

# Phantom of StainedSteam SAMPLE

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# Chapter 1

# Chapter 1

The morning fog in London was as thick as clotted cream, shrouding the cobblestone streets in a ghostly veil. Lilly Ravenwood pulled her woolen cloak tighter against the damp chill as she stepped outside. Tendrils of mist curled around her legs like spectral cats, making her shiver. Her breath came in pale puffs as she made her way down the dim street.

As she walked, Lilly's keen eyes caught glimpses of London's hidden world – an orc in a bowler hat tipping his cap to a pair of noble elves, a troll inspecting apples at a fruit cart. To most, they were just ordinary Londoners, but Lilly knew better. She was part of this secret society, a world of magic thriving beneath the surface of the mundane.

Arriving at a small, nondescript shop nestled between two larger buildings, Lilly gave two sharp knocks on the weathered door. It creaked open, revealing a wiry man with nervous eyes.

"Och, Miss Ravenwood! Come in, lass, come in," he said, ushering her inside.

The shopkeeper, Mr. McTavish, led her to a back room where a small fire sputtered in the hearth. "I expect ye're here about the shipment," he said, unable to meet her piercing gaze.

Lilly nodded, her voice smooth and low like well-aged whiskey. "My client is eager to ensure its safe delivery. He sent me to finalize the travel plans."

As they discussed the details, Lilly couldn't shake a feeling of unease. Something about McTavish's demeanor set her on edge. But she had a job to do, and she would see it through.

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William Blackwood jolted awake, his eyes snapping open as the sharp peck of his enchanted woodpecker clock pierced the silence. He groaned, fumbling in the dim light to silence the magical timepiece.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, dragging himself out of bed. His bare feet hit the cold floor, sending a shiver up his spine. The chill air nipped at his skin as he shuffled towards the kitchen, his mind already whirring with the details of his latest case.

A soft meow caught his attention, and he looked down to see Midnight, his winged cat, padding alongside him. The feline's obsidian wings were tucked neatly against its body, eyes glowing with an otherworldly intelligence.

"Good morning to you too, Your Majesty," William said, a hint of amusement in his voice. "I suppose you're expecting breakfast?"

Midnight chirped in response, leaping gracefully onto the kitchen counter and fixing William with an expectant stare.

As he prepared his morning tea and Midnight's breakfast, the realization struck him. Two days. Two whole days since he'd wrapped up the Hanbury Murders. The familiar itch returned, crawling under his skin, an insatiable need for a new puzzle.

William sipped his tea, grimacing at the bitter taste. "Come on, old boy," he said to himself. "Surely there's a mystery out there waiting for you."

Midnight meowed again, this time more insistently. William chuckled, reaching out to scratch behind the cat's ears. "Yes, yes, I haven't forgotten about you. Here you are, your royal breakfast."

He set down a small plate of finely chopped fish. Midnight sniffed it delicately before deigning to eat, wings fluttering slightly in satisfaction.

As if in answer to his silent plea, a shimmering hologram alert from Scotland Yard materialized before him. William's heart quickened, a mix of excitement and dread coursing through him.

"Well, well," he murmured, studying the ethereal message. "What have we here?"

The alert spoke of a crime scene requiring his expertise. William's lips quirked into a half-smile. Whatever awaited him was sure to be extraordinary.

He dressed quickly, donning his usual attire – black trousers, a white shirt with intricate embroidery, and a dark leather coat. The familiar weight of his tools and potions settled on his hips as he strapped on various belts. Lastly, he grasped his cane sword, feeling its comforting presence in his hand.

As he prepared to leave, Midnight flew over to perch on his shoulder, wings spread for balance.

"Oh no, you don't," William said, gently removing the cat. "This isn't a social call, I'm afraid. You'll have to guard the house while I'm gone."

Midnight gave an indignant meow, but settled onto a nearby armchair, tail swishing in mild annoyance.

"Don't give me that look," William said, heading for the door. "I'll bring you back something interesting, I promise."

With a final glance at his feline companion, William stepped out into the foggy London morning. The mist clung to his coat, dampening his hair as he made his way to the crime scene – an abandoned warehouse near the docks.

Constables milled about outside, their faces drawn and tense. William's friend and fellow investigator, Theo, greeted him with a tired nod.

"I'm glad you're here, Blackwood," Theo said, his voice low and strained. "We've found some... peculiar elements. Your skills will prove invaluable."

William raised an eyebrow. "Peculiar, you say? Do enlighten me, old chap."

Theo shook his head, leading William into the dim warehouse. "Better you see for yourself."

The scent of decay assaulted William's senses as they entered. He wrinkled his nose, fighting the urge to gag. They navigated through crates and debris, their footsteps echoing in the cavernous space.

"I do hope you haven't brought me here for a tour of London's finest rotting fish," William quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

Theo didn't laugh. "I'm afraid it's far worse than that."

They came upon a gruesome sight – the body of a young woman, her face frozen in fear. But it was the strange symbols etched into her skin that seized their attention.

"Good Lord," William breathed, crouching down for a closer look.

"This is unlike any other case," Theo whispered, his voice quavering. "These symbols are ancient, dating back to the Black Thorns."



William's heart skipped a beat. The Black Thorns – a notorious group of dark sorcerers. If they were involved, this case was far more dangerous than he'd initially thought.

"Well, Theo," William said, his voice deceptively light, "it seems you've outdone yourself this time. And here I thought we'd be dealing with a simple murder."

Theo shot him a reproachful look. "This is no laughing matter, Blackwood."

"On the contrary," William replied, his eyes beginning to glow with an arcane blue light, "laughter might be all that keeps us sane in the face of such darkness."

The constables kept their distance, unsettled by his unnatural aura as he began his investigation. William's enhanced vision revealed mystical clues invisible to others, painting a grim picture of the young woman's final moments.

After a thorough examination, William stood, his face grim. "She was slain by an unnatural creature," he proclaimed. "And judging by the ritual symbols carved into her flesh, the Black Thorns are indeed involved."

The constables traded uneasy looks, all too aware of the Thorns' reputation.

"Marvelous," William said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Just what London needs – a group of homicidal sorcerers running amok."

As he left the warehouse, determination set in. This was no isolated incident – it was the beginning of something far more sinister. William's grip tightened on his cane sword.

"Well, my dear Black Thorns," he muttered under his breath, "let the game begin."

William's mind raced. This was no isolated incident – it was the beginning of something far more sinister. As he left the warehouse, determination set in. He would uncover the truth,

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William paced his study, boots scuffing against the worn floorboards. The fire's warmth failed to penetrate the chill settling in his bones. He paused, running a hand through his disheveled dark hair, eyes darting between the maps and tomes scattered across every surface.

Midnight, his winged cat, stretched lazily on a high shelf. Her emerald eyes tracked his movement, tail swishing with mild interest.

A sharp rap at the door broke the silence. William's jaw clenched. "Enter," he called, voice rough from hours of disuse.

Jaxon Westwood stumbled in, glasses askew and salt-and-pepper hair wild. His tweed jacket bore fresh ink stains. "William, my boy! You won't believe what I've uncovered about those claw marks."

William pinched the bridge of his nose. "Jaxon, you're late. Again."

"Late? Nonsense! I'm precisely on time for a breakthrough." Jaxon's eyes gleamed with excitement. "The marks, William. They're not just random scratches. I believe they originate from the ancient Raxian dialect, once spoken by certain demonic entities."

"Fascinating," William drawled, "but unless these demons left a forwarding address, we're no closer to catching our killer."

Jaxon's mustache twitched. "Now, now, don't be hasty. Knowledge is power, especially when dealing with the supernatural."

"Knowledge won't stop more bodies from piling up," William snapped. He took a breath, steadying himself. "I apologize, old friend. It's been a long night."

"No offense taken," Jaxon said, clapping William on the shoulder. "Now, shall we devise a plan of action? Perhaps over a spot of tea?"

As if summoned by the mention of tea, a gentle knock echoed through the room. The door creaked open, revealing Ms. Potts, William's housemaid. Her gray hair was neatly tucked under a white cap, and she balanced a silver tray with practiced ease.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Blackwood," she said, her voice warm but firm. "I thought you and Mr. Westwood might need some refreshment."

William's expression softened. "Thank you, Ms. Potts. You're a godsend."

She tutted, setting the tray on a cleared corner of the desk. "It's my job to look after you, sir. Heaven knows someone has to." Her eyes swept over the cluttered room, a mix of fondness and exasperation in her gaze.

Jaxon beamed at her. "Ah, Ms. Potts! Your timing is impeccable, as always."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Mr. Westwood," she replied, but a smile tugged at her lips. "Now, don't let it get cold."

As Ms. Potts turned to leave, the air before them shimmered. The study's warmth evaporated, replaced by an unnatural chill. Three hazy, faceless forms materialized, hovering ominously.

A voice, cold as the grave, emanated from the apparitions. "Cease your investigation into the supernatural attacks, or suffer dire consequences."

Magic crackled at William's fingertips, the familiar tingle of power racing up his arms. He stepped forward, a snarl forming on his lips.

Jaxon's hand shot out, gripping William's wrist. "Wait," he hissed, eyes never leaving the phantoms. "Let's not be rash."

The apparitions dissolved, fading into wisps of shadow. William's chest heaved, adrenaline coursing through his veins.

Ms. Potts, who had frozen by the door, let out a shaky breath. "I suppose I should bring more tea," she said, her voice admirably steady. "And perhaps something stronger?"

William nodded, a wry smile twisting his lips. "That would be appreciated, Ms. Potts. Thank you."

As she hurried out, Jaxon released his grip, adjusting his glasses. "Well," he said, voice slightly higher than usual, "that was certainly dramatic."

William barked out a laugh, tension bleeding from his shoulders. "Only you would describe a supernatural threat as 'dramatic,' Jaxon."

"One must maintain a sense of perspective, my boy." Jaxon's eyes twinkled. "Now, shall we tackle this mystery over a cup of Ms. Potts' excellent brew?"

As dawn's first light crept through the windows, William set down his pen. The beginnings of a plan had taken shape, each step laid out in his precise handwriting.

Jaxon snored softly from an armchair, an open book on his lap. Midnight had curled up at his feet, purring contentedly.

William stood, stretching muscles stiff from hours of sitting. He moved to the window, gazing out at the awakening city. Somewhere out there, dark forces were moving against them. But he wouldn't back down. Not when lives were at stake.

A smirk tugged at his lips. The game was afoot, and William Blackwood was ready to play.

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William stood at his study window, his piercing blue eyes scanning the awakening city. His fingers tapped impatiently on the head of his cane sword, a habit he'd developed when deep in thought. The fog had lifted, but a sense of foreboding still hung in the air, much like his long coat that billowed slightly as he turned to face Jaxon.

Jaxon hunched over an ancient tome at the desk, his shoulder-length curly brown hair falling forward as he pored over the pages. His thin beard was unkempt after a night of research.

"Any revelations from your nocturnal scholarly pursuits?" William asked, his rich baritone tinged with a hint of dry humor.

Jaxon looked up, dark circles shadowing his eyes behind his glasses. "The symbols we saw... they're not just decoration, William. They're part of an old summoning ritual."

William's jaw tightened, the muscles in his chiseled face becoming more pronounced. "Summoning? That's a rather ominous turn of events."

"You've no idea," Jaxon said, rubbing his temples. "We're talking about an entity that could rip apart the fabric between worlds. If it succeeds..."

"Then we ensure it doesn't," William cut in, his voice steely. He strode to the desk, his movements deliberate and assured. "What about the next target? Any progress there?"

Jaxon nodded, spreading out a map of London. Red marks dotted its surface in a distinct pattern. "See here? They're moving in a spiral, each kill bringing them closer to the city's heart."

William's eyes narrowed as he traced the path with a long finger, the silver streaks in his dark hair catching the lamplight. "If this holds true, the next attack will be..."

"Near Westminster," Jaxon finished, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Right in the belly of the beast, so to speak."

A sharp knock interrupted their exchange. William straightened, adjusting his crimson vest before opening the door. Lilly Ravenwood stood there, her long black hair framing a face marked by a scar across her left cheek. Her icy blue eyes darted around, assessing the room with a calculating gaze.

"Mr. Blackwood," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I... I may have information about your case."

William ushered her inside, noting how she moved with cat-like grace despite her obvious tension. "Miss Ravenwood, allow me to introduce Jaxon, my associate."

Lilly nodded distractedly, perching on the edge of a chair. Her fingers absently traced the hilt of her enchanted silver dagger. "During my last... assignment, I overheard something. A shipment, arriving tonight at the docks. I believe it's connected to the killings."

William and Jaxon exchanged glances. "What manner of shipment?" Jaxon asked, leaning forward.

Lilly shook her head, her expression guarded. "I'm not certain, but the way they spoke of it... it's dangerous. Powerful."

"The final components for the ritual, perhaps?" William mused, pacing the room with measured steps.

Jaxon nodded grimly. "It fits. We need to intercept that shipment."

"Agreed," William said, turning to Lilly. "Can you guide us to the exact location?"

Lilly hesitated, her eyes darting between them. "I can, but... it won't be a stroll in the park. The docks are crawling with Thunderhorn Syndicate operatives."

William's lips curved into a small, mysterious smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "When has that ever stopped us? Meet us at sunset by the Thames. We'll devise a strategy then."

As Lilly left, William began gathering his equipment. Jaxon watched him, fidgeting with his spectacles.

"William," he said, his voice tinged with concern. "You do realize we're walking into a trap, don't you?"

William paused a vial of shimmering liquid in his hand. He met Jaxon's gaze squarely, his posture radiating quiet confidence. "Most likely. But it's also our best chance to stop whatever's coming. Are you with me?"

Jaxon sighed dramatically. "Someone has to keep you from getting yourself killed. I suppose that unenviable task falls to me."

"Your enthusiasm is overwhelming," William replied dryly, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, William and Jaxon made their way to the meeting point. The Thames flowed beside them, its waters dark and secretive.

Lilly awaited them, her face half-hidden by a hood, her posture alert and ready. "Prepared to dance with danger, gentlemen?" she asked as they approached, her voice low and controlled.

William's hand rested on the hilt of his cane sword, his stance assured. "Lead on, Miss Ravenwood. The night is young, and so are our chances of survival."

They wove through the winding streets towards the docks, the air growing thick with tension. In the distance, a clock tower struck the hour, its chimes echoing through the night like a portent of doom.

William's grip tightened on his cane, his piercing blue eyes scanning their surroundings. The game was no longer just afoot - it was racing towards a climax that could shake London to its very foundations. And he was determined to see it through, his unwavering resolve evident in every deliberate step he took.

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The trio crept through the shadows of the dockyard, the salty tang of the Thames mixing with the acrid smell of industry. Lilly led the way, her steps silent and sure. William and Jaxon followed, every sense on high alert.

William's heart hammered against his ribs as he crouched behind a stack of crates, the rough wood digging into his palms. He ran a hand through his dark brown hair, the distinguished silver streaks catching the moonlight. Beside him, Lilly's icy blue eyes gleamed with predatory focus, her long black hair tucked neatly beneath a dark cap.

"There," Lilly whispered, her gloved hand gesturing with practiced efficiency. "See those brutes unloading the ship?"

William's piercing blue eyes narrowed as he studied the scene, his chiseled features set in concentration. A chill ran down his spine as an otherworldly energy prickled at his senses.



Jaxon, his curly brown hair disheveled and glasses slightly askew, leaned in. "I feel it too," he murmured, absently stroking his thin beard. "Those must be the artifacts we're after."

William's hand instinctively moved to rest on the head of his cane sword. "Indeed," he replied, a small, mysterious smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Shall we take a closer look?"

They crept forward, using the labyrinth of cargo as cover. William moved with assured strides, his long coat billowing slightly behind him. As they drew nearer, his gaze locked onto the strange symbols etched into the crates' sides, eerily similar to those found carved into the flesh of the murder victims. His jaw clenched, the muscles working beneath his lightly tanned skin.

A low, guttural growl sliced through the night air. William's muscles locked, his grip tightening on his cane. That sound... it was the same bestial noise from the crime scene.

"We're not alone," he hissed, his intense eye contact not breaking as he glanced at his companions.

Before Jaxon could respond, a massive shape erupted from the shadows. It was a nightmarish fusion of wolf and man, with glowing red eyes and claws that gleamed wickedly in the moonlight. The dock workers scattered, their terrified shouts piercing the night as the beast lunged for the crates. One unfortunate soul wasn't fast enough - the creature's claws raked across his back, shredding flesh and sending a spray of crimson into the air.

"Bloody hell!" Jaxon yelled, his scholarly composure cracking as the worker's agonized screams filled the night.

William's mind raced, adrenaline surging through his powerful physique. He yanked his cane apart, revealing the hidden sword within. "Jaxon, protect the crates! Lilly, with me!"

Lilly nodded, a fierce grin playing across her lips as she drew two gleaming daggers from beneath her cloak. Her movements were fluid and practiced, reminiscent of a rumored warrior of the Far East preparing for battle.

They charged at the monster while Jaxon scrambled towards the cargo, his hands already tracing glowing runes in the air. The beast roared, swiping at William with claws the size of butcher knives. He ducked and rolled, his tailored black suit somehow remaining immaculate as he came up slashing.

His blade bit deep, drawing a howl of pain from the monster. Black ichor oozed from the wound, sizzling where it hit the dock planks. But to William's horror, the gash began to close almost instantly, muscle and sinew knitting together before his eyes.

"It's regenerating!" Lilly shouted, her voice steady despite the danger. She danced away from another swipe, her movements deliberate and efficient. A claw caught her arm, tearing through fabric and flesh. She hissed in pain but didn't falter, her own blade flashing out to leave a deep gash across the creature's muzzle.

William's piercing gaze darted between the beast and the crates Jaxon was frantically warding. He tapped his fingers impatiently on his cane pommel, a plan forming in his mind.

"Just one," he called back, sprinting towards the cargo. "And it's absolutely mad!"

Jaxon looked up as William approached, sweat beading on his brow and fogging his glasses. "What in blazes are you doing?"

"Something foolish," William replied, snatching up one of the smaller boxes. Power thrummed within, making his skin tingle and his teeth ache. "Wish me luck!"

Ignoring his friend's protests, William turned and charged back towards the fray. Lilly was holding her own, but fatigue was evident in

her usually fluid movements. Blood dripped from her wounded arm, leaving a trail of dark droplets on the dock. "Duck!" he bellowed.

Without hesitation, Lilly dropped. The monster's attention snapped to William, jaws opening wide to reveal rows of gleaming teeth, still red with the blood of its earlier victim. At the last possible moment, he hurled the box straight into the creature's maw, his aim true and his stance unwavering.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened. Then the beast's eyes widened in what looked almost like a surprise. Light blazed from within its body, growing brighter and brighter until William had to shield his piercing blue eyes.

With a deafening roar that shook the very planks beneath their feet, the creature exploded in a burst of otherworldly energy. When the light faded, all that remained was a smoking scorch mark on the dock and a gruesome spray of viscera and black ichor coating everything within a ten-foot radius.

Panting heavily, William helped Lilly to her feet, his chiseled features etched with concern. Her long black hair had come loose, framing her face and the scar across her left cheek. Both of them were spattered with the creature's remains. "Are you alright?" he asked, his voice a rich baritone.

She nodded, her icy blue eyes meeting his with a mix of awe and her usual guardedness. "That was... well, I'd say incredible, but I don't want it going to your head. How did you know that would work?"

"I didn't," William admitted, wiping a smear of black ichor from his brow. "But I figured whatever was in that box was powerful enough to disrupt the creature's magical nature. Or blow us all to kingdom come. Either way, problem solved."

As the Black Thorns advanced, William allowed himself a small, mysterious smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. This was just the

beginning, he knew. Whatever dark plot they had uncovered, it went far deeper than a few magical artifacts and a summoned beast.

"Well then," he said, raising his sword, his long coat billowing dramatically in the night breeze, flecks of blood and ichor dripping from its hem. "Shall we give our uninvited guests a proper London welcome?"

Lilly's eyes glinted dangerously, her body coiled and ready to strike, ignoring the blood still seeping from her arm. "I thought you'd never ask."

Side by side, the trio braced themselves for the coming storm, the fate of London hanging in the balance. The dock around them was a grisly testament to the night's events, blood and otherworldly remains mingling with the puddles on the worn planks. William stood tall, his cane sword at the ready, while Lilly's cat-like grace belied her deadly skill. Jaxon, for all his scholarly awkwardness, held his ground, his vast knowledge their secret weapon in the fight to come.

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William's cane sword whistled through the air, meeting the first Thunderhorn Syndicate member's weapon with a resounding clang. The impact reverberated up his arm, but he stood firm, his tailored black suit barely rustling as he pivoted to face his next opponent. His piercing blue eyes darted across the moonlit dockyard, assessing the chaos unfolding around him.

"Quite the welcoming committee," he muttered, his rich baritone tinged with dry humor. A Syndicate member lunged at him, and William sidestepped, his long coat billowing dramatically behind him. "I don't suppose you chaps would consider surrendering?"

Nearby, Lilly Ravenwood moved with fluid grace, her enchanted silver dagger glinting in the pale light. Her long black hair whipped around her face as she ducked under a wild swing, her icy blue eyes never leaving her opponent. Suddenly, she thrust out her free hand, and a flurry of tiny magical stars erupted from her fingertips, peppering her attacker with pinpoint accuracy.

"Less quipping, more fighting, Blackwood," she called out, her voice cool and measured despite the frenzy of combat.

William chuckled, parrying another blow. "My dear Lilly, one must maintain standards, even in the heat of battle." He winced as a glancing blow caught his cheek, drawing blood. "Though perhaps you have a point."

Jaxon's voice rose above the clamor, chanting words of power. The air crackled with energy as a shimmering barrier materialized, deflecting a barrage of magical attacks. "I say," he panted, adjusting his spectacles with one hand while maintaining the spell with the other, "this is rather more excitement than I bargained for!"

"Welcome to our world, old chap," William quipped, a small, mysterious smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He tapped his fingers impatiently on the pommel of his cane sword before lunging back into the fray.

The fight raged on, a deadly dance of blade and magic. Lilly's blood magic surged through her veins, manifesting as shimmering red tendrils that lashed out at her opponents, sapping their strength. Crates splintered under misplaced blows, their contents spilling across the

dock. The tang of blood mingled with the salty air, and the sound of labored breathing and clashing weapons filled the night.

As the last Syndicate member crumpled to the ground, William lowered his cane sword, his shoulders heaving. He surveyed the scene, taking in every detail with his keen gaze. Unconscious bodies lay strewn about, and the once-orderly dock now resembled a battlefield.

Lilly emerged from the shadows, her posture still alert and ready. The last wisps of her blood magic dissipated around her fingers. "Well," she said, wiping her dagger clean with practiced efficiency, "that was... enlightening."

Jaxon stumbled over, looking decidedly disheveled. His usually impeccable suit was rumpled, and a thin sheen of sweat glistened on his brow. "Enlightening? I'd say it was downright harrowing!"

William dabbed at the cut on his cheek with a handkerchief, the white fabric quickly staining red. He stood tall, exuding an air of quiet confidence despite his injury. "We're not done yet," he said, his voice taking on a more serious tone. "These artifacts need securing, and I have a feeling our night is far from over."

Lilly nodded, her stoic expression unchanging. "Agreed. But William..." She paused, her gaze fixed on his injury. "Perhaps we should tend to that cut first?"

"It's nothing," he waved her off, though he appreciated the concern. "Right now, we need answers more than I need medical attention."

Jaxon, having caught his breath, attempted to straighten his jacket. "I concur. Though I must say, William, your definition of 'nothing' leaves much to be desired. That looks rather nasty."

William shot him a look that was half-exasperation, half-amusement. "Your concern is touching, truly." He rested his hand on the head of his cane sword, a gesture that spoke of both contemplation and readiness. "Now, shall we get on with it? These crates won't secure

themselves, and I'd rather not be here when our unconscious friends from the Thunderhorn Syndicate decide to rejoin the land of the living."

With a shared nod of determination, the trio set about their task, each acutely aware that this was merely the first step in unraveling a mystery that threatened to shake London to its very core.

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Dawn was breaking over London as William, Lilly, and Jaxon made their way back to his townhouse. They had managed to salvage several of the mysterious artifacts, now safely tucked away in Jaxon's enchanted satchel.

As they entered the study, Midnight greeted them with a curious meow, her wings fluttering as she circled their feet.

"Right," William said, collapsing into his armchair. "Let's see what we've managed to recover."

Jaxon carefully emptied the contents of his satchel onto the desk. Five objects clattered out: a tarnished silver mirror, an ornate dagger with a bone handle, a small leather-bound book, a crystal vial filled with swirling mist, and a strange mechanical device that ticked softly.

"These are powerful magical items," Jaxon murmured, his eyes wide behind his spectacles. "Each one tied to a different aspect of the ritual we believe the Black Thorns are attempting."

Lilly picked up the mirror, studying her reflection. "What kind of ritual requires such diverse components?"

"One that seeks to tear down the barriers between worlds," William said grimly. "The question is, which world are they trying to access?"

Jaxon furrowed his brow. "There's something else bothering me. Why did we encounter both the Black Thorns and the Thunderhorn Syndicate at the docks?"

"I've been pondering that myself," Lilly said, setting down the mirror. "It's too much of a coincidence for both groups to be after the same artifacts."

William leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "What if they're not working independently? Perhaps there's a connection we've overlooked."

"You think the Black Thorns and the Thunderhorn Syndicate are in cahoots?" Jaxon asked, incredulous.

"It's possible," William mused. "The Syndicate has the resources and connections to acquire these artifacts, while the Black Thorns possess the arcane knowledge to use them."

Lilly nodded slowly. "A partnership of convenience, perhaps? The Syndicate gets a share of whatever power the ritual unleashes, and the Black Thorns get the means to perform it."

"If that's true," Jaxon said, his voice low, "we're facing a far more formidable enemy than we initially thought."

William stood up, pacing the room. "We need to dig deeper into both organizations. Find out who's pulling the strings and what their ultimate goal is."

"Agreed," Lilly said. "But we must tread carefully. If they are working together, they'll be watching for any signs that we're onto them."

The trio exchanged determined looks, the weight of their discovery settling over the room. The artifacts on the desk seemed to pulse with



an ominous energy, a reminder of the dangerous forces they were up against.

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William hunched over the mechanical device, his piercing blue eyes narrowed in concentration. The lamplight caught the distinguished streaks of silver in his dark brown hair as he ran a hand through it, disheveling his usually impeccable coiffure. His tailored black suit jacket hung over the back of his chair, the deep crimson vest beneath it a stark contrast to his crisp white shirt.

Across the room, Jaxon's muttering grew louder, punctuated by the rustle of ancient pages. "Blasted archaic syntax," he grumbled, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. His curly brown hair, now shot through with gray, fell past his shoulders as he bent over the tome. "You'd think these mages could write a coherent sentence."

Lilly glanced up from her stack of coded messages, a wry smile playing on her lips. The scar across her left cheek caught the light as she turned. "Having trouble with the big words, old man?"

"I'll have you know, young lady, that I—" Jaxon's retort was cut short by William's sudden exclamation.

"It's a map!" William's chair scraped against the floor as he stood, excitement coursing through his veins. He gripped the head of his cane sword, tapping it impatiently as he spoke. "This isn't just a timepiece.

Look here." He gestured to the device's face with his free hand, where tiny pinpricks of light pulsed in a familiar pattern.

Jaxon shuffled over, his keen eyes behind the wire-rimmed spectacles squinting at the mechanism. "Well, I'll be damned," he breathed, running a gnarled finger along the device's edge. "Those points... they match the murder sites, don't they?"

William nodded, a grim smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Precisely. And if I'm right, it's not just showing us where they've been—"

"It's predicting where they'll strike next," Lilly finished, her icy blue eyes widening as she joined them at the desk. Her long black hair, usually so meticulously styled, was slightly disheveled from hours of work. She leaned in, her lithe frame taut with tension.

"Brilliant deduction, my boy," Jaxon said, clapping William on the back. "Now, if we can just decipher its inner workings—"

"We might be able to get ahead of these bastards for once," William finished, his voice tight with determination. He stood tall, his athletic frame radiating quiet confidence.

Lilly's brow furrowed, a shadow passing over her delicate features. "That's assuming they don't change their plans now that we've mucked up their little dock party."

"Always the optimist, aren't you, Lilly?" William teased, his intense gaze softening slightly as he looked at her.

"Someone's got to keep you boys grounded," she shot back, a hint of a smile softening her worried expression. Her hand unconsciously brushed the hilt of her enchanted silver dagger.

Jaxon harrumphed, already rummaging through his battered leather satchel. "Well, grounded or not, we've got work to do. William, my lad, I'll need your steady hands for this."

William nodded, rolling up the sleeves of his white shirt, revealing strong forearms marked with old scars. "Just tell me what you need, old friend."

As Jaxon laid out an array of delicate tools, Lilly gathered up her messages, moving with cat-like grace. "I'll keep digging into our Black Thorn friends. Maybe I can shake loose some more information about their next move."

"Be careful," William warned, catching her eye. His hand tightened on his cane sword, betraying his concern.

Lilly's smile was sharp and dangerous, her icy blue eyes glinting. "Don't worry about me, Blackwood. I can handle myself."

As she slipped out of the room, William turned back to the device, its steady ticking a counterpoint to the racing of his heart. He absently touched the wolfsbane pendant at his throat, a habit born of years of facing the supernatural.

Jaxon handed him a delicate set of tweezers, his thin beard quivering with excitement. "Ready to perform some mechanical surgery, Doctor Blackwood?"

William's answering grin was wolfish, his chiseled features lit with determination. "Let's crack this thing wide open."

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The dying sun painted London's skyline in hues of amber and crimson, stretching shadows across the cobblestone streets. William

Blackwood leaned over the mechanical device, its intricate gears clicking softly. His piercing blue eyes narrowed in concentration, a stark contrast to his dark brown hair with its distinguished streaks of silver.

A sharp rap at the door jolted him upright. William's hand instinctively moved to rest on the head of his cane sword as he straightened his deep crimson vest.

"I'll get it," he muttered, his rich baritone filling the room.

William's assured strides echoed on the hardwood as he approached the entrance. He opened the door, his 6'1" frame filling the doorway, to reveal a scrawny boy, no older than twelve, chest heaving.

"Urgent... message... for you, sir," the lad gasped, thrusting a sealed envelope towards William.

Before William could respond, the boy darted off. William's brow furrowed as he broke the seal, his fingers tapping impatiently on his cane pommel - a tick Lilly had often noted.

"Bloody hell," he cursed under his breath, his usual stoic demeanor cracking slightly.

Lilly's head snapped up, her icy blue eyes narrowing beneath her long black hair. The scar across her left cheek seemed to stand out more in the fading light. "What is it, Blackwood?"

William's jaw clenched, the muscle twitching visibly. "Fletcher. There's been another murder."

Jaxon pushed his glasses up his nose, his usually jovial face etched with concern. His shoulder-length, curly brown hair seemed more disheveled than usual, matching his rumpled clothing. "Where?"

"Westminster Abbey," William replied, his voice low and controlled.

Lilly rose in one fluid motion, her lithe form tensed for action. Her hand instinctively went to her enchanted silver dagger. "Right in the heart of London. Bold move."

Jaxon glanced at the mechanical device, running a hand through his thin beard. "It matches the next location in the sequence," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "We're running out of time."

"Then we'd better get a move on," William growled, snatching his signature long black coat from the rack. It billowed behind him as he shrugged it on.

Lilly arched an eyebrow, her lips curving into a smirk. "Expecting trouble, Blackwood?"

William's lips quirked into a grim smile that didn't reach his eyes. "With our luck? Always."

As they hurried down the steps, Jaxon stumbled, nearly face-planting on the pavement. William caught his arm with lightning-fast reflexes.

"Easy there, old friend," William said, his intense gaze softening slightly. "Can't have you breaking those spectacles of yours."

Jaxon chuckled nervously, adjusting his glasses. "Oh, I'm sure you'd muddle through somehow."

Lilly rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of fondness in her exasperation. She moved with cat-like grace, her eyes constantly scanning their surroundings. "If you two are quite finished, we have a murderer to catch."

They set off into the gathering darkness, William's long coat billowing behind him, Lilly moving silently and deliberately, and Jaxon hurrying to keep up. The night air carried a chill that had nothing to do with the weather, a foreboding that settled deep in William's bones as he gripped his cane sword tightly.