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The Leviathan

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I

*24th March 1703**A place far from the sea*

She is awake.

And I must remind myself of how it began.

The end of all things. It was a time of witches, it was a time of saints. A time when rabbits hunted foxes, when children came into the world without their heads, and kings lost theirs on the scaffold. The world was turned upside down, or so some said. *Weep, England, weep*, the broadsheets cried, and the poets and philosophers, fearing for their own necks, delayed their poems and philosophies, or incarcerated them in Latin and impenetrable Greek, to be exhumed at a more enlightened date.

Now, less than a hundred years after men and magic began to drift apart, we walk a new earth. We have become *reasonable*, and cleave to our certainties as once we cleaved to our kings. Now, the buried stories are dismissed as old wives' tales, exaggerations, falsehoods. But still they bubble through the cracks, clinging on, refusing to go down into the dark.

They develop strange qualities, words stored for too long. In the dim light of my small study, never bright enough now, I lay them down in honest black ink, but they are past their bloom. The candle wax runs low, but still they come, and my pen moves over the page as if of its own will.

But it was my intention to remember. I rise and cross to the bookcase, turning the key and opening the latticed door. The bookcase stands near the window, which I keep slightly

open in spite of the cold. A draught comes through, sharp-toothed, carrying the chill of the late-winter's eve and, drifting from the books, the smells that have walked with me since childhood: vellum, hide glue, resin, cuttlefish bone scattered across gossamer-thin pages.

Yet it is not a book I draw from the shelves, but a calfskin wallet, from which I brush long-abandoned spider webs and a thick coating of dust. The wallet houses many separate pieces of parchment: letters, pamphlets, other trifles collected over the years. Here is a sketch of the armies at the Battle of Edgehill, here a recipe for cherry wine I had thought lost.

There. Hidden amongst all that ephemera, cast out of sight and memory, is the sought-for object. I put my hand upon it, linger for a moment, and my intention falters. Perhaps I am just an old fool who should know better than to rake up what is buried. But I carry it back to my desk.

The handwriting – my father's – is economical, his frugality echoing from the densely placed words. Not every word is readable: the inevitable result of repeat folding and unfolding, or of water damage, perhaps. It is testimony, a witnessing, dated *16th August 1628*. The witnesses were my father, and his kinsman, John Milton. This, then, was where it all began.

We were late. The Guldern had been at sea five wretched months. We had lost the convoy weeks before. The waves and gales moved against us, so less experienced men moaned pitifully and emptied their bellies over the side of the ship. This was the Kattegat strait, off the coast of Anholt, Denmark, in late winter, with darkening skies, narrow and treacherous, full of reefs and sandbanks, shallow enough...

In a little while, Mary comes. She leans in, reading. The worry lines between her silvered brows are deep, but as I glance down at her hand on my shoulder, the wrinkles and liver spots fade in the gloom. I know we are lucky – if not among the luckiest

— to have lived this long and in such relative bliss. I ask whether anything has changed since supper. No, she says, looking up at the ceiling; everything is just as it was. But the fine tremor in her hand, still resting on my shoulder, belies her words.

Brightly, she asks if I want more coal heaped upon the embers, but we can ill afford to run the fire high these days. Still, the room is chill. My breath clouds the candlelight and the cold creeps in beneath my breeches. I gather about my arthritic knees a woven blanket that once belonged to my father. Mary asks how long I plan to write. I lie, saying I might be another half an hour. She hates it when I strain my eyes and scolds me, so I tell her I am not straining, but exercising them, the better to see her beauty. She laughs, a sound as soft as down, and leaves, unhurried and deliberate as always, taking all certainty with her. Alone, I return to where I left the story.

...Now my steps were taken downhill, the ship was so tilted. Riches, treasure, plunder — all of a sudden they were will-o'-the-wisps, phantoms. There was something else here, something that breathed and whimpered, something still alive. I groped like a blind man. With my snaphance in my right hand, I took another pace forward.

I lean back, rubbing my eyes to sharpen the meandering edges of my sight. This is a distraction, only, from what I know I must do, and from the knowledge encamped in the pit of my stomach, which has squatted there since morning broke and Mary came down the stairs with cheeks as white as lamb's fleece beneath her flyaway hair, and said the words I have so long known I would hear:

She is awake.

27th December 1643

North Norfolk

Dearest brother,

My heart grew wings when I received your last letter. I had worn my knees down to the bones in beseeching God that you would not be harmed. The knowledge that you would be in the van of the fighting weighed upon me such that I cannot describe the turmoil of my thoughts! Mercifully, my prayers were answered, and knowing that you are safe is the greatest gift the Lord could bestow on our small family. It tells me we are truly blessed by God. Because of this, I know Parliament will prevail.

Yet, now the danger has passed – or so Father informs me in my ignorancy of these things – I must admit what I have not before; that all has not been well at home. I beg you to return to us as soon as you are able. Please do not delay for any matter.

I will not share the whole story now. It is long and will, I fear, seem unlikely to you, reading by daylight. But I write in the shadows, by candlelight, with my hands shaking – even now you will see the difficulty I have in forming these letters – because our home is under attack by a great and ungodly evil.

This wickedness surrounds the harlot Chrissa Moore. You will remember she appeared in April, without character or respectable family name. I swear to you, Thomas, the girl is drawing our father more and more into her corruptions. There are times

when I think he is fascinated by her, when he does not hear me. I fear for his safety, and for his soul. He is quite unmanned. She is Babylon, brother – the abomination of the earth.

Exodus is clear: ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.’ As this is God’s Word, so I must act. The matter can wait no longer. I hope by the time of your return our home will be restored to peace. However, if the witch is victorious over my small strength – should God not see fit to lend me more – she might find in you a doughtier enemy. Do not fail God, or me. Please come home as soon as ever you can.

May God bless the King always, and may the army under Cromwell succeed in freeing him from the papists’ evil counsel.

God bless you.

Your loving sister,

Esther

I folded the letter and replaced it in my jerkin. I had only taken it out to remind myself of its contents, and found that, in the fading light, with my body rising and falling with the trotting of my horse, I regretted it, as I could barely read my sister’s shuddering scrawl. I remembered all the occasions Esther had asked me for help with her letters and felt a keen twist of shame.

She was hysterical, obviously. It was natural enough, being sixteen, stuck on the farm all this time. A young woman, particularly one with her imagination and melancholic humours, needed friends, people to laugh with and balance her tendencies towards overanxious thinking. Our estate was too isolated, buried in its own shallow valley, surrounded by just a few hamlets. She had no mother to teach and guide her. Apart from Father, the others in the house were servants: this girl, Chrissa, whom I hadn’t met, and Joan, our other maid. Joan was an honest, kind girl, but daft, as inconstant as a kid goat. I decided to speak to Father

about finding some companion for my sister, someone her own age who might bring her out of herself.

Of Chrissa Moore I hardly thought at all. Though Father rarely took on new servants and, had I given it more attention, I might have found it surprising that he had hired a woman without a character, I was preoccupied by other matters. I was injured, carrying a wound unhealed since Newbury, and every stumble of the horse brought a lance of fresh pain near my groin, filling my mind with unwished-for images: the sawn-off shaft of my enemy's pike as it struck out with disembowelling force, my desperate twist away, the other man's frightened face, and then the moment of shock as the steel point pierced my inner thigh. I had killed my man, but paid the price for it.

It was getting on in the day and very cold. We were passing All Saints, near Scottow, and the sky was beginning to darken. The church's stone porch looked inviting, but would be locked against bandits. These were turbulent days. There was no shelter for us here. 'Come, Ben,' I said. The horse whinnied, seeming to know it would soon be time for a meal and a warm stable, but there were no taverns or alehouses nearby, and anyway, it did not seem worth the blow to my thinning purse of seeking lodgings for another night. Not so near my destination.

Instead, I rode on, anticipating my welcome. I saw in my mind's eye what I so hoped to see in truth: Father's face lifting at the sight of me, his large hands enfolding mine. He would say I had proved myself. Treat me as a man, not a boy.

It was Christmas. I had just missed the day itself, but still the house would be snug and merry, with a fire in the hearth, perhaps a pie from the turkey or the boar's head, whatever Father had been able to get hold of for a simple celebration of Christ's birth. There would be no plum puddings, no hobby horses, no kissing bush of holly and bay hung from the ceiling, as Father, though he maintained it was not our place to judge others who

followed the old ways in their own homes, said such things were licentious. Still, there would be wintry tales, warmed wassail, and small gifts for Esther and me on New Year's Day; a pair of gloves or a printed prayer. In the evenings, Father would roast apples and read from Revelation in his deep, strong voice.

At those thoughts, something soared inside me, something strong enough to steal my breath: a deep, resurgent hope. A hope that, once home, I would be forgiven the missteps of the past – I didn't want to think of them, but there they sat, huddled traitorously in the corners of my mind – and all would be as it was before.

Most of all, I thought of peace, even if it could only be temporary. If my journeying had told me one thing, it was that this was a land in chaos. How few moments there had been, on the road north, when I had not looked over my shoulder for vagabonds, or known the exact position of my sword. How the wind from the west had sniped at me, laughing at the inadequacies of my cloak and hat. I longed to put down my burdens and sink into the comfort of my own bed, free of the grunts and farts of other men, forgetful of the guttural cries of battle, safe behind our whitewashed walls.

By then, my sister's letter lay unthought of inside my jerkin, though somewhere at the back of my mind was a vague intention to talk to her about it. I would find out what disagreements and jealousies had soured things between her and the Moore girl, reassure Esther, and remind her that she was the mistress of the house, with no need to enter into petty wars with the servants. Should this Chrissa turn out to be a troublemaker, she could easily be dismissed.

First, though, I would wash. A kettle of hot water, clean linens, too much peat charcoal on the rufous-hued fire. I wondered whether, if I spoke particularly sweetly to Esther, I could persuade her to sing. The memory of her high, sad voice

releasing its song like a mistle thrush on some long-ago occasion — a birthday, or Christmas — was bitter-sweet, as I knew Father would frown upon the frivolity of music in these more holy days.

I gave the horse an encouraging pat on his hindquarters — *rest soon, my friend* — and straightened my hat. We rode on.

An hour later, I leant against the trunk of an ash tree. It was too dark to see the tree clearly, but I knew it was an ash, and which one; I was less than three miles from home.

Somewhere above my head was a branch as thick as a man's waist. From that branch, in the reign of fat King Henry, two men had dangled by their necks for a murder they had not committed, or so the legend went, and their dolorous spirits had often been reported moaning about the trunk. I'd never heard them. I was told there was a stone boasting the Devil's claw marks around here somewhere, too, and a healing well, but had never found those, either, though I had searched many times; more, I suppose, to prove to myself that they were just stories for the credulous, than for any other reason.

I squinted into the darkness. The night had been lively with stars, but thick clouds had now passed in front of the moon's face, and I wouldn't have seen a camel lumber by six inches from my nose. It had not been my intention to stop, knowing the road like the back of my own hand, but when Ben had stumbled on his forelegs and limped thereafter, I'd doubted myself. I so desperately wanted the comforts of home, but if the animal broke a bone, I would have to put him out of his misery and I liked this horse.

So I dismounted and turned Ben loose in the field, seeking shelter beneath my cloak and the thinning canopy of the ash. I would continue in daylight until I stood once more on my own acres.

I suppose I was feeling sorry for myself as I huddled in a fissure of the ancient trunk. Ben was happy enough cropping

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grass ten or so feet away, and there was nothing for me to do except close my eyes, but my wound throbbed, and as I dug sharp stones out from beneath my breeches and shifted my weight against the hardened bark, I knew sleep would not come easily. It made me think of the night before the last fight, at Newbury. After a long march, the King's forces had reached the town before us. When we halted for a few short hours of rest, we had sworn violently on realising the site of our camp: the flats along the banks of the river, without roofs or beds, and on short commons. The fear, though, had been worse than any material discomfort; a ravenous cold deep in my belly, a tremor afflicting my limbs as I listened to fifteen thousand men talking without surcease, all knowing that in the morning we would face the earth-shaking terror of a cavalry charge, and the hot smell of musket blasts, woven into the noise of war, a noise like the end of the world.

I shivered beneath the tree branches and turned over, shoving my knapsack under my head. It did not help to dwell on the battle. We hadn't won, nor had we lost, and now Essex's army was ensconced in London, while the King had retreated to Oxford, and what would come next, no man could say.

There was the future to think of. The war wouldn't – couldn't – last forever. Even if I survived, and whether King or Parliament emerged victorious, the outcome might be little concern of mine, as I had no intention of remaining in England to see it. In the months since the fighting broke out, I had seen men shed an ocean of blood in pursuit of their rights and prerogatives. How much of the money in his pocket a man could be forced to hand over to his King, whether the law should apply equally to a beggar or a lord, what beliefs a man or woman had the right to hold in their heart – all such things lay in the balance of this war. And in their desperation to be free, the religious reformers had chosen revolution.

But I was tired of it. All of it. Tired of men beating one another into the dirt as though they were slaughtering hogs. Tired of hearing bones shatter and seeing my fellows soil themselves, all because some men far from the battle believed God had a perfect foreknowledge of who was damned and who was saved, and some others didn't.

And there was more than one way to be free.

On that same night, before Newbury, Captain Jack Trelawney and I had swapped the names of our people. He was senior to me in the company, and a little older, but as raw recruits we had worked out we had grown up less than twenty miles apart, and become friends. Before the battle we exchanged our information solemnly, like strangers, though we felt more like brothers, having shared the same feet of earth and the same scurvy food for more than a year now. We did this in the unspoken understanding that, if the worst happened to one of us, the other would seek out those who must be told, and give as false an account of the last moments of the dead as might be needed to avoid a deeper grief.

When we had finished, Jack scratched his beard furiously. In the dim light of the campfire his pockmarked face looked different: more thoughtful. He said, 'When this is done... When this is done...' I had the sense that what he was going to say mattered, and waited. 'The New World, Tom,' he said, in a voice thick with something hopeful, something new. 'Virginia, Maryland, Connecticut. There are ships sailing every day from Plymouth. Or there were before the fighting. All you need is the price of your passage, and your sword. There's land, millions of acres of it, and no bugger to tell you what to do. They grow tobacco and get fat off the proceeds.'

America.

The thought of that massive continent, its green expanses, its clear waters, its unclimbed mountains and untrodden shores, danced before me like a chimera.