

## **The Alchemist**

I'll never forget that day. The day Reg came calling. The day he showed me his inheritance.

It wasn't much, just a box wrapped in red. A green ribbon. A little bow. He set it on the table, leaned back in his chair, and lit his pipe. Staring at me in silence. The glow of the tobacco lighting his face. The crackling hiss of the fire in the bowl as he inhaled. As if waiting for some sort of response. But I had none to give.

"I'm at a bit of a loss, Ole' Boy." I glanced down at the package, then back at his face. "What's this all about?"

"What indeed?" He took a deep draw on his pipe. "I have precious few answers myself, Tom. And I hope to never have them."

I shook my head. "Now see here, Reg. We've known one another all our lives." It made no sense. Unless... "You haven't..." I raised my eyebrows. "I mean to say..." My gaze flicked to the package. "It's not related to any... indiscretion. Something Hyacinth..."

He didn't react. Simply pulled the stem from his lips. "No. Nothing like that."

Thank heaven. But this was intolerable. "Then out with it, man."

He placed the stem between his lips, and again the tobacco glowed. "Do you remember my Uncle Charlie?"

I blinked. I'd not heard Reg mention his uncle since his interment at the sanatorium. I didn't blame him. The Ole' Boy was something of a genius at one point. A renown professor at

Cambridge, as I recall. Bit of a scandal when he fell from grace. “I should think so. Lost his position, I dare say. Something to do with alchemy, yes?”

“Quite so.” Reg’s gaze dropped to the package. “He died some weeks back, willed this little beauty to me, along with his notes.”

But something in his eye, the twitch of his thumb against his pipe, made my mouth go dry. “What’s inside?”

He shifted in his chair, his gaze never leaving the package. “I don’t believe he was mad, Tom. Not at first. Not after reading his notes. It’s... everyone else that misunderstood.” He swallowed hard and tipped back his head, as if dragging his gaze from the table. “He was a philosopher, not a chemist. To him, alchemy was the transformation of the soul. The corrupt, to pure. Lead, to gold. The Philosopher’s Stone, that which brings divine illumination.” He nodded at the box.

I was no student of history, mysticism, or any discipline of the sort. I had nothing to add. Not even enough knowledge to ask a coherent question. And so, I asked the only question I could. “Is that what you think is in there? The Philosopher’s Stone?” When he didn’t answer, I coughed out a laugh. He did. Of course he did. “Well, I say. If that’s what you believe, what are you waiting for?”

“Nothing.” He took a deep draw, expelled a large plume over his head, and sighed. “I have no intention of ever opening that box.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because I am a student of letters. And I know knowledge is not benign. Like Pandora, or Eve, everything we learn comes at the cost of what came before. Teach a child about sex, and innocence dies, never to be reborn. And whatever lies in that box murdered my uncle. Turned him into a gibbering monster. Which is to be expected.”

But now he was making no sense. “Expected?”

“Divine knowledge is not human. To peek behind the curtain spoils the magic. You can’t recapture the wonder once you see the canary in the magician’s sleeve. And that’s what I believe happened. We are what we know and believe. That’s what makes us human. Whatever he learned, changed him. He wasn’t human. Not anymore. God or demon, I cannot say, but not human. And so, I will not look. Call me a coward, but I prefer to remain as I am.”

For a long time, we sat in silence. I, hashing out everything he said. Until at last he spoke. “I mean to destroy it. The temptation to look is too great. I just needed someone to know.”