

BOOM TIME

“If we’re strong enough, or lucky enough—or both—a piece of our story will carry on throughout time.”

—Unknown

The Trickster, Mister

Blackpool, England
1840

The billiard balls cracked like bones under pressure. Augustine Edgar moved flawlessly around the table, striking each ball into a hole.

Bloody hell! A new record! he thought proudly.

To his not-so-amused opponent, Conall Nass, Augustine said, “It appears, my good fellow, that I have won yet again.”

Despite losing forty pounds on the game, Conall took the loss as dignified as any aristocrat could. It also helped that the loot he’d gambled with had belonged to his wealthy folks. To Augustine, this was common knowledge when he challenged the lad to play. Rumor had it that Conall Nass had an excessive gambling habit, and the family only tolerated it because it showed how damn rich they were by displaying how they could afford the losses. Stupid on their part, for if their money pit of a son kept it up, the entire family would be bankrupt before long.

Nevertheless, it was of no concern to Augustine as he collected his winnings.

The game room they stood in was one of many rooms inside the upscale beachside mansion. The owner was an industrialist who had more funds than he knew what to do with. His hobbies included foxhunting, creating monopolies by buying out his competitor’s businesses and dismantling them, and oddly enough, painting. Dreadful paintings, in Augustine’s opinion. Augustine wasn’t an artist, but he had spent time with plenty in Paris in order to develop an eye for what decent art was, and it seemed the painter of these slushy images ought to do the same. The horrible works hung on nearly every wall. To no one’s surprise, nobody offered to buy any of them.

Augustine thought about counting the loot he had won but refrained from doing so. He’d learned that counting his winnings was frowned upon. Instead, he crammed the money into the pocket of his nice green tailcoat, which was embroidered with fancy, dark yellow paisley designs that went smashingly well with his charcoal, double-breasted shawl collar vest with its tone-on-tone scroll patterns.

Augustine lifted his glass of sherry to his opponent. “Care for another game, ol’ chap?”

Conall looked so irate it seemed he was going to challenge him to a duel. One that Augustine would accept and then not show up for. After all, he was only *playing* the part of a gentleman.

“I think not, sir,” Conall declined testily but with poise.

He left to fritter away his loot somewhere else. Augustine chuckled.

“Yeah, go lick your wounds, tosser,” he muttered.

It had been a splendid night for Augustine. After arriving in Blackpool no more than a week ago, he’d managed to swindle his way into high-ranking establishments and hustle a fair amount. His secret was in acting as though he hadn’t the faintest idea of how to play billiards. His youth helped him in the claim, but in truth, he was rather good at it. He had studied the rules in public libraries, then practiced on makeshift tables of his own creation. He could quickly sharpen his skill when playing against others. If he kept this up, he could earn enough to get himself comfortably through the upcoming winter.

“I’ll play you,” came a voice off to his side.

Augustine looked over to where a tall, slender man was leaning against the corner of the room. He was dressed in a pearl white suit jacket traced in silver thread with silver, pinstriped lines running down his white slacks. His rabbit fur hat was decorated with lively ostrich feathers. He held a pool stick and wore a grin on his feminine-looking face.

Funny that Augustine hadn’t noticed him before. Yet, there was something not entirely trustworthy about him.

“I apologize, sir, but I think I shall retire for the evening.”

Augustine bowed formally and turned on his heel to leave when the stranger’s words froze him in place.

“You clean up rather well, Pierce Landcross.”

His heart stopped in his chest, making it difficult to breathe. He fought against the shock and worked to put on a fake smile as he turned around.

“Pierce? Sir, I do believe you have mistaken me for someone else.”

Even as convincing as he sounded, deep down, Pierce knew the sod wouldn’t be fooled by it. The man gave him a critical look that burrowed far into his very core. It felt strangely similar to the feeling he got when his mother caught him in a lie.

The stranger casually circled the billiard table with his pool stick, knocking in each ball as he went. Pierce didn’t remember setting them up again.

“Aren’t you adorable when you lie,” the stranger said, hitting in the final ball. He rose to his full height, seemingly to admire his cue stick as if it were made of gold. “Pierce Landcross. Last year you escaped the prison ship the *HMS Discovery* and have recently returned to England, where you’ve begun hustling.” He slid his gaze over to Pierce, a smile touching the corner of his mouth. “Which brings us to the present.”

The hard thumping behind his ribs prompted Pierce to scout the room for any who might be listening. Every guest carried on with the party as if the stranger and the outlaw didn’t exist.

A servant carrying a tray of sherries strolled by. Usually, servants stopped to offer guests a drink, a cigar, or an appetizer. Not this bloke, which forced Pierce to snatch a glass. Did he not see him?

“No one can hear us,” the stranger stated while approaching.

As he drew nearer, Pierce noticed he smelled organic like a book. Pierce’s favorite scent.

He eyed the bloke more carefully. He was very chic with shiny dark hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and a thin mustache. His teeth were the cleanest and most perfect Pierce had ever seen, and his skin might as well have been made of pure apricot. There was wisdom in his pale green eyes—but also a great deal of mischief.

“Who exactly are you?” he whispered, ignoring the man’s claim that nobody could hear them.

“I am someone with many names,” he admitted, taking off his hat and bowing deeply.

Pierce started to suspect this wanker wasn’t human.

“Right. Then *what* are you?”

The stranger rose, donning his hat. He stood straight, holding his cue stick almost as if it was a staff. “I am, for lack of a better word, a Trickster.”

“A Trickster?” Pierce repeated with heightened interest. “So, you’re just another swindler like me, eh?”

“Oh, my darling. I’m far more than that and believe it or not, so are you.”

“You seem to know a lot about me, chum.” Pierce dropped his posh tone. “S’pose you’re here for a reason?”

“Indeed, I am.”

Pierce took a sip of his drink. “Might I be so bold as to ask what?”

Pierce was highly curious about his answer. After all, why would a Trickster choose to chat with him? He’d seen a thing or two in his twenty-four years. In a world shared by all sorts of beings, people encountered highly unusual things all the time. Yet, every supernatural run-in Pierce had ever experienced had been personal, as if the encounters were all woven together in some way. His late grandmother had had certain otherworldly gifts, so that was a given, but then there was the psychic, Sees Beyond, who told Chief Sea Wind her spirits wanted the crew of the *Ekta* to find and save him from that bloody prison ship heading for Norfolk Island. Now, there was this Trickster. Was he there for him? Pierce severely hoped not.

“You are in danger,” the Trickster answered. “I must hide you.”

Dammit to all!

“Danger?”

“A certain mare wants you dead, and it seems she’s looking for a way to do so.”

“A mare? Are you talking about a horse?”

“Aren’t you an inquisitive young thing? That’s a good sign of intelligence. And no. She’s an entity who brings people nightmares.”

Pierce opened his mouth to ask more questions when the Trickster beat him to it. “The reason why she wants you dead? Let’s just say she holds a grudge against a person I care very deeply for.”

Pierce started putting the pieces together. When he was held captive by that albino cocker, Volker Jäger—a man who’d forced him to help break into the home of a retired archaeologist—there was a woman with twig-like hair and black eyes that had burst out of the statue Pierce had thrown at Jäger. Apparently, she’d been trapped inside it—or

perhaps she had been the sculpture itself. When she saw Pierce, she threatened to find a way to kill him.

“Someone you care for? Let me take a guess—she’s a witch, eh? Aye, I believe I know the mare you’re referring to. Hide me, you say? Curious. Where would a Trickster stash someone?”

A sly grin crossed the Trickster’s face. “Oh, darling—”

“Please stop calling me that.”

“—you will soon find out.”

A sudden weight pressed down upon him. He looked warily at his sherry. “Wha . . . what’ve you done to my drink, you bastard?”

“I have no need to tamper with your beverage. Sleep. We have a very long journey ahead of us.”

Fighting against whatever the cocker had done to him proved pointless. Everything went out of focus and then he blacked out altogether.

Bugger.

One

I'll Return for You

“You have him?” Freya asked Njáll.

“I do. He’s over there.”

Njáll gestured toward the side of the mansion where the warm interior lighting poured out through the windows and melted into the darkness. Down the way, leaning slightly sideways against the wall was Pierce Landcross.

“Do you wish to see him?” Njáll asked.

Her face—that new face he’d learned to accept since her rebirth—scowled.

“That’s not a good idea,” she admitted at length.

He snorted. “Afraid you might kill him?”

He knew she wanted to. Ever since Pierce had conceived his son seven years ago, Freya had desired nothing more than to see him dead. His demise ensured her dominance over the djinn she aimed to create by merging all the bloodlines that were once part of the creature. Njáll sometimes wondered about “The Story of the Priest,” and if he’d told her the correct version when she was his beloved nymph, Temenitis. The tale was only known in certain circles throughout the supernatural world and even then, it was never thoroughly discussed. Did the story not have enough credibility even to talk about it? Honestly, he cared little himself to investigate. His plate was too full of scams and mischievous deeds to be so concerned over silly stories. Regardless, he had no quarrel in helping the newborn witch with her plan. He found it entertaining and highly interesting.

“I’d kill him if the rules allowed,” she said. “I may want to hurt him, though.”

“It’s not the boy’s fault,” Njáll pointed out.

“I don’t care.”

Her tone was firm, clearly angered by the fact that Pierce stood in the way of achieving her goal. In order to get rid of him, she faced many obstacles, including damaging his fate thread.

Such silly little rules.

“You best take him,” Freya urged.

“Indeed. Farewell, milady.”

Njáll carried the poor bastard thousands of miles into the Atlantic. It wasn’t a long trip, yet it would have been much quicker if he could simply vanish and reappear. For mortals like Pierce, the experience would be painful enough to awaken him. In order for Pierce to pass through the mist without being torn to pieces, Njáll needed him unconscious.

The mist looked just as ominous and frightening as the last time he had seen it. The first

time he dared venture through it, he didn't know how to handle himself, which resulted in broken bones and organ damage that took months to heal. Regardless, he considered himself fortunate compared to others whose body parts floated aimlessly within the grand orb that was The Gate, set in the center of the mist. Everything was drawn to it. The next time he went, Njáll was more prepared. He had learned that to succeed in getting through the vacuum of the mist, he needed to allow the winds to blow him around without struggling against them until he reached the safety of The Gate. A simple solution, but still a trial.

Keeping such useful knowledge in mind, Njáll held Pierce tightly to him like a barkeep hauling out a drunken louse from his tavern. He looked down over the boy's shoulder to the whirling cloud below them. It was exuding tremendous energy that caused his every hair to stand on end. Bright, almost blinding, sparks of lightning flashed, reflecting in blotches within the mist. Njáll was no coward; in fact, he constantly threw himself into all kinds of dangerous situations. The mist, however, shot tremors of fear into him. Still, he was never the sort to back out of a challenge.

Tightening his hold on his passenger, Njáll sucked in a breath and plunged into the mist.

The muscles in his arms strained under the pressure—the only part of him that fought against the winds. Those blasted, brutal winds knocked him this way and that as hard as rushing water. They punched him around, working hard to pry his arms away. He clutched Pierce harder and when he did, something cracked. The winds howled in his ears and the crushing force felt enough to make them bleed. His lower jaw hurt from clutching it.

He shut his eyes but still saw the flashes of lightning. At some point, he thought he'd lose his arms if he kept refusing to let go. A sharp, knife-like pain sliced into his shoulder joints. The mist was starting to rip him apart. The sudden pain caused him to lose his hold. He flung open his arms and opened his eyes, but Pierce was already gone—lost in the mist.

Unable to find his lost cargo, Njáll allowed his arms to slacken and then went with the force of the winds that continued to thrash him about until he could no longer feel it.

The stillness indicated that he had arrived at the orb. A warm rush of relief thawed the chill of fear, soothing him before he slowly opened his eyes again. The Gate was exactly as he remembered it. Roughly the size of the Earth's moon and full of hollow noises. There were no walls or any kind of barrier, only the orb with the mist and the lightning flashes surrounding it. The Gate was a place that led to hundreds of locations. A junction of sorts.

Njáll was thankful he'd made it through in one piece even though his shoulder joints ached. He began his search for Pierce and, as he did, he spied three women floating around near the edges of The Gate. They were in various places, each of them with writing journals in hand. Njáll assumed they were exploring and studying the wormholes. He ignored them as they ignored him and eventually, Njáll found Pierce floating amongst the scattered, rotten remains of those torn to bits, along with other random items that the departed had brought with them. Because the boy was out cold, he hadn't struggled

against the brutal winds, and his body, therefore, was intact. It didn't mean he had come through completely unscathed.

Njáll grabbed him by the wrist and pulled Pierce's weightless body over to him. Through touch alone, Njáll sensed the body's distress. While trying to keep his hold on Pierce, Njáll had broken a couple of his ribs and fractured a few others on the left side.

The Gate had several hundred wormholes—portals that could take a traveler to parallel universes, or dead ends, or endless darkness. Once, Njáll spent years in the Gate mapping out where the wormholes went, and in doing so, he knew the perfect place to take Pierce.

He brought him over to the mouth of a wormhole where eclectic fog wafted out. Pierce let out a moan. He was going to awaken soon. Too weak to put him under again, Njáll acted quickly and dove in.

The frigid air was dark and damp. The city hadn't been difficult to locate, thanks to the searchlights that slowly tick-tocked back and forth. The brightening morning light would soon fade them out.

The sky had turned grey by the time Njáll found the abandoned subway tunnel. The reason he'd chosen the underground was that he thought it best if Pierce gradually discovered where and when he was. Awakening in this new world somewhere out in the open might prompt him to go mad on the spot.

Inside the tunnel hung old lanterns left behind by workers who had closed off the passageway during the turn of the century. They didn't work until Njáll made them work. The first touch of light in years burned away the pitch-blackness, turning the room a honey color.

He laid the boy down in the middle of old subway tracks. Another moan escaped Pierce. No doubt, the pain from his damaged ribs was helping him come around. Njáll thought about leaving him as he was. After all, it wasn't as though he'd die from his injuries. Freya still needed to damage his fate thread and that would not happen until some seasons from now. Well, back in *their* era, anyway. Only after his thread was damaged could she kill him and prematurely remove him from the time the Fates had given him.

Anyway, the trip through the mist had left Njáll drained, as it never failed to do. He had to recuperate before returning. He loathed time traveling. He turned to leave when another miserable groan nailed him in place. Njáll wanted to leave his descendant, but something about leaving him wounded in a strange new era tapped into a rare compassionate part of him. Also, Pierce reminded him of himself—a cocky, intelligent lad full of mischief. Blast it all, he actually liked the wiseass!

Njáll touched Pierce's injured left side and focused on the distressed bones within. The ribs were completely broken in two, and others badly fractured. He slid a hand underneath Pierce's shirt and vest and rested the other upon the boy's forehead to help soothe his thoughts and keep him under for just a little longer. Njáll sensed the youth's restlessness. In his unconscious state, he was striving to awaken and find out what had happened to him.

The shifting bones were a queer feeling. Njáll guided them back into place and fused

them together. The Trickster had used the same kind of technique when he'd healed Pierce's father, Jasper, of the blood clot trapped in his lungs when Jasper was a child. As the bones moved, Pierce's moans grew louder and his eyelids began to flutter. Njáll worked quickly to repair the fractured bones, a much simpler task. Moments later, it was done. There would be a great amount of soreness, but that paled in comparison to what had been.

Njáll removed his hand from under the boy's clothing but kept the other upon his forehead.

He leaned forward and spoke softly into Pierce's ear, "I'll return for you. Until then, stay out of trouble."

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[Return to Page](#)