful, so much more than the boy I had once brought in from the cold, I felt something I did not often allow myself to feel a quiet, unshakable fear. Not of the things we faced, but of losing him, of losing anyone I cared for, to this life I kept stepping into without hesitation.

I pushed the thought down for now, but it lingered, waiting.

The village square was nearly silent when we returned. The cold evening air hung still, and the villagers watched us with wide eyes as we stepped from the trees. I set the girl down gently, and she stumbled into her mother's arms with a cry, burying her face against her chest. The mother clutched her as though she might vanish again if she let go.

A few of the villagers moved closer, speaking in low voices, but I gave them only a brief glance. "She is safe," I said. "Keep her close tonight. The woods will settle in time."

They nodded quickly, murmuring thanks.

The bobbies stood a short distance away, uneasy in the fading light. One of them stepped forward, his face pale. "My lord... what exactly happened in there."

"Nothing you need to worry about any longer," I said. "The man who caused it will not trouble you again."

He swallowed and nodded, stepping back.

Mikhail remained beside me, silent. His robe shimmered faintly in the light of the setting sun, the runes woven into it still faintly alive from the power he had called upon. His hands were folded loosely before him, but I could see the weight in his eyes.

When the villagers began to scatter back to their homes, I rested a hand lightly on his shoulder. "You handled yourself well."

He looked at me, his voice soft but certain. "I only did what was right."

"You have grown, Mikhail," I said, meeting his gaze. "I do not only mean in power."

For a moment, his expression shifted, something unspoken passing through his eyes. Then he gave a quiet nod.

We left soon after, the ride back to the estate quiet but not strained. The cold air bit at us as the sun dipped low, but neither of us spoke. Mikhail rode slightly ahead, his posture straight and steady, and I watched him for longer than I cared to admit.

By the time we arrived, the sky had turned deep blue, stars faintly piercing the dusk. Deeds was waiting at the door, his calm face unreadable but his eyes sharper than usual as they lingered on Mikhail.

"Welcome home," Deeds said simply. "Dinner will be prepared."

Mikhail gave a polite bow before excusing himself, disappearing down the hall toward his room.

I lingered in the sitting room long after. The fire crackled quietly, throwing soft light across the walls. My thoughts felt heavier than they should have.

I thought of Mikhail standing firm in the forest, his hands glowing as he held the distortion back. He had been fearless, stronger than I had ever seen him, and I had admired him for it. But the admiration carried a weight I had not felt in some time.

I stared into the fire, the warmth pressing against my face. I thought of Bella, her smile, her sharp wit that disarmed me more than any weapon. I thought of Deeds, always steady, always there when I returned no matter how far I went. And now Mikhail, who had grown so much already, who would keep stepping into dangers like this because of the life I had brought him into.

The thought tightened in my chest in a way I did not like. For a man who has faced creatures, warlocks, and gods, fear was not something I often admitted to. But tonight, as the fire crackled low, I felt it all the same.

Not fear of death. Not fear of what waited in the forests or the ruins. But fear of losing them of coming back one day to find they were no longer there. And perhaps worse than that, the quiet, gnawing terror that one day I might forget why I kept doing this at all.

I sat there until the fire dimmed, the warmth lingering, the thought refusing to leave.

The morning came cold and pale, sunlight filtering weakly through the frost that clung to the estate's windows. I found Mikhail already awake, standing in the garden behind the house, the air misting around him as he practiced. His robe moved with every motion, the runes along its trim glowing faintly with each controlled shift of energy.

I watched for a time before stepping closer. He noticed me immediately, lowering his hands and straightening his posture.

"Good morning, Lord Blackwood," he said, his voice steady, though there was still a boyish respect in the way he addressed me.

"You are up early," I said, moving to stand beside him.

"I wanted to keep practicing," he said simply. "Yesterday showed me how much more I still need to learn. I held the distortion, but it was harder than I thought it would be. If I was stronger, I could have ended it faster."

I studied him, the way he stood so firmly, the quiet determination in his eyes. "You did what no one else could have done, Mikhail. Do not measure yourself against impossible expectations."

His purple eyes shifted to me, calm but unyielding. "If I want to stay by your side, I have to. You risk everything every time you leave this place. If I cannot keep up, if I am not strong enough, I will slow you down."

There was no arrogance in his tone, only quiet resolve.

"You are not slowing me down," I said firmly.

He gave the faintest smile. "Then I will become strong enough so you will never have to worry about me."

I looked at him for a long moment, and though I did not say it aloud, the words struck deeper than he likely knew.

He would grow stronger, there was no doubt. He would become something far greater than even I could imagine. But that quiet fear, the one that had sat with me the night before, pressed closer now.

It was not just the danger he might face. It was the thought of him stepping too far into the life I lived, of losing himself to the same endless push forward that I could never seem to escape. And worse, the thought that one day I might wake and realize I had lost him, or Deeds, or Bella, to the same path that had already taken so much from so many.

I looked away toward the frost-covered hedges, speaking more quietly than I intended. "You are already stronger than I could have hoped, Mikhail. Just... do not forget why you do what you do. That is the only thing that keeps any of this from consuming you."

He tilted his head slightly, watching me. "You say that as if you fear you might forget."

I met his gaze, giving a faint smile that did not feel as steady as it should have. "I hear that often these days. Perhaps there is some truth to it."

He gave a small nod, his voice soft. "Then I will remember for both of us."

That earned a quiet laugh from me despite the heaviness in my chest. "You are a remarkable boy, Mikhail."

He straightened, his face serious again. "A remarkable pupil, my lord. That is what you taught me to be."

I let the silence linger after that, the sound of his soft breaths in the cold air mixing with the distant chirp of morning birds.

For now, he was safe. For now, everyone I cared for was still here. I would hold to that for as long as I could.

But as I stood there in the pale morning light, I knew the fear would never leave me. Perhaps that was the price of caring for anything at all.

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood

Viscount, Naturalist, and A man with many he loves

The Forgotten Pirates

The letter from the Queen arrived at dawn, sealed in crimson wax. Deeds brought it to me personally, his calm composure unable to mask the weight of what the letter implied. I broke the seal and read her words carefully, each line confirming the seriousness of the task.

The Queen feared an eclipse, not of the sun, but of something far older and more dangerous. Ancient texts spoke of an alignment that would cut through the very threads of reality, unraveling everything if left unchecked. She had chosen me to stop it. My path would lead through the in-between, the space between worlds where time twisted and memory shifted, and from there to the Forgotten Realm itself.

At the bottom of the letter, written in her own hand, was a single line. *I trust you, Theodore. The world does not know what it owes you, but I do.*

I folded the letter and set it aside. Deeds stood silently by the door, waiting for me to speak.

"You will stay here," I said. "Look after the estate. Mikhail will need you if anything happens while I am gone."

Deeds inclined his head slightly. "Understood, my lord. But I would be remiss if I did not say this. There may come a day when even you must ask if it is worth it."

I allowed myself the smallest smile. "If the Queen is right, Deeds, the day I ask that question will not come at all."

Deeds gave a shallow bow and stepped back, saying nothing more.

By midmorning, I was prepared. My saber rested at my side, polished to a keen edge. At my hip hung the revolver I had brought back from America, now heavily modified. Its chambers had been reinforced to hold my newest prototype rounds improved variants of my reality-warping ammunition. The mechanism spun perfectly under my thumb, and I had no doubt it was the finest weapon I had ever carried.

At the edge of the forest beyond the estate, the air shimmered. The Queen's instructions had been exact, and soon the space before me bent open like a curtain pulled aside to reveal something older beneath it. Without hesitation, I stepped forward.

The in-between greeted me with silence. Its horizons stretched impossibly far, the sky fractured into drifting shards of light and shadow. The ground shifted between stone, mist, and something that felt like memory itself, as if the world could not decide what it wished to be. Distant shapes moved in the haze, half-formed things that might once have been people or might only have been echoes of thought.

I walked for what felt like hours, my boots striking against the ever-changing path, my hand occasionally brushing against the revolver at my side. It hummed faintly with potential, each round within it a careful experiment meant for only the most dangerous of circumstances.

And then, ahead of me on the path, I saw her.

Bella stood waiting, as if the in-between itself had placed her there. Her black coat fell around her like a shadow given form, the silver trim catching the strange fractured light. Her white hair glowed faintly in the shifting haze, and her golden eyes softened as they met mine.

"Of all places to find you," I said, stepping closer.

"And of all people to find me," she replied, her voice calm, but quieter than usual. "You never stop, do you."

"Not when the world might end if I do," I said, though I found my gaze lingering on her longer than it should have.

She studied me for a moment, something hidden flickering in her eyes. "You are going to the Forgotten Realm. You should not be surprised to see me here. I have walked these paths many times."

"Why," I asked, though there was no suspicion in my voice, only curiosity.

Bella gave a faint smile, but she looked away as we began to walk together. "Perhaps you will understand before this is over."

The path stretched ahead, glowing faintly under our steps, the in-between twisting with each pace we took. There was silence between us, but it was not uncomfortable. It was the silence of two people who understood the weight of the road they were walking.

After a time, Bella spoke, her voice softer now. "You know this mission may kill you."

"I have known that about every mission the Queen has sent me on," I said simply. "And yet, I still go."

She glanced at me, her golden eyes thoughtful. "And why do you keep going, Theodore. Is it truly because of duty, or because you do not know how to stop."

I looked ahead at the shifting horizon, my hand brushing lightly against the revolver at my side. "Because it matters. Because someone has to."

She smiled faintly at that, though her eyes carried something deeper, something unspoken. "You always give the same answer, no matter who asks."

I said nothing more, but I felt her gaze linger on me as we continued forward.

The mist ahead began to glow faintly gold, a sign that the path to the Forgotten Realm was drawing closer. For the first time in longer than I could recall, I found myself wishing this road would not end so soon.

The in-between grew stranger the farther we walked. The air thickened as if the world itself had begun to breathe, and the path beneath our boots shifted from stone to something like glass, reflecting hazy shapes that did not match our movements. Above us, the fractured sky twisted with streaks of gold and black, moving too slowly to be clouds and too quickly to be stars.

Bella walked at my side, her coat swaying with each step, her white hair catching the strange light in soft glimmers. She seemed comfortable here, as though the distorted world bent naturally to her presence, but her golden eyes scanned the distance with quiet thought.

"Have you been here often," I asked, breaking the silence.

"More often than I care to remember," Bella said. "The in-between is a place for those who are not quite lost, but not quite found either. It is not somewhere you wander by accident."

"And yet here I am," I said.

Bella glanced at me, a small, almost amused smile flickering on her lips. "You are different. You were invited."

"By the Queen, not by this place."

"This place does not care about who invites you," Bella said softly. "But it cares about who leaves."

I gave her a curious look at that, but she offered no further explanation, turning her gaze back to the road.

As we walked, the shapes in the mist grew clearer. Shadows of travelers long past stood frozen in the haze, some looking onward as if still walking, others sitting as if they had stopped to rest and never moved again. A few turned their heads slowly to watch us, their faces blurred but unmistakably human in the weight of their stares.

"They are not real," Bella said quietly, noticing my glance. "Only memories of those who came before. The in-between keeps them here because it does not know what else to do with them."

"They seem aware," I said.

"They are aware of only what they once were," Bella replied. "But they are harmless if you do not stare too long. The in-between can make you forget who you are if you let yourself think too much about what might have been."

I said nothing to that, though I found myself tightening my grip slightly on the revolver at my side, as if it grounded me in something real. The weapon felt solid, reassuring, a reminder of the things I could still control in a place where almost nothing felt certain.

We walked in silence for a while longer, until Bella's voice broke through the quiet again, softer now. "Do you ever wonder what you would be if you stopped. If you chose to stop."

I looked at her, her profile sharp against the fractured light. "I am not sure I would know what to do with myself."

She glanced at me then, her golden eyes almost searching. "You think you are only this. That you are only a man who chases the next thing to save, the next path to walk."

"It is what I am," I said simply.

"No," Bella said, her voice firm but not unkind. "It is what you *do*. But it is not all you are."

I held her gaze for a long moment before looking forward again. "Perhaps. But I have never had the luxury of stopping to find out."

Bella was quiet for a time, and when she spoke again, her voice carried a strange softness. "You have always been like this. You wear your heart like armor, but you do not even realize how much of it shows."

I allowed myself the faintest smile at that. "Is that what you think of me?"

"That is what I know of you," Bella said, her golden eyes meeting mine briefly before she looked forward again.

The path ahead began to slope downward, the mist parting to reveal a river of light flowing in the distance, its surface shimmering with reflections of places that could not possibly exist. Bella slowed slightly as we approached it, her voice low. "That river is old. Older than most things you will ever see. We will have to cross it to reach the Forgotten Realm."

"And how do we cross it," I asked.

"We wait for the ferry," Bella said simply. "It always comes for those who need it."

I studied her for a moment, watching the way her expression softened as she stared at the glowing water. There was something in her eyes then, something almost wistful, as though this place meant more to her than she wished to admit.

For the first time since stepping into the in-between, I felt the weight of something unspoken between us pressing closer. This was not just a journey for the Queen or for the world. This was a journey where I would finally have to admit the thoughts I had pushed aside for too long.

And perhaps, standing here with her as the mist curled around our feet, I began to realize how much I wanted to.

The river shimmered before us, its surface glowing with pale threads of silver and gold that moved like veins of light. Each ripple revealed glimpses of other places, other times, as though the water itself remembered everything it had ever touched. I stood at the edge, staring down at it, feeling the quiet pull of it in my chest.

Bella stepped beside me, her black coat brushing lightly against mine as she looked across the water. Her golden eyes caught the strange light, making her seem almost unearthly in the glow. She folded her arms loosely, her expression calm, though there was something in it that was softer, almost sad.

"The ferry will come," she said, her voice quiet. "It always does. But it takes its time. The in-between does not hurry for anyone."

I glanced at her. "Do you wait here often."

"Not often," Bella said. "But I have stood here before, yes."

"For what reason."

She gave a faint smile, almost teasing, but her eyes stayed on the glowing river. "For reasons not so different from yours, I imagine. You do not walk this path unless you are trying to stop something, or change something, or save someone."

"You speak as if you know this better than anyone," I said.

Her smile lingered for a moment before fading, her gaze turning distant. "Perhaps I do."

The quiet between us stretched, the sound of the water filling the air as it churned softly. The river gave no reflection of us, only of other places, other faces, like memories trapped just beyond reach.

I spoke without thinking. "Bella."

She turned her head slightly, her golden eyes meeting mine.

"Do you ever think about stopping," I asked. "Truly stopping. Leaving all of this behind."

She studied me for a moment, her expression softening. "I have thought about it. But some of us are not meant to stop, Theodore. Some of us are built to keep going, no matter what it costs."

I looked back at the river, my hand brushing unconsciously against the revolver at my side. "I wonder sometimes what that cost will be. I wonder how much I will lose before I realize I have nothing left."

Bella tilted her head, her eyes narrowing slightly as she watched me. "You have thought about this before."

"I think about it more than I like to admit," I said, my voice lower now. "I think about Deeds waiting for me to come home. I think about Mikhail, who still has his whole life ahead of him, and how easily he could lose it following me. And I think of you."

Bella's expression shifted, her usual composure breaking for a moment. Her golden eyes softened in a way I had never quite seen before. "And what do you think of me, Theodore."

I met her gaze fully, feeling the weight of the words I had never spoken aloud. "That if there is anything in this world I fear losing, it is you."

The silence that followed felt heavier than the air around us. Bella stared at me for a long moment, her lips parting slightly, but she did not speak. Not yet.

The river rippled, the golden light brightening as if something below stirred. Bella looked away for a moment, her voice quieter now. "You are not the only one who fears losing, Theodore. But you are the only one who still speaks of it like you have a choice to keep everything. You cannot keep it all. You can only hold to what matters for as long as you can."

I watched her as she spoke, the truth of her words pressing against me.

The water shifted suddenly, the faint outline of a small boat appearing in the glow, its shape slowly forming from the mist. Bella stepped back slightly, her face unreadable now, though her golden eyes lingered on me longer than before.

"The ferry has come," she said softly.

I looked at the boat, then back at her. There was more I wanted to say, but the words sat heavy in my chest, waiting for the right moment.

The ferry drifted toward us, rising from the glowing mist as if born of the river itself. Its wood was ancient, worn smooth by countless hands, and faint runes shimmered along its edges, pulsing like the slow beat of a heart. There was no ferryman, only the soft creak of the vessel as it waited for us to step aboard.

Bella moved first, her black coat brushing against the worn planks, her golden eyes scanning the river as if measuring every ripple. I followed, my boots settling onto the deck with a quiet weight. The moment we stood together, the ferry began to move, gliding soundlessly across the shimmering water.

The silence was heavy but not oppressive. The river reflected things that were not ours, showing glimpses of cities I had never seen and people frozen in moments that could not belong to us. Some laughed, others wept, but they were all only fragments of lives once lived.

Bella stood at the bow, her hands resting lightly on the edge of the ferry. The light from the river caught in her white hair, turning it faintly silver as it moved with the current. Her face was calm, but there was a quiet sorrow to her eyes that did not belong to someone who had simply wandered here by chance.

"You seem as though you have crossed this river many times," I said.

Bella kept her gaze ahead, her voice quiet. "More times than I would like to admit. The in-between is not a place you come to by accident. You only cross this river when there is something you are willing to risk everything for."

"And yet you return," I said.

"Because some things are worth losing for," Bella answered, her voice softer than before.

The ferry drifted further, the glow of the river wrapping us in a strange calm. For a long time, we said nothing, letting the quiet speak for us. I felt the words rising in me, the ones I had kept locked away for far too long, and for the first time in years, I let them out.

"Bella," I said, my voice lower than I intended.

She turned to me, her golden eyes meeting mine.

"I fear many things," I said slowly. "But not the things most people would expect. I do not fear the beasts I hunt, nor the things I have faced in the dark. I fear losing the people who matter to me. I fear losing Deeds, who has been more to me than just a valet. I fear losing Mikhail, who trusts me far more than I deserve. And I fear losing you."

Bella's eyes widened slightly, the mask she always wore breaking. Her voice was almost a whisper. "You fear losing me."

"I do," I said. "More than anything else. I have faced gods, monsters, and things beyond reason, but none of it frightens me the way the thought of never seeing you again does. You are... you are the one thing I could never let myself forget, even if I lost everything else."

Bella stared at me for a long moment, her golden eyes softer than I had ever seen them. "You have carried this for a long time."

"I have," I admitted. "I never said it because I know the life I live. It will cost me everything one day. I did not want to give words to something I might not live long enough to keep."

Bella stepped closer, her coat brushing against my arm, her voice quiet and warm. "And yet you speak it now."

"Because I cannot keep pretending I do not feel it," I said. "I am in love with you, Bella. I have been for longer than I care to admit. And I am terrified because I know that one day I might lose everyone I care for, or worse, forget why I ever fought for them. That is what I fear most. That I might forget you."

Bella said nothing for a moment, but her hand rose to rest lightly against my chest. Her golden eyes shone in the glow of the river, filled with something unspoken. "You will not forget me, Theodore. Not you. You hold on to everything, even when it hurts you to do so. That is what makes you who you are."

I looked at her, the weight in my chest easing slightly for the first time since stepping into this cursed place.

Bella moved closer, placing both hands against my chest now, her voice softer than I had ever heard it. "You do not understand how much I wanted to hear you say that."

The ferry glided forward, the distant golden shore drawing closer, but for the moment the world felt still.

Bella rested her head lightly against my shoulder, her white hair brushing against my coat. Her voice was almost a whisper. "When we reach the crossing, there are things I must tell you, things I should have told you long ago. But for now, let this be enough."

I stayed still, letting the moment settle between us, the quiet river carrying us onward.

The golden shore grew clearer as the ferry drifted closer, the light shimmering off sand that looked more like polished glass than earth. The air changed as we neared it, becoming warmer and heavier, as if the in-between itself understood this was an ending and wished to hold us a little longer.

Bella stood quietly beside me, her head still resting against my shoulder, her golden eyes half-lidded as she watched the approaching shore. Neither of us spoke for a time, letting the quiet moments stretch, knowing they would soon end.

When the ferry finally touched the edge of the shore, it slowed until it barely moved at all, gliding to rest on the shining sand with a soft hiss. I felt the weight of the revolver at my side, the saber at my hip, all of it grounding me to who I was and why I had come. Yet for the first time, none of it felt as heavy as leaving her behind.

I turned to her as she straightened, her white hair falling perfectly against the black of her coat, glowing faintly in the golden light. Her face was calm, but her eyes betrayed her. There was a softness in them, a quiet sorrow she could not fully hide.

"It seems this is where we part," I said.

Bella stepped closer, her hands lifting to rest lightly against my chest. "I wish it was not."

I placed one of my hands gently over hers. "So do I."

For a moment she said nothing, only looked at me as if memorizing my face. Then, with a quiet breath, she moved closer and embraced me fully. Her arms wrapped around me with a warmth that cut through the strange chill of the in-between, her head resting against my shoulder as she held me tightly.

"Theodore," she said softly, her voice breaking for the first time since I had known her. "No matter what happens, no matter how long it takes, come back to me. Promise me you will come back to me."

I pulled back slightly to look at her, meeting her golden eyes. "I promise," I said, the words leaving me before I could even think to hesitate. "I swear it, Bella."

Her lips curved into the faintest smile, but her eyes glistened as if holding back a truth she could not yet speak. She leaned in closer and before I could speak again, she kissed me. It was soft, lingering, and for a moment I forgot the mission, the Queen, the Forgotten Realm, all of it. There was only her, and the quiet promise that I would return no matter what it cost me.

When she pulled away, her hand lingered against my cheek for a brief moment. "Then I will wait," she whispered.

I nodded, my chest tightening with something I could not name. "You will not have to wait forever."

I stepped back toward the shore, but before I could turn fully away, her voice stopped me.

"Theodore," she said, her tone quiet but filled with something deeper than before. "Would you still feel the same about me if I were not who you think I am. If I were not mortal, but something more. Something greater."

I looked at her for a long moment, the weight of her words settling between us, and then I spoke without hesitation. "You have always been a goddess to me, you are my queen in black."

For the first time Bella's golden eyes widened, and the faintest shimmer of a tear caught in the golden light before she looked away, regaining her composure.

"Then go," she said softly. "And keep your promise."

I gave her one final nod and stepped onto the golden shore. The ferry began to drift back into the mist, carrying her away from me.

The warmth of her embrace lingered as I moved forward, but so did her words, echoing in my mind like a vow I could never break.

The golden shore vanished behind me as I stepped forward, the in-between falling away into something far older and far less forgiving. The air grew heavy, colder with every step, and when I finally looked up, the sky stretched endlessly, black and still. White dots glimmered faintly across it, scattered in perfect stillness. At first they looked like stars, but the longer I stared, the more I understood. They were not stars at all. They were souls, countless souls, drifting and watching in silence.

The ground beneath my boots was dry and cracked, each step stirring fine gray dust that hung in the air like smoke. No grass grew here, no life stirred. The only signs of what once had been were dead trees, their twisted branches clawing toward the void as though begging for mercy. Around me, faint auras flickered in the air like dying lanterns, souls trapped between existing and fading, glowing weakly as if trying to hold on.

Bridges stretched ahead, long and narrow, connecting scattered islands of black stone. Some were cracked, worn from time and weight, yet still standing as though refusing to collapse. Below them churned a black sea that hissed and steamed. Bubbles rose and burst, releasing a

faint acidic mist. One drop landed near me and burned through the stone, leaving a smoking hole.

The Forgotten Realm. A place where even the air seemed tired of holding itself together.

I adjusted the revolver at my side, the weight of it grounding me. The modifications I had made to it had left it perfect, every chamber holding my newest prototype rounds. They were the strongest I had ever crafted. I had a feeling I would need every one of them.

The sound of voices carried faintly across the still air. Not soft, not mournful, but loud and rough, echoing like laughter in a dead hall. I followed the sound, crossing the first bridge carefully, my boots scraping against the cracked stone as I moved closer.

The sight of the ship came into view. Its hull was blackened and scarred, glowing faintly with runes that pulsed like dim candlelight. The sails hung tattered, yet moved as though catching a wind that did not exist. Figures moved across the deck, shouting to one another, laughing with an edge that was almost mad.

The Forgotten Pirates.

As I approached, their attention turned to me. They were an unusual sight, some of them human, others only partly so. A few bore flickering patches of light across their faces or hands, the same pale glow as the souls that drifted in the air, as if they were not entirely alive. Yet when they looked at me, many grinned, cheering as if greeting an old friend.

At the center of the deck stood a man larger than the rest, wearing a long coat that brushed the wood beneath his boots. His beard was streaked with silver, his wide-brimmed hat tilted slightly to the side. His grin was wide and full of mischief.

"So the Queen did send you," the man said as I stepped closer, his voice carrying like a bell. "I am Captain Longbottom, and this crew of mine is yours to command until we reach the end of this cursed realm."

Another figure moved closer, standing beside him. Shorter, with a long coat that hid most of his body, his face covered by a plain wooden mask carved with no expression. His head tilted slightly as he looked at me.

"And that," Longbottom continued with a grin, "is my first mate. He calls himself Who. Do not ask why. No one knows, not even him, and he will not answer to anything else."

I gave the masked man a respectful nod. "Who."

The first mate tilted his head once more, then turned back to the ship, apparently satisfied with the greeting.

Longbottom clapped me on the shoulder, his grin widening. "Well then, Lord Blackwood, the Queen says you need to reach the heart of this realm before the eclipse. We are the only fools mad enough to get you there. You picked the right day to risk your life."

I looked past him to the horizon, where bridges stretched across endless islands. The sea below hissed and churned, and deep within its black depths, shadows moved, stirring the acidic waters. "I appreciate your willingness to take me."

"Willingness," Longbottom said with a booming laugh. "No, my friend, not willingness. Curiosity. I have sailed these waters for longer than I care to admit, and nothing interesting ever happens here. You arriving means something truly dreadful waits ahead. That is worth the risk."

I stepped onto the deck, the wood beneath my boots strange, almost warm, as if the ship itself was alive. The crew moved aside as I passed, some nodding respectfully, others whispering to each other, their eyes darting toward the revolver at my hip.

Longbottom lowered his voice as he walked beside me. "If you are here, then the rumors are true. The eclipse is coming. Tell me, Lord Blackwood, what are we sailing into."

I looked at the black sky, at the souls hanging like dim stars above us, and then out across the endless waters. "Something the Queen believes can destroy everything. And I believe she is right."

Longbottom only grinned wider, his eyes flashing with excitement. "Good. I was beginning to fear this would be dull."

The ship lurched forward, moving away from the shore as if drawn by an unseen current. The dead land faded behind us, the endless black sea stretching out in all directions. Above, the white souls glimmered faintly in the void, watching in silence.

I rested my hand on the railing, my thoughts heavy, Bella's voice echoing in my mind. *No matter what happens. No matter how long it takes. Come back to me.*

I would. I had sworn it.

The ship moved steadily across the black waters, the hull creaking softly as if it disliked every inch of the journey. The air here was heavier than before, the silence broken only by the soft hiss of the acidic sea and the occasional echo of a distant groan beneath the surface. The white dots above us flickered faintly in the void, the souls drifting slower now, as if even they dreaded where we were going.

The crew moved about their work with quiet efficiency, though some spoke in hushed voices as they kept an eye on the horizon. Longbottom stood near the wheel, his coat swaying lightly with the subtle movement of the deck, while Who remained near the bow, motionless, staring at the endless bridges and distant islands as if measuring them.

One of the pirates approached me, his face pale where the faint flicker of a trapped soul clung to his skin. He leaned in slightly, his voice lower than the others. "We are headed toward the center of the realm, aye. That is where Billy M liked to stay, or so the old stories say. If it is true, then it makes sense that all this trouble started there."

I looked at him, my hand resting lightly on the railing. "And why would that make sense."

The pirate gave a nervous grin. "Billy M is nothing but trouble. That thing does not think like we do. No feelings, no care for anything living, not even for the other gods, if you can believe it. It causes madness just to see if it can feel something from it. Like poking a wound to see if it hurts. Some call it the black sheep of its kind. Never seen it myself, and I pray I never will, but if the realm is tearing itself apart, I would wager it is sitting at the heart of it, grinning to itself."

He moved away quickly after saying it, as if even speaking its name too loudly might draw its attention.

I looked out over the waters again, my grip tightening slightly on the railing. The thought of such a thing being at the center of all this made too much sense, even if none of them truly understood what it was.

The ship creaked suddenly, shuddering under a new weight. Longbottom straightened immediately, his grin vanishing as his eyes scanned the black waves. "Leviathans," he said simply.

The crew moved fast, grabbing long spears and pulling thick chains from hidden compartments along the deck. The sea around us hissed louder, bubbling violently as something massive moved beneath the surface.

I caught the first glimpse of it as it surfaced, its slick, black skin reflecting the faint glow of the souls above. It was massive, an eel the size of the ship itself, its eyes glowing faintly as it rose from the waters with a hiss that sent steam curling into the air. Its teeth were needle-sharp, its mouth wide enough to bite the deck in half if it wished.

Another followed, rising from the opposite side, circling the ship as if deciding where to strike. The crew shouted orders, throwing hooked chains over the sides. The hooks sank into the creatures' skin, glowing faintly as runes carved into the chains activated, sparking with light that burned against the beasts.

Longbottom laughed, his grin returning now that the fight had begun. "Hold the lines, you miserable devils. Make sure they do not drag us under."

One of the leviathans lunged, slamming against the side of the hull, making the ship groan under the force. I drew the revolver, loading one of the new prototype rounds. I aimed for the first leviathan as it surfaced again, its body coiling as it prepared to strike.

The shot cracked loudly, the round tearing into its flesh. Reality twisted around the wound as the prototype round worked, the creature's skin bending unnaturally before tearing apart in a spray of steaming black ichor. It screamed, a deep guttural sound that echoed across the waters, then dove back beneath the surface, thrashing wildly.

The second leviathan lunged, but the pirates threw another hooked chain, locking it in place long enough for me to fire again. The shot struck just beneath its jaw, the twisting effect ripping through its muscles and leaving it convulsing before it sank back into the acidic sea.

The water hissed for a long moment, then stilled, the creatures retreating to the depths. The pirates slowly reeled in their chains, cheering as they checked for damage. Longbottom laughed again, clapping me hard on the back. "Well now, Lord Blackwood, you are as good as they say. Those things do not often retreat so quickly."

"Do they ever stop coming," I asked, sliding another round into the revolver.

Longbottom grinned, his eyes glinting with excitement. "Not until you leave these waters, my friend. But do not worry. We have survived worse. The chains and runes hold most of them off."

Who turned his masked head toward me briefly, tilting it as if studying the revolver, then returned his gaze to the horizon.

I looked out across the black sea again, the souls above flickering faintly as if disturbed by what had just happened. The ship moved forward, leaving behind only the faint hiss of steam from where the creatures had struck.

The closer we sailed to the center, the heavier the air became, and above us the white souls began to dim, their glow fading as if they too feared what lay ahead.

The ship sailed deeper into the Forgotten Realm, its blackened hull cutting through the acidic waters with slow, deliberate movements. The air grew heavier with every passing hour, pressing against us as though the realm itself was watching. The bridges that stretched between the distant islands became thinner, cracked and splintered in places, as if even the stone wished to crumble under the weight of what waited ahead.

Above us, the black sky shifted. The white dots that were once steady souls began to move, not quickly, but enough to notice. They drifted toward one another in slow spirals, dimming as they drew close, forming the faint suggestion of a circular shape against the void. Even the pirates who had sailed these waters for years glanced up nervously, muttering among themselves.

Longbottom stood at the wheel, his grin noticeably smaller now. His eyes scanned the horizon, sharper than before. "The center draws near. You can feel it in the air, can you not?"

"I can," I said, my hand resting lightly on the railing. "It feels wrong."

"It always does," Longbottom replied, his tone quieter than usual. "But this is different. The realm itself feels... eager. I do not like that."

One of the pirates came to stand near me, his voice hushed as he glanced at the shifting sky. "Billy M always liked the center of the realm. Said it was the best place to twist a man's mind inside out. If all this trouble started there, I would wager that thing is laughing even now."

I looked at him, my voice steady. "Has anyone ever faced it and survived?"

The pirate shook his head quickly. "You do not face it. You pray you never meet it. It does not fight like anything else. It does not kill because it must. It does it because it wants to feel something, anything."

Longbottom barked an order then, cutting the man's words short. "Eyes on the water. The closer we get, the more they will come."

As if on cue, the sea hissed louder, the dark surface bubbling and roiling as something massive stirred beneath. The ship shuddered slightly, the crew rushing to the sides, throwing runed chains and preparing spears.

A leviathan surfaced briefly far off, its massive body twisting before diving again, only to be replaced by another closer to us. It broke the surface with a loud hiss, its slick black skin glinting in the dim light. The pirates hurled their chains, the runes sparking as they latched on, but the beast twisted violently, snapping one of the chains clean before diving again.

I stepped to the railing, revolver in hand, loading another of the prototype rounds. Who moved silently to the bow, his masked head turning slightly toward me as if to acknowledge what I was about to do.

The sea erupted again as two more leviathans rose on opposite sides of the ship, their glowing eyes fixed on us. One lunged, slamming into the hull and rocking the deck violently. Pirates scrambled, shouting to hold the lines.

I took aim at the closer of the two, waiting until it opened its massive jaw. The shot rang out, the round striking deep into its throat. The twisting force of the prototype round tore through its flesh, reality itself warping as the creature thrashed violently before retreating with a hiss.

Longbottom shouted something to the crew, his grin returning briefly in the chaos. "Hold steady. They will not take us today."

The second leviathan lunged again, its teeth scraping the side of the ship, leaving deep marks in the wood. Who moved suddenly, faster than I expected, leaping onto the railing and driving a spear directly into the beast's eye. The runes on the spear flared brightly, and the leviathan screeched before diving back into the depths, leaving the water hissing in its wake.

The sea slowly calmed after that, the bubbling surface settling, though the crew remained tense. Longbottom wiped his hands on his coat, his grin returning though his voice remained serious. "They are only testing us now. The closer we get to the center, the worse it will become. Billy M likes to know who walks into its domain. It plays with its prey before it decides whether to break it."

I reloaded the revolver, my gaze fixed on the horizon where the bridges grew thinner and the dead trees taller, their twisted branches stretching upward like skeletal hands.

The sky above shifted again, the white souls dimming further, forming an almost perfect ring now. The shape of the coming eclipse was undeniable.

Longbottom followed my gaze, his grin faltering just slightly. "There it is. The beginning of it all. The center waits, and whatever sits there does not plan to make this easy for you, Lord Blackwood."

I looked at the growing darkness above, Bella's voice echoing quietly in my mind. *No matter what happens, no matter how long it takes, come back to me.*

I gripped the railing tighter. "I will reach it. Whatever it takes."

Longbottom gave a short laugh, though his eyes were sharper than ever. "Good. You may be the only one mad enough to make it that far."

The ship pressed on, the bridges and islands ahead stretching like a path into the heart of madness itself.

The further we sailed, the more the realm seemed to unravel around us. The black sea churned with violent motion, sending waves as high as the masts slamming against the hull. The once-still surface now writhed as if something beneath it stirred every inch of the waters at once. Acidic spray lashed across the deck, hissing as it ate into the wood, leaving small smoking holes where it landed. The crew scrambled to throw salt-treated tarps over the damaged spots, shouting to one another as the ship groaned under the strain.

The air grew thicker, hotter, and it carried with it the scent of burnt metal and ash. The bridges in the distance crumbled piece by piece, some collapsing entirely into the boiling sea below. Dead trees rose taller as we approached the center, their skeletal limbs swaying as if moved by an unseen wind, though no wind touched us.

Above, the black void shifted violently. The white souls spiraled faster now, moving unnaturally in perfect circles, their glow dimming further as they gathered into a single mass. A ring of white light formed in the sky, bright and pulsing, closing in on itself like a great eye preparing to blink shut. The eclipse was no longer approaching. It was forming before our eyes.

The crew began to change. At first it was only nervous whispers, but soon voices cracked into shouting as some of them looked to the sky too long. A few clutched their heads, screaming, falling to their knees as if trying to tear something out of their minds. Others muttered to themselves in low, broken tones, their words making no sense.

Longbottom stood firm at the wheel, his grin now a tight line. "Hold steady, you devils," he shouted over the roar of the sea. "Do not look at it. Keep your eyes on the water or you will lose your minds."

But it was already spreading. Madness crawled across the deck like a sickness. One pirate grabbed a spear and swung it wildly at a crewmate, laughing as if it were some kind of game. Another tried to climb the railing to leap into the acidic sea, muttering that the lights above were calling his name. Two men had to drag him back, tying him to the mast.

Who stood unmoving at the bow, his masked head tilted upward toward the eclipse, though it did not seem to affect him. His presence alone steadied some of the crew who still clung to their senses.

The water beneath us erupted as a leviathan breached the surface, its massive body twisting and slamming back into the sea, sending waves crashing high enough to drench the deck. The acidic spray hissed, burning holes in the railing as another wave struck the hull, rocking the entire ship.

"Chains ready," Longbottom bellowed, his voice cutting through the madness. "Do not let them tip us."

The pirates scrambled, throwing runed chains into the water, their hooks glowing as they latched onto the thrashing beasts. But the waves made it nearly impossible to hold steady, and one chain snapped, recoiling back and knocking a man across the deck.

I gripped the railing, steadying myself as the ship tilted sharply with another wave. My revolver felt heavy in my hand, its cylinder already loaded with my strongest rounds. One of the leviathans rose again, lunging for the side of the ship, its teeth snapping dangerously close to the deck.

I fired, the round tearing into its jaw. The twisting effect of the bullet bent its flesh inward, ripping through the muscle before bursting outward in a spray of steaming black ichor. The creature recoiled, slamming back into the sea, but another surfaced immediately behind it, circling like a predator waiting for the right moment to strike.

The ship groaned as another wave lifted it high before dropping it back into the churning sea. The crew held fast, though many shouted prayers or curses between heaving breaths.

Longbottom shouted over the chaos, his grin flickering but never fully vanishing. "We are close now. You can feel it, can you not. The center waits for us, and it does not want us to arrive."

I reloaded, my eyes fixed on the horizon. The black void ahead seemed to shift like a curtain, revealing faint glimpses of a distant island surrounded by jagged bridges and twisted dead trees. Even from here, I could feel it. The pull of something ancient and wrong, something that almost seemed to laugh with each wave that struck the ship.

The pirates who still clung to reason stared at the island in quiet dread. One of them muttered under his breath, just loud enough for me to hear. "Billy M is waiting there. If anything could make the realm act like this, it is that thing. I would stake my soul on it."

I tightened my grip on the railing, Bella's words echoing again in my mind. *No matter what happens, no matter how long it takes, come back to me.*

The ship surged forward, cutting through the waves as if it too understood there was no turning back.

The center of the Forgotten Realm loomed ahead, a jagged island rising from the black waters like a wound torn open in the world. Dead trees clawed toward the void, their twisted branches bending unnaturally, as if they were reaching to escape the land they grew from. The bridges leading to the island were broken and half-sunken, their stone crumbling into the acidic sea, leaving only narrow, treacherous paths to cross.

The sky above was no longer still. The white souls spun faster, the once-gentle light now swirling into a brilliant ring of white fire that pulsed like a heartbeat. The eclipse had almost fully formed. It was no longer just gathering; it was alive, as if aware of us drawing near. The weight of it pressed down on the ship, thick enough to feel in my chest.

The sea roared louder than ever, throwing massive waves at the ship, the acidic spray hissing as it struck the deck. One wave slammed against the hull so hard the entire ship tilted, sending pirates sprawling. Ropes snapped, and barrels slid across the deck, some bursting open as they struck the railing.

"Hold steady!" Longbottom bellowed, his voice fierce against the chaos. His coat was soaked, his hands tight on the wheel as he forced the ship to cut through the boiling waves. His grin had faded now, replaced by grim determination. "She will hold. She has to hold."

The pirates scrambled to secure the ropes and tighten the chains along the hull, their faces pale and eyes wide. Some still whispered prayers under their breath, their fear growing with every inch closer we sailed. A few glanced toward the island, their expressions twisted in dread.

One pirate, gripping the railing beside me, spat into the churning sea. "This is its doing. Billy M is laughing at us, I swear it. This is what it loves most. Watching us scramble like fools while it waits to see who breaks first."

The ship lurched violently as a massive wave slammed into the side, throwing us against the railing. A moment later, the sea itself erupted as another leviathan breached the surface, its massive body twisting in the waves. It hissed, its glowing eyes fixed on the ship as it circled, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Two more followed, their slick bodies cutting through the water, their movements faster and wilder than before. The chains were thrown immediately, hooks glowing as they latched onto the creatures, but the wild waves made it harder to hold them steady. One of the leviathans dove, dragging a chain with it until the line snapped with a sharp crack.

Who stood at the bow, unmoving despite the chaos. His masked head tilted slightly, watching the approaching island as if he cared nothing for the creatures circling us. Longbottom shouted for more men to the sides, his voice cutting through the roar of the sea. "Keep those beasts off us. We are almost there. Do not let them drag us under now."

The closest leviathan lunged for the ship, its teeth scraping the hull. I raised the revolver and fired, the shot tearing through its side. The round twisted its flesh, burning through it before ripping apart entirely. It screeched, thrashing violently before sinking back into the waves.

Another wave struck before I could reload, nearly knocking me to the deck. One of the leviathans rammed the ship from beneath, the hull groaning under the force. Acidic spray hissed against the wood, leaving new holes in the deck.

Longbottom tightened his grip on the wheel, his teeth bared. "We will reach it. We will not be stopped here."

The ship surged forward, riding another massive wave as the island grew closer. The bridges that connected it to the other islands swayed and cracked under the weight of the turbulent waters, some collapsing entirely into the boiling sea.

As we drew near, the air grew almost unbearable. The madness in the crew grew worse, several men clutching their heads and screaming as they dropped to their knees, whispering to themselves in broken voices. One man threw himself overboard, the acidic waters consuming him in a flash of steam before he even screamed.

I looked toward the island, my grip tightening on the railing. The dead trees swayed unnaturally, and the white ring in the sky pulsed faster, as if reacting to our approach. The closer we came, the more I felt it—the sense that something was watching us, amused, waiting.

Billy M was there. Even without seeing it, I could feel its presence. It was not anger or hatred, only an overwhelming sense of curiosity. We were entertainment to it.

The ship lurched again as another wave carried it forward. Longbottom shouted over the chaos, his grin returning for a brief moment as he laughed through the madness. "There! Hold on, you devils. We are landing!"

The hull scraped against black stone as the ship struck the shore, grinding to a halt. The crew scrambled to secure it with chains before the waves dragged it back, shouting to one another as the water hissed and roared against the rocks.

I stepped to the railing, staring at the island that stretched before me. The ground was cracked and lifeless, the trees standing like twisted bones, their branches reaching into the black void above.

Longbottom moved beside me, his grin now a serious line as he looked toward the center. "If you plan to face whatever waits there, I will not stop you, but I will not lie. Many of us will not wait long. The longer we stay here, the more this place will eat at our minds."

I nodded once, my eyes fixed ahead. "You have already done more than anyone could ask. Keep the ship ready."

Longbottom gave me a sharp nod, his grin returning faintly despite the madness in his crew. "Do not take too long, Lord Blackwood. The center does not forgive those who linger."

I stepped down onto the blackened shore, the stone beneath my boots warm as if it had been burned recently. The air carried no wind, no sound, only the soft hiss of the acid sea behind me and the distant hum of the eclipse forming fully above.

The center of the Forgotten Realm waited, and I knew Billy M was already watching.

The bridge creaked under my weight, its ancient stone worn thin, parts of it crumbling into the boiling sea below. The air smelled faintly of ash and something older, something wrong. The dead trees lining the path swayed though there was no wind, their twisted branches moving as if tracking me. The auras of trapped souls hovered nearby, flickering more violently now, their light growing dim as if they too feared what waited ahead.

The sky above pulsed with the almost-complete eclipse. The white souls that had once drifted lazily now spun faster, forming a perfect glowing ring in the void, bright enough to cast sharp shadows across the cracked ground. Every pulse of light felt like a heartbeat, not mine, not the realm's, but something else. Something watching.

I pressed forward, my revolver heavy at my side. The bridges became thinner, some barely wide enough for a single step. I moved carefully, but as I drew closer to the heart of the realm, the silence broke.

At first, it was only a soft whisper, faint and almost curious, like someone watching from a distance. Then came laughter. Not loud, not mocking, but quiet, soft, and deliberate. It echoed across the void, impossible to place, as if it came from every direction at once.

The laughter grew louder as I stepped onto the final stretch of land, the dead trees now twisted completely, their branches clawing toward the sky as though writhing in agony. The air felt thicker, pressing against my chest with every breath.

At the center of it all, there was nothing. No throne, no figure, only a patch of cracked earth where the shadows seemed darker, where the world itself felt thinner. But I could feel it.

Billy M.

It was not visible in any way I could comprehend, but I felt its gaze settle on me, heavy and curious. The laughter stopped, replaced by silence so deep it rang in my ears.

The ground shifted beneath me, not physically but in my mind, as if the world itself folded. A strange warmth crept up my arms, into my chest, as the air around me bent like liquid. My heart pounded, and I realized it was not from fear of death but something worse.

I saw them.

Deeds, standing at the door with that quiet, patient expression. Mikhail, his robe glowing faintly, smiling shyly the way he always did when he wanted to impress me. Bella, her golden eyes soft, her hand against my chest as she whispered for me to come back to her.

I heard them too, faintly, as if from behind a wall. Deeds telling me to be careful, Mikhail laughing about something simple, Bella's voice repeating my promise.

The warmth became heat. It pressed into my mind like a hand peeling back layers of who I was, pulling me apart, piece by piece.

Billy M was watching.

The eclipse above flared, the white ring glowing so brightly it hurt to look at, but I could feel it wasn't looking at the world. It was looking at me.

A voice, not spoken but felt, filled my head. It was not words, not truly, but I understood it all the same.

You fear losing them. You fear forgetting them. What does it feel like, I wonder, when you become the very thing you fear most.

I dropped to my knees, my hands pressing against the cracked stone as my head pounded. My vision blurred, twisting, my thoughts slipping from me one by one.

What does it feel like to forget.

"No," I whispered, my voice hoarse, my fingers gripping at the stone as if it could anchor me. "I cannot forget. Not them."

I pulled the small leather notebook from my coat, my hands shaking as I tore it open. My revolver slipped from my hip, clattering against the stone, forgotten for the first time in years.

I began to write. The words poured out of me, frantic, uneven.

**Dear reader I must interject here and state that it was all based on the recounting that I managed to get after many many interviews with Blackwood and I believe this next part is what ties alongside it. I shall explain more after.*

The air is heavy. The bridges are breaking behind me. The ship is gone from sight now and Longbottom's shouts are only echoes in my head. The ground here is cracked, warm under my boots as if burned from the inside out. The dead trees are moving. They are watching me. I do not look at them for long.

The sky is wrong. The white lights are no longer stars. I know they are souls. They are spinning faster now, pulling together in a ring. It is bright, too bright, and every pulse feels like it is inside my chest. I can feel it watching me.

I hear it laughing. It is not loud. It is soft and patient and curious.

Billy M. I know it is here. I cannot see it, but I feel it. It does not need to show itself to be real. It is close now. The center of this cursed place belongs to it.

The ground hums under my hands when I touch it. I do not want to kneel, but my legs feel weak. My revolver is heavy, heavier than ever before, but I keep it in my hand. The acid sea is roaring behind me, and the sky feels closer than it should.

I hear them. Deeds telling me to be careful, his voice steady and sure. Mikhail laughing, saying something about my coat, about how I look too proper for a man chasing gods. Bella's voice is clearer than both of theirs. She is saying my name, telling me to come back to her. I swore I would. I promised her.

The heat is inside my chest now. It is pressing against me, pulling me apart. My head is pounding.

It is speaking to me. Not words, not really, but I can feel what it means.

You fear losing them. You fear forgetting them. What does it feel like, I wonder, when you become the very thing you fear most.

No. I will not forget. I will not lose them.

What does it feel like to forget.

I cannot forget. I will not.

I pull out my notebook. My hands are shaking. My revolver falls to the ground. It does not matter. This matters. I need to write. I need to hold onto them. I cannot let them slip.

Deeds is patient. He has been more than a servant, more than I deserve. He is... he is my friend. Mikhail is strong, stronger than he knows, and stubborn, but he has a good heart. I am proud of him. I am proud to be his teacher. Bella... her eyes are gold. She smiled at me. She told me to come back to her. She kissed me. She is waiting for me. I cannot forget her. I cannot forget them.

I cannot forget them all.

I cannot forg...

**This final entry was the last of Lord Blackwood's journals, recovered from the site of the Queen's fated expedition into the Forgotten Realm. The ink was smeared, the pages warped, and the writing grew frantic and uneven before ending abruptly mid-sentence. There was no further record of him after that day.*

The Foundation officially cataloged SCP-1867, a *Nembrotha kubaryana*, a small neon sea slug contained in a standard aquatic enclosure. To most, it is simply that and nothing more. But to those who speak with it, the creature insists it is Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, Viscount, Naturalist, and Explorer. It speaks with the same voice described by those who knew him, rich with charm and confidence, recounting tales of grand hunts, distant lands, and impossible wonders.

And yet, when asked about Deeds, or Mikhail, or the woman with golden eyes, the creature tilts its small, bright head as if puzzled. It denies knowing anyone by those names. It speaks the stories as if they are history, but there is no weight in its words, no flicker of memory in the way it tells them. They are echoes, repeated with pride but without the sorrow or love that once gave them meaning.

I have sat for hours listening to it speak. The voice is his, the mannerisms are his, the certainty in his words unshaken, but he does not remember who he was. Whatever he was before is gone, and what remains is only the story he told himself he was meant to be.

If this is truly where his story ends, then let it end as an echo, because even if he does not remember the people he cared for, his tales carry them still. They live on in the words he repeats, even if he no longer knows why.

-Calico