

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

THE CONQUERING DARKNESS



LUCAS HAULT

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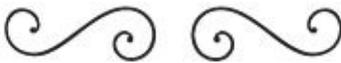
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About the Author



The City of Harot



The bleak winds howled, sounding like an awful wail of the starving wolves.

It was a cold autumn night. Dry shedded leaves covered the lonely roads, with heaps everywhere around the long roadway that connected to the Southern Woods. The blowing winds and the sound of rustling foliage filled the entire place, beside the roar of a vintage car, tearing through that path, scattering the heaps of dry leaves all around.

“We could have made it much earlier if it wouldn’t have been for you,” roared Allan Will. He was a middle-aged man, with an impassive, rather sulky expression, along with a yellow parchment skin and a pair of tempting blue eyes, dressed in cargos and boots, a revolver butt by his side, and a leather jacket covering his top. Allan had earned his place as a commander in the Synerian army despite his young age, as the man was remarkable for his fortitude and astuteness, which was the solitary reason behind his appointment to the post.

“I was not the only one responsible, but you and Edd as well were fairly involved in gushing those wine down your throats,” replied the man beside him, Rickard Jones, a heavy, golden-haired, dark youth, who was feared by every stranger for his husky appearance, though his disposition were just the opposite. He was the same in age as Allan, clad in a suit of heather tweed with a soft cloth cap; but appeared more mature than his companions.

“Sounds like I am in a company of drunken bastards,” commented Allan irritatingly.

“That company involves a wank commander as well,” mentioned Edd Green, the final companion clutched at the back, struggling with the cannikin held in his hand. He and Rickard laughed, not as much at the remark, but rather to annoy

the fierce commander. Allan didn't look at them but could hear their palms clap against each other. Edd was little more than a boy, frank-faced and cheerful, with the breezy manner of one who is out for a trip and means to enjoy every minute of it. A dark-haired, black-skinned man with a pair of big brown eyes, he was the youngest soldier ever admitted in the army. Though it was his elder brother behind the delegation rather than any of his adroitness, but Edd seemed proud of it.

The men had crossed the extensive wasteland that separated the large forests of Townslane from the thick yellow Southern Woods, following which laid their destination—the abandoned city of Harot.

Harot was located far south of Townslane, the vice-capital of Syneria. It was situated at the southernmost region of Syneria, at the edge of the Southern Continent. Harot was cursed, being evacuated centuries ago. Once regarded as a beautiful city famous for its magnificent buildings and opulent lifestyle, the place now stood in ruins. Its brightness was replaced by darkness, sorrow overtook its laughter, and worst of all, life had surrendered before destruction. The city that was once mesmerizing was presently bare and lonely, haunted by countless tales.

People trying to approach it had never made it back. The matter was reported to Marven Fraser, the current President of the nation, who had sent a large army troop to Harot to discover the truth. But half the troop met with an accident midway, while the ones that remained, making it favourably to the place, never ever returned.

There were countless tales relating to many others who had never made it back from Harot. It was the leading cause as to why the entry to that place was strictly prohibited by law, and the ones trying surpassing it were punishable by death.

“Rules are for the rest. None can dare to stop a commander,” mentioned Edd, as he opened the third beer can, pouring the delicious drink down his throat.

“Surely they will,” he replied at once. “When they notice a capable commander driving a bunch of morons to some restricted place.”

The howling winds slapped their faces all the way through the woods. The weather seemed harsher, much different than before, as if it had changed within an instant. Rickard caught a glimpse of small round eyes staring at them from tall tree branches, being disturbed by the sound of their speeding car. His stomach clenched, but thank heaven, they were nothing more than owls in the branches, fierce and awake.

Allan and Edd continued with their chattering, but he was least interested in their military talk. The tall dense trees wrapped in complete darkness appeared

like giant behemoths, sending a shiver down his spine. He could hear the chirping sound of crickets behind the bushes and the absolute silence that surrounded the region.

Allan rushed the car across the woods and towards the land of rumours. His nerves tingled with the sense of adventure. Rickard was impatient too. The thought of witnessing Harot with his own eyes buried the seeds of eagerness within his chest.

The roofless car that Allan drove was exorbitant. Roofed automobiles were used only by the President and his chiefs for their impregnability.

Allan Will had spent three glorious years in Hustlecitis, the capital of Syneria, while Edd was in the service of the Townslane army. Edd Green was the younger brother of Owen Green, one of the highly trusted officials of Lord Elias Solomon Rayne, the Governor General of Townslane, and who was also the closest friend to the President. The third one, Rickard Jones was the son of a nobleman who had been enjoying life with his father's wealth. He was up to no good, and yet was married to a noblewoman from the exquisite city of Balin because of his father's status.

The three were close friends, born and brought up in the vice-capital. They were no different than the rest, who had grown up hearing tales about Harot. The tales did not frighten or bother them, but they weren't the exceptions.

A majority of Synerians regarded the tales of Harot as nothing but a myth, while some considered it as old twisted tales to frighten young children to sleep. They denied the existence of anything unnatural or execrable, and referred the believers as ignoramus and dastard.

"Do you really believe in the people and what they say regarding the city?" asked Edd mockingly. He had just emptied the can, throwing it off the car.

"Now I can see the wine playing its part." He sounded arrogant, which he truly was.

"Maybe Edd has a point," joked Rickard, trying to pull the leg of the man beside him.

"Maybe I shouldn't have picked you up, but left you to lay naked beside your woman." Allan had always been ahead of them in this regard.

"I seriously regret that," replied Rickard, placing his hands within the pouch. "I should have stayed at home rather than wandering with the vagabonds. At least I would have stayed warm and comfortable with her." The three laughed.

Allan seemed diligent, with restlessness beating down his chest and vibes of edginess running all over his body. He drove the car through the woods and straight to the gate where stood six of the guards, dressed in chocolate brown attires. They stood by the big iron gate, attached to the towering walls bordering

the city which was on the extreme fringe of the world. It was their post, appointed by the President himself to prevent folks from getting past the barricade which would lead to nothing, but the end. However, many refused to believe it at once.

“Is there anything wrong Sir?” asked the stout one among the six.

Allan shook his head in pride. “We are here by the President’s accord. There is something he wants us to look after and that itself brings us to this place.”

There was dubiousness in the guard’s eyes, but he was helpless. He did not had the authority to interrogate a commandant. “Alright Sir!” he said, moving out of their way as the three got off their car. The gate was big, but unfortunately not that spacious to let a fancy car through. “There you go.”

The men didn’t turn around, not once, but walked past the gate and towards their destination.

We did it!” expressed Edd, as they proceeded in.

“I did it,” he reminded, sounding brash. “You would have been taking your ass back through the woods if it wouldn’t have been for me.”

“I might have taken some other way to get through,” said Rickard, sounding hilarious.

“Maybe if you would have offered them something noble, they might have let you in,” he replied.

Rickard looked dull. “What?”

“It appears to me that he was speaking of your noble wife,” mentioned Edd and laughed.

“Don’t you fucking say that.”

“I meant some noble reward or any noble deal,” he opposed. “Don’t listen to that moron. There are always women in his head.”

“Aaah women! The beautiful creation of God.” Edd seemed captivated remembering them. “I am a very religious man, my friend, and this itself makes me love the beautiful creation. This is the reason behind them being tucked deep within my mind.”

“And how many have you been with?” asked Rickard eagerly.

“To be honest, I have lost the count after seven!” Edd seemed to be proud of his so-called accomplishment. “What about you my friend?”

“I am loyal to my wife and I think of none besides her.”

“Who sounds like a moron now?” remarked Edd, and along with Allan laughed.

The conversations continued with their approaching footsteps. The winds were cold and disturbing, teasing every inch of their toned bodies. The men placed their hands in their pouches but it was still unbearable. Rickard was

bothered. Something was not right, something unusual—the icy winds, the vast stretched ground covered with ferns and grasses, appearing like a green ocean, and the deep silence holding the place. It spoke of something alarming, perhaps atrocious, flashing in his mind that was layered with ignorance.

The ground seemed vast and endless, the only thing visible in every possible direction till the horizon. The tall dense trees pulled their attention. They were green and healthy, with no shedded leaves around anywhere which seemed anomalous, as it was already autumn in the land, the whole land, the whole Syneria, the whole of the Southern Continent; but the place was uninfluenced.

“Do you still consider it a right decision getting here?” asked Rickard, who had begun to turn suspicious.

“Is the greenery bothering you?” asked Allan insolently. Rickard did not speak.

Allan pushed himself down on his knees touching the grasses. It felt dry over his fingers, but appeared fine and green, unlike the touch. “I think this place has a lot to speak,” he said, wiggling his eyes which soon died under the howling winds.

They tramped endlessly, without a moment’s pause, through the small grasses and past those dense trees. Rickard’s feet had already begun to ache, his muscles stretching in pain, while his calf hurting with every single move. The man needed to rest, but unfortunately he couldn’t, as stopping was never an option, not really before Allan Will, who was strict in nature.

Rickard was weary, while Edd looked confused. But surprisingly, there was a completely different look around the face of Allan Will. The look reflecting his determination and stubbornness. The look that portrayed his willingness and insanity. Allan was venturous; his head held high in fortitude, while his audacious breath battling the hindering winds. He pulled himself with all the belligerence, moving ahead as far as possible. The other two companions were debilitated to his persistence, like an animal to its trainer.

“Look at that,” cried Allan, pointing towards something before him, his voice being carried away by the winds, echoing around everywhere.

“What’s that?” enquired Rickard, as he and Edd rushed towards their friend awaiting at the far. They reached his spot to notice the ancient ruins before their eyes. It was enthralling, a bit obscured and a little intimidating. The site was hallowed, with broken walls and destroyed houses which stood mute for ages. The halls were roofless and the ruptured floor seemed unevenly decorated with cavities. The cracked round pillars and charred walls had burning torches attached to it which threw enough light all over the place, bathing every object bright and clear. Some of the rooms and houses had its walls broken, while

others had just a wall that remained. The walls were scorched and sloughed, with lichens growing over it. Grey stones rose from the land, and a couple of leafless trees with its long long dry branches stood firm surrounding the site.

Their faces washed blank with fear and confusion on watching the burning torches in a place visited by none. Every muscle of their body just froze, until Allan's lips stretched with a sardonic grin. "It must be the guards," he explained. "It looks like they are taking proper care of this place."

Rickard pulled himself closer to the torches. His piercing eyes focused on the helve and his hands groped the strange attribute. Something within his eyes itched, causing an algid sensation following the touch. The torches had the symbol of a snake carved on its handle. He turned around to notice the large round pillars within the broken halls that had the symbol of a python's head incised on it. It definitely looked appalling, eventhough he knew nothing about it.

"Looks abhorrent!" remarked Edd gravely, noticing the large emblem at the pillars glaring them.

"Let's move," said Rickard, who could bear it no further. His grey eyes, glaring out of the white mask of his face, were full of horror and astonishment as he gazed around the ancient ruins while walking through the disintegrated locality, before stopping by a large necropolis that laid beyond the site. The graveyard was almost thrice in area than that of the ancient ruins behind them.

"It might have been a graceful community once," guessed Allan staring at the necropolis before them. "There might have been a large population of tribals once residing in this place, living a lavishing lifestyle. But here they are now, resting in their permanent homes. The community must have been destroyed by the enemies who might have been much stronger than them. The foes might have outnumbered them, killing every poor soul." The expression over his face had commiserated, and he looked pitied picturing the image in his mind.

"I think this place was covered in some plague or a curse. It must have been a return for their deeds which none could have survived," explained Edd. They had varying assumptions regarding the downfall, and both argued among themselves, stressing on their own theories standing appropriate.

"That's strange!" interfered Rickard astoundingly, breaking them in between, as he slowly began to proceed inside the necropolis.

"What are you up to?" asked Allan, and the two chased him, though none among them could debate about the configuration in his head.

"Just look at this," pointed Rickard. "The ruins and the graveyard are quite ancient but look at these graves." He bent down to touch the moist soil and it seemed ominous and abnormal. The graveyard was ancient enough, and the

place was evacuated centuries ago. The entry here was strictly prohibited, leaving absolutely no way for the existence of new ones.

Some graves were recent, while each of it displayed the gravestones that had names of the deceased scribbled on it. They crossed a few, before stopping by an older one. 'Simon Conred' read the gravestone.

"I know him, Simon Conred," said Allan, his heart leaped within him as he saw it. Something struck his mind all of a sudden, and his eyes gaped in shock. "He was once a General of Townslane before being appointed by the President to serve in the Capital. I have heard some tales about this man in Hustlecitis. He was one among the President's most trusted men and had quite a significant role in the War of Syneria. People say that he hardly travelled south, especially after his delegation in the Capital. He was declared missing years ago, and here he is, dead and decaying."

"Was he a believer?" asked Rickard staring at the large gravestone. There was something sceptical striking his senses all the while.

Allan shook his head, clinching all of the indecision with his single gesture.

"Should we proceed?" asked Rickard. He sounded cold and bothered. His eyes reflected the horrid sensation, while his voice shivered. He looked insecure, and the audacity and determination within him seemed to have vanished.

"Now don't get started as one among the believers," stated Edd at once. He sounded sharp, trying to imitate Allan Will. His arrogance had often attracted him and he was partial to the qualities that the man possessed.

Rickard stood still beside Allan, with his mouth clutched up, while Edd had moved across the necropolis to seek some other way out of that place.

"I think Edd was absolutely right!" said Allan.

"For what?"

"You do sound like a moron now."

Rickard looked at him inanely. "I just want to get back."

"And we will," he replied boldly, rubbing his hands in a pompous and self-satisfied manner. "We will be back once we are through this thing."

"Allan!" called a loud voice. It was Edd. The men rushed in his direction, eager to discover something staggering. Their eyes sparkled with anticipation, while impetuosity dangled their minds.

"What's that?" asked Allan holding his breath, as they discovered a huge well before them which actually killed the animosity within themselves. The well was big and dark, located immediately beside the graveyard. The small broken boundary encircling it was blotched with lichens and mosses. Allan and Rickard peeped into it but could see absolutely nothing, except for the pitch-blackness.

Allan grabbed a pebble from the ground and threw it deep within. They waited for it to hit the surface beneath, but couldn't hear anything. No splash nor any sort of resonance.

"Its depth looks to be profound," said Rickard, staring at the large surface of darkness. His companion nodded.

Edd, all this while had moved on, continuing with his initial endeavour.

"Shouldn't we head back?" asked Rickard.

Allan looked at him annoyingly. "If you ever utter another word of return anytime, I swear I will knock you down into this dark shit."

His words never frightened Rickard, but the place did. He could sense something abnormal, perhaps alarming, and wanted to get back at once.

Edd's voice called again, this time being much louder and comprehensive than before. The men speeded towards him, pushing themselves vigorously against the winds, approaching Edd, who stood before a high slope with his eyes gaped and a grave expression over his face. Allan and Rickard were dumbfounded too, frozen like a statue—bolted and braced, stunned by the view before them. It was perceptible and evident—the mysterious city of Harot, with fine streets, high palatial structures, large gateway and the royal houses. Everything that they had ever heard about the city stood apparent to their own eyes.

The magnificent city was bordered with enduring walls that were high and resplendent. The large gate attached with the boundary was sealed with a big tarnished lock and was the only possible way to enter the city.

The streets were wide and large, and the palaces were more brimming and superior than any individual could have ever imagined. The houses were megalithic and much in number, expensive and radiant, constructed using the early art and architecture. The outer walls of the structure were carved with altered stones—an artistry that was remarkable within itself. There were tall dense trees growing along the borders of the city which made the place mesmerizing. It never looked like a relinquished place, not a bit, but appeared to be the residence of the royal bloods.

The city was fantastic, but at the same time looked abstruse and bizarre, for there was an extreme silence lying over the place, and no sign of life anywhere around the extensive city. The winds blew harder, causing a violent shake over the trees and making the leaves rustle emphatically, as that of a dog that snarls at the strangers. The inconvenient weather chilled them to the bones and set their teeth chattering.

"What is that?" asked Edd instantaneously, pointing out something high towards the far end.

“It is the Cristal Barrier,” replied Allan boldly. “I have heard about it from some of the men whom I once met in a military campaign, but had never actually thought it to be true.”

They contemplated the high barrier which stood quite distant, but its enormous height and shimmer were easy to perceive.

“Should we proceed?” asked Edd in a low but resolute voice.

Allan gave a slight nod. “Just stick together.”

They steadily descended the slope, which was golden-green on one side and grey shadow on the other. The approaching footsteps sounded like some army march—so acute was the silence, which buzzed into their heads, making it more oppressive than the unforgiving winds. They paced through the ground and stomped over the grasses, and found themselves before the large gate—a hinged barrier, painted in black, with iron bars similar to those of a prison cell. Allan pulled out his revolver and took a shot to break it down. The gunshot sounded like an explosion filling up the entire place. The seal cleft and the gates wide-opened.

They were finally into the city of Harot. The charm of the place had doubled, abruptly, as if by magic, making it appear more fetching as they got within. The gravel roads were wide and clean, houses remarkably big and appealing, while the lights were brighter and beckoning. The atmosphere within was calm, while the deserted city was tied up in dumbness. The crisp sound of their boots upon gravel was the only sound audible, beside the howling winds.

Each and every house of the city was bigger and far more lavishing than any other house that they had ever seen. The way in which it were constructed and embellished was truly laudable. The men ambled across the wooden-floored houses and through the lonely streets, before standing by a colossal Palace. It was a high storey structure with two tall towers connected to it. The greyish tint and the jumbled battlements made it resemble like a beautiful castle.

“This one must be bigger than the Palace of Townslane,” flattered Edd as they adored the pile of bricks before them. The entrance to the Palace was through a large stairway covered with fancy red carpet. The gateway was big, larger than the one at the entrance of the city, and led into the big royal hall within the Palace.

“I have never heard anyone calling it beautiful,” wondered Rickard Jones, who could hardly move his eyes off the edifice.

“They call it mysterious,” replied Edd.

“And so it is,” said Allan Will, waving at them to follow him through. “Keep your eyes and your ears open,” he added, and they sluggishly mounted the stairs. The thick carpet felt good and comfortable beneath their boots.

The hall was big, with its ceiling and pillars decorated with expensive gems. The matting had brilliant designs imprinted on it, something perhaps never seen before. The wide stairwell led up to the various chambers in the Palace, and the railings were embedded with gold.

“Check everything around in here,” commanded Allan. “I am sure there are certain mysteries to unfold.” The men dispersed, glancing everything around.

There were beautiful paintings hanging on the walls. It were so perfectly done that Rickard could spend whole night admiring the art. But unfortunately it wasn't the errand, and he needed to be quick. He thus moved on, unwilling, involving himself into the task. Edd on the other hand, was busy looking for something on the shelves and over the chests. Allan, the young commander was involved in examining the stuffs placed on the big tables in that spacious hall.

Rickard could hardly avoid those paintings despite being at work. The brilliant art drew his attention every single time and he could barely prevent himself. He proceeded towards the large bookcase located beside the stairway. It was completely occupied with books—some thin, while others thick and bulky. Some were quite old, and the remaining were recent. He went closer and pulled out a thick one, but could find nothing useful. He looked over some others but none made any difference. He continued digging amongst the shelves, like a gravedigger dredging a grave, while Allan and Edd walked towards their struggling friend for assistance.

“How about some abetment?” asked Allan derisively.

“You are most welcome!”

Allan could watch him work the whole night, enjoying his smirk, but time did matter and so he had to join his friend. He came forward with a somewhat sullen, defiant air, putting on his hands to assist.

“What stops you?” asked Rickard, watching Edd standing distant.

“You actually know,” he replied. Rickard was no stranger to it and spoke to him no further. He handed him the book to hold for the instance as the other two engaged into the task.

Edd was never fond of reading. He stood distant from the bookcase, as if it was the last thing that he would ever like to behold. He stood behind his friends, with the filth held in his hand, flipping the pages over and over again. He was ignorant to certain scriptures and was not interested in learning any. He just enjoyed his act, repeating it time and again, before all of a sudden, caught a glimpse of a gorgeous woman in red standing by the railing on the upper floor.

She was perhaps twenty-nine or around, standing with her figure outlined against the flood of light, one hand upon the railing, one resting by her waist, her body slightly bent, her head and face protruded, with eager eyes and parted lips,

as if welcoming the presence of the strangers into her place. A tall and ravishing figure, clasped in a blood-red gown that flaunted her luscious curves, she was caramel-haired, white-skinned, with slim lips whose colour matched that of a beautiful rose, and a pair of luring amber eyes that were just hard to miss.

He admired her incessantly with wide-opened eyes and senses that had flattened before her beauty. He never blinked, not once, but continued adoring every inch of the enchantress who had blown-up his mind. The sight of those alluring eyes staring him back simply sent a thrilling sensation down his spine. He wanted his friends to see this, but remembered the annoyed face of Allan Will. Interfering in his work would do no good, and the man would yell at him for disturbing them. It was best to keep it within himself.

“I think I shall search upstairs,” he said impatiently, though Allan and Rickard were too involved to hear him speak. He placed the book on the table beside the stairway and dragged himself upstairs as quick as he could.

Allan and Rickard searched the other shelves but found nothing useful, not until Rickard caught the glimpse of a book, placed in a corner of the uppermost shelf. The book was chunky and old, similar to the ancient ruins they had seen before. It looked relic, dipped in dust. He pulled it out at once and displayed it before his friend.

The pages had turned yellow and were mangled. Termites and pests had already begun to feed on it. It was scribbled in the Holferian scripture—a writing which not all were capable to decode, and fortunately Rickard wasn’t one among them.

“What is this book about?” asked Allan staring at it with ignorance.

“It’s the Holferian scripture,” he replied, wiping off the layers of dust over it. “Apocalypse says the title.” He sounded grim and scary, a manner which only the presence of a torment inspires.

“What does the book says?” asked Allan anxiously.

Rickard opened the book to begin, but couldn’t, as the ragged pages painted with dust had gobbled most of its content. He struggled to brush off the dust over it, focusing on some of the scribblings noticeable and tried, “A Banshee Knight shall give rise to.....? He couldn’t complete, as most of the content was blotted, leaving it meagre and nugatory.

He turned some pages and read, “The Year of the Scorpion and the Raven.” The further content was the same, blotted and invisible, making it hard to conceive. But the last sentence said, “The promise was never forgotten, and shall be fulfilled. And by the fall of the year mentioned, shall he rise again.”

“What was all this about?” asked Rickard, staring bluntly at his companion. He seemed perturbed, and his body soaked up in sweat.

“I do not know much about it,” replied Allan in dull voice as of someone who could sense danger, but could do nothing about it. “The year that you just mentioned, the one of the Scorpion and the Raven falls into the Holferian calendar.”

“And what promise did it speak about?” asked Rickard curiously.

“I know nothing about it,” he replied at once, but the same thing bumbled within his head. He suddenly noticed another bookcase, this one being smaller than the one behind him, located beside the entrance. Though none among them had ever noticed it in the first place.

“Look for some other stuff here. I will check the other shelves.”

Rickard nodded and returned to the bookcase, while Allan proceeded towards the other at the opposite.

The bookshelf, though small, was fully lined with books. He was involved in examining the books, when suddenly, within a blink of an eye, he sensed something rushing down the stairs before the Palace. It seemed as quick as lightning, and a very odd sensation thrilled through him.

“What was that?” he asked himself distrustfully, as he pulled out his revolver and cautiously descended the stairs that dropped down to the streets.

He found himself back on the roads; flustered, anxious, dismayed and somewhat shaken in his nerves to sense something so meteoric, that scrambled for a moment and disappeared in the ether. There was not a soul to be seen or a sound to be heard. It was just him and the lonely place, which had begun to get wrapped in a light fog of the cold night.

“Must be some illusion,” he murmured under his breath, allowing the agitation to settle down within him. He shook his head distrustfully and slowly pulled himself towards the stairs.

He was about to ascend the remaining steps, when, in a trice, the sound of the approaching footsteps fell into his ears. By now he had no second thought, as he was sure of it to be Edd. He was already mad at him and wanted to scold him. He descended again, loping over the remaining steps and into the street. It was just the deserted roads covered in the growing fog. There was no other movement anywhere around. He was troubled, too much involved in vague imagination that had overwhelmed him.

It appeared aberrant, a bit daunting as well. This couldn't be his illusion, not for a second time. “I should speak to Rickard,” he said to himself and turned his way back to the Palace. He was about to proceed towards the stairs when the crisp sound over the gravel was heard for the other time. This time it came from the opposite street, across the rows of houses which was covered in thick snow-like fog, diluting the light from various lamp posts fixed by the solid road. He

grasped his revolver, and slowly and guardedly began chasing it. Allan Will was a brave man, but something around there surely crucified him with terror!

Rickard was almost done with the entire shelves but discovered nothing.

“Did you find something?” he asked, turning around to find himself the sole living creature in the entire hall. There was absolutely no sign of his companions. The chamber was lonely and still, as if there had never been anyone around for centuries.

“Allan!” he called, his voice echoing everywhere around, but no answer. He called it a second time but things remained unchanged. There was something weird about the situation that had overtook his emotions. He could breathe in fear—a fear that was so unnatural and yet so familiar, as if it had never faded in his mind. A chilling sensation crawled up his spine, making him recoil in horror. He cocked his pistol, and with shuddering footsteps made his way out of the hall seeking his companions.

“Was it a mirage?” murmured Edd to himself, looking over the last corridor. It was the only inquisition hitting his head right from the moment he stepped his foot into the upper floor. His features were dull, and he resembled the look of a weary buccaneer whose repeated attempts had brought nothing but despondency. He had explored for that mystery woman all over the floor, including the second, third and fourth, but found no sign of her. He walked past the row of chambers within the last corridor, but it proved no good.

The man was disheartened as he slowly descended the steps that dropped into the big hall. He got down, but to his astonishment found it decamped. His companions were no where to be found. Discovering no sign of the woman did dismay him, but finding his friends missing just anguished the man.

“Allan! Rickard!” he cried, but no answer. He repeated it a couple of time but no response. The hall was forlorn, leaving him aghast.

“They must have moved out,” he said to himself, storming his way out of the hall. He hurtled down the large stairway and into the streets, but was thunderstruck to find it occupied with countless individuals. The city that was bare and lonely was now filled with eerie creatures, dressed in black hoods, emerging from the light fog which draped the place. At the first glance he started back so suddenly that he almost slipped down to the ground, and a deadly pallor overspread his face. His knees shook, and heavy drops of sweat came on his forehead, and he trembled like an aspen. They had their hoods on, veiling all of their faces, save for the hands that were pale white, similar to the fog draping the place.

All were busy walking around the street, involved with their own endeavour, neglecting the odd one amongst them. It looked liked some floating flesh

amongst the lake filled with crocodiles.

His legs were frozen into place, so he crouched into a crawl and dragged himself towards the entrance gate. But before he could successfully make it, the sky hit with a deafening thunderbolt, so heavy that it destroyed his soul within. A sudden lightening followed, allowing him to see their pale white faces covered in hoods which was enough to give anyone sleepless nights. Never had he seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and dreadfulness. The pale white faces were strong and merciless, evil, and vindictive, with dark scales covering the skin, and fierce blood-red eyes staring him ferociously. The men and women, everyone the same. They looked beastly and disastrous, harrowing and dreadful, for their robust appearance was enough to freeze his nerves. They stood still, like firm mountains over the earth.

The audacity and decisiveness within him were burnt to ashes. He, almost in a chill of horror, turned slowly around, and then he began to shake and tremble like a man in a palsy, for his eyes witnessed countless dead bodies hanging down from the Palaces and all the houses. The bodies were wrapped in white sheets, and hung lifeless all over the place, including the branches of the leafy trees over the boundaries.

He was petrified, while blood ran cold in his veins. His jaw dropped into a silent scream of horror, and he returned to his feet, throwing himself towards the huge gateway; but to his shock, found it sealed. The lock that had been shot broken by his friend some moments ago, was once again holding the gate. Edd had been victimized and terrorised, shuddering in dreadfulness and deformity. A great fear began to come upon him as his sweaty palms hurriedly rummaged his pocket, pulling out the revolver. His quavering hands found it difficult to grasp the weapon at once, but he had to be through—for the sake of his mortal life, he had to do it. He somehow succeeded, though his body seemed to be paralyzed with trepidation. He quickly aimed at the point and took his shot. But unfortunately, he missed.

It was hard to aim with his numb hands that shook involuntarily with fear and pain. He immediately tried with the other one, but lo! He missed.

He once turned around to look at the dreaded figures getting close. Blood pumped rapidly within his body as he took a few other shots. The third, fourth, and fifth, but nothing helped, until the sixth one which fortunately hit the target.

The lock dropped down to the ground and gates opened.

He sprinted out of the gate, dashing towards the high slope and ascending it as quickly as possible. Another thunderbolt followed, devouring the remaining life in him. The sound seemed to have blown up the lights, leaving the place in pitch-blackness. Nothing was conspicuous to his eyes, except the enormous

Cristal Barrier standing like a firm mountain.

He ran across the necropolis, throwing his legs as fast as he could, before it tumbled, and he thrashed down to the ground. His foot had slipped upon the moist soil and the fall had hurt his elbow. He groaned in pain, grabbing his elbow with the other hand, while tears flowed down his eyes.

He found himself before some graves, which were as fresh as the winds. He dragged himself closer towards the gravestone, bringing his watery eyes near the scribbling.

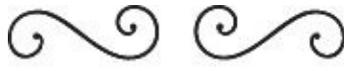
‘Allan Will’ read the one, while ‘Rickard Jones’ said the other. His strength seemed to have left him, and he was incapable of action or movement, hardly even of thought. He was emasculated and eviscerated, holding himself to his knees and crying out in paroxysm of grief and terror, so loud that his soul looked to have poured out through his mouth. It was then, when the man noticed a third grave—dug and empty. ‘Edd Green’ read the gravestone.

This numbed his senses, tearing out his heart with sudden mutilation. There was something around the dark that annihilated his soul, something like the air that could not be seen but its presence could never be denied either. The scene struck him with a spasm of pain and blurred his eyes with tears, the tears of adversity and eradication. He tried to stagger to his feet, but was still ghastly pale and trembling in every limb. He somehow pulled himself back to his feet, in a final gasp to flee away, but then, within an instant, a loud wail followed—so abrupt and gruesome that it chilled his entire body. It was so asperous and unbearable that it began to dull his senses.

He placed his hands on his ears, pressing it as hard as he could, but nothing worked. The wail got louder and louder every moment, with each moment being more crucifying than the one before. It damaged his eardrums, causing it to bleed.

His ears and nose had begun to pour out blood, and he slowly lost his consciousness. Everything was dull before his eyes. It once appeared that that same woman was before him, the one in red gown. However, he could never be sure as only the colour of the gown flashed before his eyes, all other thing remained dazzled.

The wail was perennial, but now it could lay no affect on him. Edd could feel no pain or fear, as it was all over, and he, just like a rotten fruit from a tree, dropped down lifeless into his grave.


1


The hurried steps climbed the remaining stairs, leading to the large corridor that ended up at Borkan's door. He was finally there, William Hayes, a man average in height, strongly built, sallow complexion, black hair, a little bald in the centre, black side-whiskers and moustache; dressed in black frock-coat faced with silk, black waistcoat, and grey tweed trousers, with brown gaiters over elastic-sided boots. He was the messenger of Lord Elias Solomon Rayne, the Governor General of Townslane. He was incharge of the external affairs and was aware of every events taking place around the city or the places nearby. It was his job, and the man was perfected in it.

William sighed, exhaling the tiredness within, as he knocked on the door. It took a few moments before it opened, and there he was, Borkan Solomon Rayne, the son of Lord Elias Rayne and Rebecca Skye. He was neatly clad in a chocolate brown tweed suit, and waistcoat, with a dark grey tie, and a close-fitting hat. The rich leather boot that clasped his ankles were thickly outlined with hide. A young blood of twenty-one, Borkan had the resemblance of both his parents. He was tall and well built, with a strong neck, dark-haired and a neatly trimmed beard, just like that of his father. While on the mother's affinity, he was hazel-eyed, slim-faced, with a beautiful turned-up nose, and slim brows. His complexion was similar to his parents—white and glowing, and a charming smile just like his beloved mother, Rebecca. The young man had an irresistible personality and was considered to be extremely handsome by all. He was a figure that any girl or woman could ever have imagined, with a fascinating face that made them weak at their knees. His prominent jaw curved gracefully around, and the strength of his neck showed in the twining cords of muscle that shaped his entire body; strong arms, bold thighs and calves, and a firm chest.

Every other man was pale in his comparison, and his single sight was enough to swoon both women and men, no matter whatsoever their sexual preference might be. His parents were flooded with marriage proposals for their son from all over their land, but he wasn't in a will for marriage, not that early at least.

"Your parents await you down in the gardens", said William, gazing at the beautiful sunlight entering through the large window in his chamber, reflecting on the shiny surface of the polished marble floor.

"Is everything alright?" he asked, dissertating on the grim on the round face before him. It was something unusual, something distressing. Borkan had always loved the humorous nature of the man before him. Sternness was never his concern, not until it was something lurid.

William said nothing, simply shook his head. That itself was enough to ratify the unsettling situation. He, without any further delay, began to follow the messenger.

"What exactly is the matter?" he asked, proceeding towards the stairway.

William sighed. "Our guards in the borders have discovered something".

"Discovered what?"

William was in such evident distress that he tried to comfort him, but without effect. The messenger looked strangely at him for an instant, and his voice sank almost to a whisper as he answered. "It's too barbaric to explain!"

This struck a chill in his heart. He had never heard William speak in such manner before. It was truly abominable, something beyond any possible imagination. It would never have bothered him if it was from Owen Green, who was just like his friend. But the case was just the opposite for William Hayes. The man had a careful choice of words, and every single word out of his mouth was simply impossible to neglect. This particular thing pricked his mind, causing a chilling sensation run down his spine.

"What exactly is all this about?" he asked, his suspicious eyes locked with the man.

William shook his head, with his narrowed eyes avoiding contact. "You will know once we are in the Forests of Townslane".

Borkan followed him down the stairway and into the wide corridor that had its expensive plastered walls covered in beautiful paintings, and finally into the shaft that led out to the gardens.

The day was bright, with sweet pleasant sunlight casting upon the beautiful Palace of Townslane. The Palace in the vice-capital was an absolute beauty itself. It was a spherical structure, with six tall towers surrounding it all over. The giant towers were connected to the main Palace through the long corridors, which had the beautiful gardens beside them. The shaft that connected the

towers to the main palace structure, divided the garden into six equal parts.

The gardens and towers were further surrounded by a high circular wall. There was a big royal gate at the front, which was the only way to enter or exit the magnificent Palace of Townslane.

Borkan walked beside the messenger through the long passage, and finally into one of the gardens where he found Owen, along with four of the guards, dressed in their dark green attires with round armoured helmets, standing before his parents. His mother, Rebecca Rayne, was a very pretty brunette in her early forties, hazel-eyed, and white in complexion, and had attracted admirers who had ever visited their Palace. She had a slate-coloured, broad-brimmed straw hat, with a feather of a brickish red. Her jacket that covered half of her richly decorated purple gown was black, with black beads sewn upon it, and a fringe of fancy ornaments. There was a little pink plush at the neck and sleeves of her dress, while the gloves that she wore were greyish. Beside her stood his father, Lord Elias Solomon Rayne, a man known for his dignity and honour. He was a dark-haired, broad-shouldered man in his mid forties, with high cheekbones and deep grey eyes. He was slender and toned, and had a stance that spoke of his eminence. Heavy bands of dark curly fleece were slashed across the sleeves and fronts of his double-breasted coat, while the deep blue cloak which was thrown over his shoulders was lined with flame-coloured silk and secured at the neck with a brooch which consisted of a single flaming beryl. Boots extended halfway up his calves, and were trimmed at the tops with rich brown fur.

Rebecca originally belonged to Spion, a nation situated next to Syneria. It laid right beside North-Eastern Syneria, a sovereign state that was once a part of Syneria, but had separated following the War of Syneria. Rebecca was the daughter of Darren Skye, a nobleman in the city of Bronn in Spion. She had been married to Elias right after the war, during his visit, along with the President to Spion, where the two fell for each other in their very first encounter. Elias and Rebecca were married for twenty-three years and the couple had four children—three sons and a daughter. Borkan was the eldest, followed by Barak. Their daughter Farrah came in the third place, while Meshach was the youngest. They were the followers of the Ancient Religion, which was the second dominant religion following Rasphorism all over the three continents.

The couple's daughter, Farrah Solomon Rayne, was married to Silas Hocaine, the son of Joshua and Diana Hocaine. Joshua Hocaine was the cousin of Lord Elias Solomon Rayne, and he along with his family resided in Balin, a beautiful city located on the Hills of Syneria. Joshua and Diana also had a beautiful daughter, Cynthia Hocaine, who had been married to Barak Solomon Rayne, the second son of Elias and Rebecca. Both these weddings took place on

the very same night, which was a memorable one for all. Elias and Rebecca had the initial intention to wed Cynthia to their eldest son, but due to his unwillingness for any marriage, she had been taken by the second one.

“Father! Mother!” called Borkan, stepping into the garden through the gravel steps and walking right beside them. The garden was a large stretch of semi-circular lawn with a path around it. There was a central bed of shrubs, trimmed grasses, bright green plants, and blooming flowers whose fragrance suffused the entire place. The garden stretched around the entire Palace, winding like a green River through the structure, being cut by the long corridors that ran from the towers to the main structure. It was beautiful, simply mesmerizing—so charismatic that one could spend all his time under the sunlight gazing at it.

Borkan stood beside his parents, only to discover an utter silence that dominated a place like such. The features across all the faces were dull, while the furrows in his father’s forehead and a pitied look on the face of his mother left him in daze astonishment. He felt slightly sick in nerves and his hands were twitchy and trembling. The tension in the atmosphere troubled him. He saw the stunned face of Owen Green, a man in his late twenties or perhaps early thirties, who was one of the most trusted officials of his father. Owen was taller than the guards beside him, and stronger as well, with bulging muscles and a pair of big brown eyes. Dressed in a dark brown waistcoat over his woollen shirtings, with faded narrow pant that covered the back of his leather shoes, Owen was as dark as pitch, but his hulky corpus made him arrestive. He resembled the look of a man who was depressed and shattered from within, and yet managed to hold his emotions out of some strong resolution. Owen was traumatized, covering himself in a spurious blanket, pretending to be normal from outside. But the actual man behind it was no secret to Borkan or his parents.

Lord Elias Rayne nodded, and Owen along with the guards left.

“What exactly is wrong with Owen?” he asked his father.

“A young commander from Hustlecitis has gone missing, along with two others. And the third one happens to be his brother. The guards had rung in the Capital and were speaking of their clever strategy to get past the boundaries of the forbidden place. The authority has never spoken to those men about anything, and now it has been a couple of days but no word of them”.

It was crushing, also staggering, too much to bear for a soul like Owen, who had only a brother that was left. Borkan, just like his parents, was no stranger to the situation and knew what would follow next, which best described the helplessness of Owen Green.

“Remember the news of the other one gone missing a long time ago?” began Rebecca. “It was regarding some Simon Conred”. She didn’t properly remember

the name, simply taking an easy guess, which fortunately stood correct.

Elias nodded. "Simon Conred was a capable man who had a good relation with the President. He was once a General here in Townslane, before being appointed as a high official in Hustlecitis".

"And the other one, who along with Simon had been declared missing? asked Borkan. The wretched foregone was nothing new to him, but his reminiscence was limited to his mother's accomplishment.

"Petrus Sanclave!" Elias sighed, looking stern and frazzled. "The missing reports are increasing day by day, and the President himself is looking into the subject resolutely. It is never to be neglected, and this is the sole reason why Owen is wanted in Hustlecitis".

Hustlecitis was the Capital of Syneria. It was a royal city located by the banks of the River of Zorang. The city was extremely beautiful and magnificent, and was a hundred times bigger than Townslane, both in area and population. The city was the residence of noblemen, high-class traders and merchants, priests and priestesses, and people with high living standards.

The President, Marven Fraser had decreed his Governor's presence in the Capital, and Elias had to leave as per the command, along with the brother of the accused.

"Does it really needs to be done, honey?" she asked. She could neither figure out the actual intendment nor the fate of poor Owen Green.

"His brother broke the law, Rebecca", he replied abruptly, sounding bold and specific. "There is a reason why that place is strictly prohibited".

"And I think everyone has the right to know it". She said it with quite an offence, standing by the point that the law should be imposed with proper supporting reasons. Only then could it be possible for anyone to follow.

"Everyone does know it", began Elias. "Everyone knows about the place, but not everyone believes. The believers will believe it, while the disbelievers will continue to deny it, no matter whatsoever is done".

He was absolutely clear and true, and she knew this deep within herself.

"So what do you think awaits Owen?" Rebecca was known for her caring nature. She had always been praised for the love and care that she possessed for her family, and Owen was no different. He had lost his parents a long time ago, and only had a brother that remained. It was Elias and Rebecca who had looked after the two, and that was the reason why Owen served them wholeheartedly.

"I know absolutely nothing. But one thing I can assure is that it won't be a torment, or else it would have been me carrying it out by the President's command".

That was absolutely true, as Elias Rayne was his most trusted man, who was

supposed to be his closest friend as well. They had known each other right from the very beginning, before Lord Fraser was even elected as the President. They had fought numerous wars beside each other and had travelled to various places around the world together. The President had also sung a song for Elias and Rebecca on their wedding, which everyone still found it hard to believe.

“What about our guards in the borders?” remembered Borkan. The thing had disturbed him all the while, right from the moment it had been mentioned by the messenger. “William says it’s too graceless to explain”.

His parents did not speak. Their features were pale just like his own, and he could conceive the similar look of concern over their faces.



A roofed car, surrounded by disclosed automobiles, moved across the narrow gravel path that ended within the large Forests of Townslane. A deathly silence lay upon the place, which made Borkan’s nerves tingle. William’s words still echoed within his head, and now this disturbing silence around the place was enough to torture his senses.

“My Lord!” said one of the guards, as the car stopped, and out came Lord Elias Rayne, followed by Borkan. They had just stopped by the borders, heavily fortified with various guards, who stood with their heads bent low in his honour. Dressed in dark green attires, with round helmets and dark leather boots, the guards—valiant and sturdy, were carried away by a strained articulation which perhaps hung over them by the sight of their discovery.

“Where is it?” asked Elias hurriedly. Borkan stood next to his father, while Owen remained behind the two.

“This way, My Lord!” said one of the guards leading them through. Owen walked behind them, accompanied by William Hayes and some other officials. The sound of their heavy footsteps conquered the woods.

It was a gloomy land of black crag and tangled forest. Borkan’s eyes scanned it thoroughly as he walked. The woods were dense, while the trees were tall and leafy. Sunlight entered through the cleaves of the tall heaped branches, spreading itself all over the ground that was covered with dry shedded leaves.

The scattered fronds belonged to trees surrounding the region, but the oak leaves laid in abundance. The small thick bushes, grasses and the shrubs were all under the influence of the approaching season.

Borkan stared at the surroundings as he walked, but everything looked fine and perfect so far, tensing the earnestness within his nerves. The messenger’s words never stopped repeating in his head, triggering the rate of restlessness

over his mind. The fine trees, thick bushes, ferns and grasses—everything sound and normal. The blowing winds and rustling leaves and the wavy bushes were all well and good.

They proceeded further in and finally stopped at a point. Before them laid a green sloping land full of forests and woods, crowned with clumps of trees and outlined with greenery till the very end, interrupted only by a large stream that flowed in the lower region of the forest. There was also, everywhere, a bewildering mass of fruit blossom. The steep slopes were covered in sponge-like grasses, leading down beside the stream. A mesmerizing place indeed it was, with the sound of flowing stream and the scent of fresh water. The clouds were driving over the face of the sky, while the cool winds blowing and the fragrance of the lovely flowers growing around filled the whole environment.

Borkan noticed a large faction of guards in green, standing down beside the stream. They stood circling the spot, making the view nebulous from the top.

“Something isn’t right father!” he said, as he stood by his side, gazing down at the crowd. The cool breeze kissed his face which he simply loved.

Elias nodded, and they began descending the steep slopes. Getting down the slopes was a bit comforting for Borkan, who could feel the thick spongy grasses under his boots. It felt good and soothing as he jolted. The guards escorted them to the scene, beside the flowing stream on their left, and the thick woods at the opposite.

Borkan could hardly believe his eyes as to what it witnessed. His nerves tensed, while the eyes gaped in dreadfulness, as he looked around, with a chill of fear in his heart. Something horrible, or better awful, extremely brutal, torturing every inch of his eyes in the gaze. His blood ran cold in his veins, for there was a break in his thought which told of the sudden horror which had seized him. He looked at his father who was wrapped in the same.

There were five men and a big tiger lying dead by the stream. The bodies of both the tiger and men were hauled, torn into countless pieces, with scrap of flesh scattered all around. It truly was barbaric and savage.

He glanced around with a gloomy face, staring down the bodies, as sweat ran down his chest. The vibes of repugnance scratched his body, sending a shiver down his spine. Clearly, this never meant any good, but instead marked something appalling, something that might prove minacious to all.

“This is barbaric!” said Owen. He could feel the same upthrust deep within his heart. “Who can be so inhumane?”

Never ever had he witnessed anything so grody and shuddersome.

“It doesn’t always have to be human!” said William, trying to perceive the incident.

“This is what needs to be discovered”, mentioned Elias Rayne gazing down at the bodies. He called the guards around him and began inquiring about the incident strictly. “How did all this happen? Tell me everything right from the very beginning”.

The shorter one among them stepped forward and began, “We had our watch outside the woods and at the borders last night. The woods had constantly been patrolled and everything was reported normal. All looked good, following which we held the borders. It was then all of a sudden when the wails and screams of some men fell into our ears. We immediately rushed into the woods, looking around everywhere, before discovering this”.

He was brief, trying to explain the incident in his best possible way.

“Did you discover anyone or anything around?” inquired Elias. His features had turned rigorous and concerned, as he stood pale but collected before them. He suspected something horrible, though the exact solicitude remained concealed within him.

“Yes My Lord”, replied the guard. He sounded firm, while his face covered in intimidation.

Lord Elias Rayne himself had never doubted the capabilities of his guards. He could definitely sense the situation judging by the stern look on their faces. Something pathetic!

Draco, the shorter guard began to lead and everyone followed. Borkan walked beside his father, though his nerves were still quivering from the scene. He followed Draco across the thick bushes, ahead of those hauled bodies and scattered flesh, with the smell of dry blood and decaying meat burning his senses. Intolerable and horrendous!

They moved across the bushes to witness the splashes of blood everywhere around. Some of the plants were damaged, while some of the grasses burnt, with no more greenery but the remains of fire, visible before their eyes.

They walked past the spot, discovering a dead body of a man around forty, lying down lifelessly before a tall tree. The man was dead for long, for his limbs were rigid and cold. The body wasn't hauled or damaged like the ones before, but was in a totally different state. The deceased might have been an individual with an average complexion, but the colour of his body had turned dark blue, with some milk-like substance protruding out of his mouth.

“That's pathetic!” expressed Owen, staring down at the body.

The treacherous scene spoke a lot about the dreadful incident that had occurred under the darkness of the night. Owen went down to examine the body, trying to interpret the situation in his mind. Perhaps he believed the man to have poisoned himself for some reason, and he wasn't the exception. Any other

individual in his shoes might have perceived the same, but it was just the assumption. The truth remained buried with the darkness of that cold night which might have carried destruction by its edge.

Owen got himself too involved in inspecting the locus, while the inquiry continued.

“What else did you come across?”

“Nothing else, My Lord! We only found this man, who was already dead on discovery. We were all around the forests but couldn’t inspect anyone or anything around the woods”.

“What about this one then?” asked Borkan pointing at the deceased. It simply appeared absurd, because if they witnessed no one around, then how could it be possible that a stranger was found dead in their place.

“We know absolutely nothing, My Lord”. He was specific, with the same look around his face, which spoke more than his words could ever do. “We were everywhere around but didn’t notice anyone in the woods or around the wasteland”.

The answer wasn’t satisfactory, but he believed it just like his father, though something abominable struck his senses time and again.

“Did you patrol the wasteland?” asked Lord Rayne.

“Yes My Lord!” was the humble reply at once.

The wasteland was a huge barren land following the forests of Townslane. It extended miles and miles to the south, following which was the Southern Woods that led to the city of Harot, the place forbidden by law. However, the Southern Woods and the large wasteland acted as a big separation between Harot and the vice-capital.

Everyone stood in silence. The peculiar incident had destroyed everything, leaving no possible clue to unveil the truth. It was bizarre and hideous, something that none had ever witnessed before.

“There must be some wild animal behind it”, explained William. He inferred it as a theory of a wild hunt by some hungry beast, which appeared suitable before his own eyes. “The ones must have been killed by some hungry predator that might have been ferocious, tearing them in pieces”. His conception satisfied none but himself, and yet he was pleased with it.

Elias shook his head. “This isn’t the hunt of a beast or any wild animal, as there are no such around here”. He drew himself to the remains of torn flesh, and continued, “There is definitely something else behind it”. He sounded cold, recalling something in his mind.

The mercilessly torn bodies, the pieces of flesh scattered everywhere around, the split of blood all over the place and the body of a stranger poisoned to death,

it was all catastrophic and concerning. Borkan knew the look on his father's face. A steely hardness shone from his eyes and Borkan seemed to read it that he took the matter more seriously.

"This must have been the stranger, who was the one behind these killings. He must have killed them all, before poisoning himself in the fear of being captured", said William. He tried one or two explanations, but, indeed, he was completely puzzled himself. This assumption flashed much appropriate in his senses, looking straightforward in his exposition.

"This can't be done by an individual. It is merely impossible for a single man to carry it out himself". Borkan denied this at once. The stranger found dead was timid, not that strong to execute the task all by himself.

"True", supported Elias. "The stranger might not have entered the woods last night. He must have been here long before, hiding and avoiding the guards all the while".

He sounded appropriate and logical to a large extent, as this seemed the only possibility, if not any exceptions.

"Didn't you suspect something similar before?" asked Borkan boldly. The guards shook their heads.

Elias turned to the messenger and began, "Call Sir Thomas Wright to the Palace immediately and tell him to take over the case".

Sir Thomas Wright was the private detective and a close friend of Lord Elias Rayne. He was known for his intelligence and remarkable abilities, and the extraordinary skills that the man possessed. He was the only detective in the whole country, having resolved all his cases perfectly. He had been handed more than a thousand of cases, which were all successfully resolved.

"Yes My Lord!" replied William Hayes and left.

"My Lord!" cried Owen, from the bushes behind the body of the stranger. It looked like the man had finally found something.

Borkan along with his father walked hurriedly to the spot. The incident continued to flash within his mind all the while, as he tried drawing appropriate conclusions. His head ached, but no sensible conclusions, not by that moment. It disturbed him further.

"I found it within the bush", mentioned Owen, handing Elias Rayne a small bottle labelled red.

He examined the label closely; that pungent smell burning his nostrils from the far. The tension around that face relieved. It looked like a ray of light into the large pit of darkness. Something struck his mind, easing his nerves, drawing a little smile over his honoured face. Elias tilted the small bottle to confirm it, and there he was.

He sighed. "It's the Dorphous".

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