

Blackout Obscura

By
S.G Mark

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Preview Chapter

Chapter One

Cold whisky trickled down the side of the scratched glass; despite the gloom, the drink was illuminated with a faint hope. And yet it sat on the edge of the bar, isolated and remote, forever shrinking and growing at the same time. A slow sip of liquid relief churning and burning on the inside: merely a second's worth, but valued as if it were for eternity.

Static cackled around him. Idle chit chat and a musical melody shrieking from a cheap stereo. It was not hard to be lost in this place for he was not the only lonely figure clinging to the bar like a shadow clings to its owner at midday. Though many swam in schools, they were all ultimately here for the same thing: to forget. Whether it had been a difficult week was irrelevant: it was Friday evening and the only prior engagement Jack Blackwood had for the weekend would be Saturday morning's hangover. His fingertips touched the rim of the glass, circling it enticingly. It was his third of the evening and already his paycheck had shamefully diminished. But what was there to save for: a house, a holiday or a life's dream? Jack's only dream swirled at the bottom of his glass; it swirled at the bottom of every glass.

It was September the twenty-eighth and the first gusts of seasonal change swirled around the city's streets. Auld Reekie in Auld Autumn. But the weather was not the only change afoot. In companionship, the seeds of change that had been scattered decades

ago had sprouted forth from the ground and were now smiling up at the sunlight; no longer a bulb but an old, established weed.

Everyone in The Banshee Labyrinth, from the old grizzly men to the teenage under-ager in for a quick one before they were caught, was there for the same reason. Be it in the form of lager, bitter or an old fine scotch; a quick vodka shooter or rum chaser; it was all the same demon they were running from. Jack stared down at his own and the hazel tar stared right back, daring him to have another and another until all worry left his mind. In the end, there would be no escape. Jack had been here before. He knew the score for it was always the same game. By sunrise the next day the same desolate hopelessness that had spurred him to alcohol in the first place would creep back from the shadows and once again there would be no more money, ambition or anything to live for and all would once again be uncomfortably numb.

The cavernous catacombs devoured the darkness which was breached only by sporadic candlelight. Once a territory for criminals, thieves and the morally corrupt, the bar was now crowded with the miserable, the desperate and the discontent.

Jack's phone buzzed in his jean pocket. He took it out and read the text message that had just arrived. It was Alex.

Sorry, running late.

Alex was renowned for his great failings of communication and exemplary tardiness. Ever the workaholic, he would nearly always replace social events with research or writing up articles. "You're not just a journalist by day," he would say, the junior correspondent to the Edinburgh Evening News. Still, his lateness was not wholly unexpected. Prior to his arrival at the pub he was due to cover a story of a protest or charity event - Jack was sketchy on the details: his concentration frequently faded when Alex started speaking about his job.

Dismissing the text, Jack downed his drink and ordered another. After paying the rent he only had one hundred and eighty pounds left to his name. His pay was not quite as much as he had hoped it would be. From that there were still the phone and energy bills to pay for as well as any other food that the Rations did not cover. He would be lucky if he could go out again before the end of the next month, but his fingertips were starting to tingle and the fairy lights decorating the pub's interior brick walls were swaying slightly: one more would be just enough?

As the barman tended to his order, another man approached the bar right beside where Jack was perched. He was gruff looking and had the appearance and stench of a vagrant. Grease and sweat trickled down his forehead. His beard was matted and uneven and mottled with many shades of mud. His clothes reflected a life on the pavements; grime and dirt suffocated once-clean fabric. Jack turned his opinionated nose to the fresh drink that had just slid across the bar to him. Exchanging coins with the barman, he heard a cough to his left. Jack ignored it at first, but the approaching arm that tapped him on the shoulder, he could not.

"Spare some change?" the man croaked, hoisting a shaking cupped hand in front of Jack.

Before Jack could guiltily respond, the barman stepped in.

"Sorry, I'm going to have to ask you to leave," he said pointing bluntly to a sign by the entrance that read No Beggars.

The barman escorted the beggar out, dusting his hands as he returned to behind the bar and his face screwed up into an expression of repulsion.

"I hate it when they come in," Jack said.

"You and me both. Shouldn't be allowed to beg, lazy bastards," he said as he prepared the two hundredth pint of his shift.

"Agreed," Jack raised his glass slightly but before it touched his lips, the ground shook. A deep grumbling.

Jack looked at the barman, who was equally concerned. They then both turned to the other customers who had also paused mid-drink to look frantically around for the source of the noise that had disappeared just as quickly as it had happened.

“Earthquake?” a voice squeaked from the corner.

“Dinnae be stupid, hen, this is Edinburgh!”

“Then... what?”

From outside a man rushed in with a lit cigarette still stuck in his mouth, “Something - something happened, outside - near North Bridge, I think!”

The barman flipped the music off as some of the people rose from their chairs, abandoning their drinks, for a look outside. Jack, whose hopes of Alex joining him were already diminishing, necked back his and joined the cult of the curious leaving the pub.

The fresh air knocked his senses for a second. The warmth of the pub was poles apart from the crisp chilling air outside. As he walked up the cobbled hill to join the High Street, it seemed that others from the neighbouring pubs were, too, joining the upward flowing river of people. Jack had not an inkling as to what was happening and by the whispers wisping through the crowd, neither did anyone else. As he marched up the hill, he overheard several theories and listened intently as he saw the cobbles beneath his feet melt from dark to bronze as the streetlights from the Royal Mile shone down on them.

“Look up!” an indistinguishable voice shouted from the moving mass.

Several people, including Jack, obliged and saw a great orange cloud hanging dangerously in the sky. Against the towering baronial buildings, the cloud bubbled with explosive reflected light.

“Oh god, a train’s crashed!” a woman yelled.

“No, it’s a plane - it’s collided with another!”

“No, the light - it’s not coming from above, it’s... it’s coming from...” the sentence faded into the gagging commotion coming from the top of the North Bridge, which nestled above the train station.

A fire engine screeched passed, speeding so much its flashing lights were a blur. A second flew by. Then a third. People were clambering off the road to make way for them as a parade of ambulances raced to join their comrades. Jack counted at least four of each in the five minutes he was stuck in the stagnant crowd.

“Oh my god, this is serious,” a man muttered to himself nearby.

Still steadily shuffling towards the bridge where everyone had gathered, Jack was forced to come to a complete standstill at the corner where The Royal Mile met North Bridge. The crowd was too dense to penetrate any further. Slipping free from the tight throng and diving for the shelter of some closed-down tourist shop, Jack listened to the stories reverberating back.

“It’s everywhere - oh god, it’s everywhere...”

“No one can possibly still be alive!”

“They’re pulling out bodies!”

Horrific scenarios dared to enter his panicked mind. Inside his pocket his phone vibrated once again. It was Eliza, Alex’s sister, and she was calling him. Jack picked up immediately.

“Where are you?” she said frantically and slurring her words.

“Eliza - something’s happened!”

“I know! I can see it. It’s... it’s...”

“I’m at the edge of North Bridge. Where are you, are you alright?”

“I’m alright, but Jack - oh my god, it’s.... horrifying.”

From her breathless panic, Jack was alarmed.

“I can’t see it properly - I’m still too far away. I don’t know what’s happened but it’s big. Are you alright?” Jack said, trying to visualise a path through the crowd.

“Jack, you don’t understand! Alex w-was there! He *is* there!”

Jack’s heart stopped for a moment. The alcoholic numbness in his bloodstream plunged to further depths. Without clear thought, he dove into the crowd, pushing past the idle and thrusting them out of his way. Eliza was still on the other end of the phone, sobbing hysterically.

Carnage. The trees were alight with their own funeral pyre. The charcoaled remains of a marquee had collapsed under the weight of the fire. All else was black by comparison.

“Fucking hell,” he muttered, the crowd dense around him. The cold air was frosted with muttered shock.

He was at the edge of the bridge now, leaning over into the abyss below. Perhaps the drink was deceiving him; perhaps this was something from a nightmare. The flames licked the sky; the screams echoed continuously in his head. Princes Street Gardens were alight with death.

“Are you still there?” Eliza yelled in his ear.

“I’m here,” he replied, tightening his grip on the phone. “I can see it. Where are you?”

“I’m across from you, at the top of The Mound. Jack, I-I can’t reach him. He isn’t p-picking up his phone.”

Jack gulped, his throat swelled, constricting his breath. If Alex was down there... more screams erupted as fresh ambulances flew past, throttling his optimism. Jack looked across from the bridge to the top The Mound, directly ahead of him. Shifting shadows revealed a crowd had amassed there also. Eliza was among them.

“I’m going down there,” his alcohol-infused courage hung up the phone.

Clamouring his way backwards, he found the old steps that took him from the North Bridge down to the roads below and descended into the dense curtain of smoke, leaving reason and fear in the company of the crowd above. From here the flames looked lean and menacing; snatching at the clouds as if their desire was to burn all that could be seen. Terror bred with horror in the heavy smoke-clogged air. A few people watched in abject shock at the bottom of the steps. He was the only one running forward.

The screaming and shrieking intensified as he grew closer. As he honed in on the epicentre of hell itself, he saw it. He saw the heart of it: the death, the destruction. Through the black wrought iron fence he saw bodies collapsed on the ground, alive only with fire. Lives were ending as he watched on, struck by a sudden and unrelenting horror.

In an instant he thought of all that had happened in the past four years. The day he had met Alex; the despair, the anger, the uselessness chained to the eternal hopelessness of everyday life. He looked up at the burning epitaph: this is what it had become. The fire that burned so carnivorously was not here by pure chance or neglect. He knew it as he knew that day followed night. He looked at it and saw the souls of the departed rise to the top of the flames and ascend into the clouds. No, Jack thought: chance does not play chess as well as this.

“Jack!” her familiar voice cried out above all other sounds.

Heels topped by a short dress tore down the steep road from The Mound. Though shrouded in the shadow from the roadside trees, he knew her figure too well to mistake her for anyone else.

“Eliza!” he ran over into her arms.

“Jack - he’s not answering his phone. I-I-I can’t reach him,” tears were streaming down her mascara-clad cheeks.

“Are you sure he’s in there?” Jack grabbed her arm.

“Yes!” she screamed, “He told me not half an hour ago. Please, I can’t go through this again! I can’t lose my brother as well! Please!”

Jack looked her dead in the eye and knew what he had to do. His feet reluctantly, but valiantly, turned around and gathered pace as they carried him up towards the Eastern entrance to Princes Street Gardens: to where death feasted upon the horrors of the living.

Tortured screams resounded all around; lifeless corpses lay at the edge of the pavement. He saw others cowered by bodies on the ground; resuscitation, hands pumping on chests with all the fury and power of the end of the world. One, two, three, deep breaths plummeting into lungs that would not accept their gift. Above, the flames danced and twirled in tremendous crescendos and might. Scorching the skies and the iconic Scott Monument which towered gothically above all below; the flames were mountainous. Though his feet carried him on, Jack was petrified. Alex - his closest friend - was in there, struggling for breath, trapped under rubble or burning alive. The stench of burnt flesh rotted the air. Vomit erupted from his stomach at once. He leaned over the fence and spewed between its spires. At that moment another great cannonball of fire burst forth from the gardens, smothering all in ash and flame. Deafening screams, more chilling than the ones before, overpowered all and struck Jack right in the heart. He fought onwards, ash falling down on him like snow; faceless bodies running from the blaze and collapsing into the arms of paramedics and firemen alike.

His vision was spoiled by the thick smoke that followed; choking up more than just his lungs, but his courage too. Instantly, his eyes hooked on to the vision of a woman falling backwards on to the pavement, blasted back by the fire’s fury and rage. A man ran to her aid. He was not a firefighter or even a policeman. He wore plain, black stained clothes. Jack clutched the fence, his grip tightening, as his attention was drawn to a man lying lifeless in the middle of the street with three other figures surrounding him: one with his arms pressed down on his chest; another with his mouth hovering above the face in anxious impatience and the third standing by in absentium, no doubt wishing he was somewhere else entirely. Dozens sheltered from the trauma on the far side of

the bridge. Through a heavy haze of smoke, Jack saw the crowds that had gathered at the top of the road as it met the once-illustrious Princes Street. A boarded up shop played backdrop to their menagerie of shapes and sizes. It was uniquely unreal that even their desperate screams and shouting were disembodied.

Time was running out. Four firefighters tore into the fire carrying canisters just as two more fighters rushed out with bodies draped over their shoulders. They were lifeless dummies: and any of them could be Alex. His stomach lurching with the horror, he carried on, fighting his fears and racing on in hope of finding Alex alive. He had to be alive. Alex could not die. Not another death. Not today - he begged - not Alex. As he ran full force into the gates of the gardens, a yellow and black arm threw itself out in front of him and dragged him backwards away from the disaster. The flames dwindled as he was dragged further back and the face of the hand's owner, though shrouded by helmet, came into view. Back to the far side of the pavement he was dragged and unceremoniously forced on to the ground, with the firefighter standing tall above him, removing his helmet.

"Leave it to us, we've already got enough casualties," he said, pushing Jack's shoulder down to make sure he did not instantly rise up again.

"My friend - he's in there - I need to -"

But the fireman shook his head, "We'll find him, just stay here," he said and ran towards the nearest engine, picking up an axe and diving back into the brink.

Jack stared up and around. Flying over his head was a massive crane extending over the road and towards the gigantic fire. Paramedics darted around him like infuriated wasps. Blood was smeared over their hands and uniforms. Their sleeves were blackened with soot. Their eyes were tormented by the horror but their faces were plastered with robotic professionalism. It was unnervingly heroic.

A green-clad woman dropped down beside him, "Are you alright? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. But my friend - I'm looking for my friend."

The paramedic gave him her hand and hoisted him to his feet, "Go over there," she pointed towards a circle of paramedics by a fleet of ambulances. "But please, if you can't find your friend go home and wait for news."

She left as quickly as she had arrived. Jack turned to say thank you but saw only her outline disappearing into the black smoke.

"Jack!" Eliza's voice screamed above all the chaos.

Eliza's frame, governed by her heels, was running along the road after him, her hair flailing frantically behind her and her short black dress riding up her thighs. As she drew closer, he saw fresh tears streaming down her cheeks. Had she heard from Alex?

"I couldn't wait, I couldn't," she sobbed, "Not alone. Not there."

"Come here," he took her hand and marched up to the paramedics.

"We need to get these people out of here," one of them shouted to another, pointing at the dense crowd that had gathered behind them.

"We can't do fuck all until the police get here - I'm not wasting my time on fucking crowd control!" the other threw his arms in the air and stormed off to a patient who was shivering in a foil blanket on the back step of the closest ambulance.

Jack approached the remaining paramedic, whose bearded face was contorted with frustration.

"Move back! Move back!" the man shouted at them both and beckoned them to merge with the rest of the crowd. "If you're not hurt or injured, you can't be here!"

"I'm looking for someone - Alex - Alex Reader!" Jack shouted as pair of latex gloves steered him towards the crowd.

Eliza was fighting against her pair, "My brother's in there! Please! Let us help! I need to know he's okay - please, please don't do this to us!" she squirmed uncontrollably.

The bearded paramedic, already en route back to the warzone, stopped in his tracks and turned back and looked sharply at Eliza.

“Aye, and my daughter’s in there too. And someone else’s son, someone else’s brother or wife. Get back behind the line. We’ve got too many injured to have to deal with anymore!”

His words cut into Jack’s gut but was dwarfed by the sudden and almighty explosion that happened next. In an instant the chaos had turned into the beating heart of hell. The tide of fear changed and suddenly it was no longer the fiery rubble of a recent explosion, but a descending death of fragmented stone and masonry. In disbelief the crowd, the paramedics, the firefighters and Jack and Eliza watched in desolate and communal horror as the pinnacle of the gothic Scott Monument; blacked by age and wrought in flame; was blown clean off the top and tumbled with terrible gravitas towards the burning ground beneath. Dust and debris rained down and the world seemed to suddenly just... stop.