

The Shadow Over the Crystal Palace

I

London greeted them with rain.

Not the familiar, fine rain of the steppe foothills that drifts over the feather grass like the breath of a weary earth — but a heavy, cast-iron rain, as though the very sky above the Thames had been forged in the same factories that belched smoke day and night along the banks of the great river. The drops drummed upon the cab's roof with a persistence peculiar only to English weather and English creditors, and Yerzhan Kunanbayev, a young engineer from Semipalatinsk, shivered involuntarily, drawing tighter the greatcoat he had purchased in Orenburg.

"It is not the rain that should trouble you," said the man seated opposite him, his gaze never leaving the window beyond which the gas lamps of the Strand drifted past.

Kazakh — so he was called by all who knew enough not to ask his true name, yet not enough to receive it — was a man of some forty-five years, lean and sinewy as a steppe saxaul. His left hand rested upon the head of a walking stick of dark wood, and only the most attentive observer would have noticed that the fingers of his right hand never strayed far from his belt, where beneath his frock coat lay a curved knife — a gift from a Bukharan dervish, bestowed for a service that both preferred not to recall.

Kazakh had served as a military intelligence officer with the Separate Siberian Corps and had seen enough on the frontiers of the Empire to know that the world was wider than the professors of the Petersburg Academy supposed. The wound he had received under circumstances described in his service report only as "during the execution of a special assignment" had ended his commission, but not his path. Among the officers there were rumours — whispered only, to be sure — that Kazakh possessed knowledge taught at no university, and that his wounds had been inflicted not by bullet or blade, but by something for which military science had no name.

Now he was accompanying Yerzhan, whose father had once done him a considerable service, to the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, where the young engineer was to present his invention — a mechanical calculator capable, by its creator's claim, of performing the most complex ballistic computations with a precision beyond the reach of the human mind.

The cab halted before a hotel on Jermyn Street. Kazakh stepped onto the wet pavement and froze at once, his eyes narrowing. Something intangible had brushed against his senses — not hearing, not sight, but something else entirely, sharpened by years of walking along the edge of the unseen world. The sensation was akin to a shadow slipping across the nape of one's neck.

"Yerzhan," he said, without turning. "Take the machine from the carriage yourself. Do not bring it to the room. Let it remain in the hotel storeroom, under lock. And tell no one which crate it lies in."

The young engineer made as if to object, but held his tongue. He knew Kazakh well enough not to argue when he spoke in such a tone.

II

The following morning, a messenger arrived at the hotel bearing a visiting card that read: "Mr R. Cromwell, Woolshire Hall, County of Woolshire. Collector and Patron of the Arts."

The accompanying note, written in a flawless hand, stated that Mr Cromwell, having heard of the arrival in London of remarkable guests from the distant and enigmatic Kazakh steppes, would consider it an honour to invite them to dine at his London residence and to converse about their marvellous invention, of which the most flattering rumours were already circulating.

Kazakh turned the card between his fingers. The paper was of superb quality, the embossing gold, but the smell... He raised the card to his nose. Faint, sweetish, with a coppery note. A smell that any butcher would recognise without difficulty, yet one that had no place upon the visiting card of an English gentleman.

"What do you make of it?" asked Yerzhan.

"I say we shall not be dining with him," replied Kazakh. "But it would do no harm to learn who this Mr Cromwell might be."

By midday, Kazakh was already seated in the reading room of the British Museum, where he spent several hours examining bound volumes of newspapers from the county of Woolshire. What he found offered no comfort: over the preceding thirty years, no fewer than a dozen travellers had vanished without trace in the vicinity of Woolshire Hall. The locals attributed the disappearances to the bogs, but Kazakh noted a pattern — all of the missing

had been strangers, all had arrived at the invitation of the estate's master, and all had vanished on the night following their visit.

More curious still was a notice from twenty years prior, in which a correspondent of the Woolshire Herald — himself now also vanished without trace — described Mr Cromwell as "a gentleman of a most rotund exterior, with a ruddy, almost perfectly spherical countenance and a smile so broad and so unchanging that it produced an impression not so much of geniality as of a certain predatory anticipation."

Kazakh closed the volume and sat motionless for a long while, staring before him. He recalled the tales of the old Bukharan dervish concerning creatures that assumed forms impossible for human flesh — creatures that fed not upon food but upon the very life force itself, capable of concealing themselves among mankind for centuries, betraying their inhuman nature only through the fixed, frozen grimace they believed to be a smile.

III

On the third day, when Yerzhan had gone to the Crystal Palace to inspect the pavilion where the exhibits were to be installed, Kazakh discovered that the hotel was being watched. The watcher — a pale, emaciated man with a glazed stare and two distinctive marks upon his neck — stood at the corner of Jermyn Street and St James's, making no attempt to conceal himself. When Kazakh went out to him, the man extended an envelope and vanished into the crowd with an agility unbecoming of a living creature.

Inside the envelope lay a second invitation, this time written without social pleasantries: "Bring the machine. I wish to see it. A refusal shall be taken as an insult, and insults I do not forgive."

Beneath it was a postscript that made Kazakh frown: "I know who you are, steppe sorcerer. Your tricks do not frighten me. My servants are already in the Crystal Palace."

Kazakh burned the note over a candle, donned his frock coat, checked the knife at his belt, and drew from his travelling trunk a small bundle wrapped in camel hide. Inside lay an aspen stake, carved from a tree that had grown upon the grave of a steppe holy man, and a silver flask containing water from the sacred spring of Tamgaly.

By evening of that same day, having questioned the hotel proprietor, cabmen, and shopkeepers — for in London, as in the steppe, those who stand by the road know more than all others — Kazakh had assembled a sufficiently clear picture.

Mr Cromwell — if that was indeed his true name — appeared in London whenever the Great City attracted something unusual: foreign inventors, travellers bearing curiosities, scholars with discoveries. He would invite them to his residence, they would accept the invitation — and nothing more would be heard of them. But this time, something particular had drawn his interest: Yerzhan's mechanical calculator, reputed to be capable of computing and predicting anything whatsoever. For a creature that had hidden among humans for centuries, such a machine was both a threat and a temptation — for what if it were capable of calculating him as well?

IV

The dénouement came on the night before the Exhibition's opening.

Kazakh did not wait. Waiting is the privilege of those who hunt men; he who hunts the inhuman must act first. He dispatched Yerzhan under the guard of two retired Gurkhas he had hired to the Crystal Palace, where the young man was to spend the night beside his exhibit, and himself set out for the address printed on the visiting card — Cromwell's London residence, situated in a sombre house on Half Moon Street, beyond the reach of the gas lamps' light.

The door was unlocked. This did not surprise Kazakh — the creature was expecting him, believing itself the hunter.

The interior proved furnished with ostentatious luxury, yet the air held the same sweetish odour, and Kazakh observed that the mirrors in the entrance hall had been draped with cloth. He ascended the staircase, lighting his way with an oil lantern, and in the drawing room on the first floor found what he sought.

Mr Cromwell sat in an armchair by the fireplace. In the light of the flames, it became clear why the newspaper correspondent had described him so strangely: the creature was indeed spherical, rounded unnaturally and perfectly, as though its body obeyed no laws of anatomy. Its face, ruddy and glistening, was split by a smile stretching from ear to ear — a smile motionless, frozen, baring two rows of small, sharp teeth like those of a river fish. The eyes, small and round, gazed out with a cold merriment in which there was nothing human.

"Ah, the steppe guest," Cromwell uttered in a voice resembling the creak of an ungreased wheel. "I was expecting the boy with the machine, and instead the old wolf has come. No matter — old blood is sweeter than young. Do sit down. Will you take wine?"

"I do not drink with the dead," Kazakh replied, halting at the threshold. His left hand gripped the walking stick; his right, the aspen stake beneath the flap of his coat.

Cromwell laughed, and his laughter was like the gurgling of water in a stoppered bottle.

"Dead? What a coarse word. I have lived four centuries, my dear fellow. I have survived the Plague and the Fire, the Restoration and the Revolution. I watched this city being built, and I shall watch it fall. And your machine — your wonderful machine — will help me calculate precisely when."

"The machine computes ballistic tables," said Kazakh. "Not destinies."

"Nonsense. Everything in existence is ballistics. The trajectory of a bullet and the trajectory of a life obey the very same laws. I need that machine. Surrender it, and I shall release you both."

Kazakh did not reply. Instead, he did what he had learned not in barracks nor in universities, but from the nomadic baksy in the foothills of the Altai: he began to speak — quietly, steadily, in a tongue so ancient that its very words were older than cities and empires. It was neither a prayer nor an incantation in the sense understood by European occultists. It was a summons — an address to that which the steppe peoples called Kōk Tängri, the Eternal Blue Sky, a force possessing neither temples nor priests, yet permeating all that exists, as the wind permeates the feather grass.

The fire in the hearth flared blue.

Cromwell ceased to smile — for the first time, perhaps, in four centuries. His spherical body jerked in the armchair, and he hissed, baring fangs that had been concealed behind the rows of small teeth.

"Stop!" he shrieked. "What are you doing?!"

Kazakh did not stop. His voice grew deeper, his words heavier. The air in the room thickened and turned cold as a steppe winter's night, and in that coldness the sweetish smell that had pervaded the house began to dissipate, yielding to something else — the scent of clean wind and dry wormwood, the scent of open spaces where evil has nowhere to hide, for above it from horizon to horizon there is only sky.

Cromwell lunged at him.

The creature moved with monstrous speed — a ball rolling downhill could not have been swifter. But Kazakh had been waiting for this. With his left hand he thrust out the walking stick, taking the blow upon its shaft; with his right he drove the aspen stake into the place where a man's heart would be, simultaneously splashing water from the silver flask of the sacred spring.

Cromwell screamed. His scream was not human — so screams the wind in a chimney flue, so shrieks iron upon glass. His body, pierced by the stake, began to sag, to lose its form, and Kazakh watched with cold horror as four centuries of flesh became what it had been all along — dust and decay, a handful of brown powder that scattered across the Persian rug.

The smile vanished last.

V

The following morning, the first of May in the year eighteen hundred and fifty-one, Her Majesty Queen Victoria solemnly opened the Great Exhibition. The Crystal Palace gleamed in the rays of an unexpectedly clear sun, the crowds filled Hyde Park, and the orchestra played Handel.

Yerzhan Kunanbayev stood beside his exhibit — the mechanical calculator in its casing of polished bronze — explaining its principles with shining eyes to the interested visitors. Several English engineers had already requested a meeting, and a representative of the Admiralty had made a note in his pocketbook.

Kazakh stood at a distance, leaning upon his stick. His left shoulder ached — the creature had proved stronger than he had supposed, and upon his chest there bloomed a bruise the size of a saucer. But he was content, insofar as a man of his temper could ever be content.

He was approached by a Scotland Yard inspector — a stout, moustachioed gentleman by the name of Harding — with whom Kazakh had spoken the previous evening.

"We examined the house on Half Moon Street," said the inspector, lowering his voice. "Found in the cellar... belongings. Effects of the missing. A great many. We shall close the case as a series of murders. The killer — one Cromwell — has absconded." He paused. "You are not going to tell me what truly happened, are you?"

"I am not, Inspector," Kazakh replied.

"And I shall not ask," Harding nodded. "But should you ever require the assistance of the Yard whilst you are in London..."

"I am grateful."

The inspector departed. Kazakh turned towards the Crystal Palace, that temple of progress and reason, the glass marvel of a new age, and reflected that beneath its vaults were gathered inventions intended to render the world comprehensible and predictable. Steam engines, telegraphs, mechanical calculators — all of them promised a future in which there would be no place for darkness.

But Kazakh knew what the inventors and engineers did not: darkness does not fear progress. It merely learns to hide better.

He adjusted his walking stick, surveyed the shining immensity of the palace, and slowly made his way towards the exit. In the pocket of his frock coat lay the visiting card of Mr Cromwell — the sole remnant of the creature that had preyed upon this city for four centuries. Kazakh intended to burn it that evening, together with the aspen splinter and the last of the water from the flask — to complete the rite, as the Bukharan dervish had taught.

But first — he permitted himself the ghost of a smile — first he needed to ensure that Yerzhan had not forgotten to eat. Young inventors, engrossed in their machines, had a habit of neglecting such trifles, and the steppes were far from here, and there was no one else to scold the boy for an empty stomach.

The London sun, so rare and therefore so precious, lit Kazakh's way. He walked with a limp, and his stick tapped steadily upon the cobblestones — softly and evenly, like the beating of an old, weary, but faithful heart.

London, 1851.

Set down from the testimony of an eyewitness and supplemented from the archives of Scotland Yard.

Case No. 7734-V, classification "Special." Not to be disclosed.