



Worth It

Vale la pena

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Phillip descends from the 23:34 train from Edinburgh to London Euston carrying the black wooden box he had been guarding for the past three weeks. He stops for a while on the platform, allowing the rest of the passengers to leave. Only a couple of drunk tourists waiting for a train long gone and a Virgin Trains employee checking her watch, counting the minutes for her shift to be over, remain on the cold platform. Had any of them paid attention to Phillip, they would have noticed a nervous man carrying a suspicious box, yet so conspicuous that the ordinary pedestrian would have dismissed it as harmless. However, his companions are too drunk or too self-absorbed to notice him. The artificial light of the station also helps to disguise the otherwise suspicious qualities of this character. He looks around again, making sure no one spotted him, and moves towards the way out. As he leaves, a new horde of passengers begins to fill the platform while a dull voice from the Tannoy repeats, “See it. Say it. Sorted.”

Outside the station, the chill of the autumn night makes Phillip shiver from head to toes. He regrets his lack of gloves and scarf; his sudden departure didn’t allow for a more thorough preparation for the weather, or anything else. In fact, besides the box, Phillip only carries a black faux leather messenger bag with some basic toiletries, two old books, a SIM card, a few loose pills, an old flask half-filled with whisky, two fake passports, and a single rusty key. He keeps his cigarettes at hand, two packs in the pocket of his coat, a harmonica in B flat, and a Zippo in his

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trousers, next to his flip phone. In his wallet, he carries about three thousand pounds, but no cards and no other IDs. He has some change in his pocket.

As instructed, he is careful not to place the box on the floor. Instead, he presses it against a wall with his body so that he can free his hands to adjust the collar of his coat and to light a cigarette. He doesn't enjoy smoking without his hands; the smoke always gets in his eyes, and he once burned a lock of hair swung by an unfortunate draft directly into the ember; the nasty smell stuck to his nose the rest of the day. Tonight, however, he doesn't have a choice, so he pulls his hair behind his ears, drags the cigarette, holds the butt tight between his lips, and grabs the box with two hands.

Despite the hour, the streets are quite busy. Phillip considers taking a longer route, through the alleys and narrow streets, to avoid people, but being in London, he doesn't want to risk being mugged. For a second there, he regrets his choice of Euston over King's Cross, but the picture of the legions of Harry Potter fans, lurking in the station at all times, taking pictures on the stupid Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ with their red and yellow Griffinshit scarves or whatever the name is, reassures him of his decision. Still, the box is way too notorious to feel comfortable in the open. For most of the journey since he got the box three weeks ago, he had kept it covered with a huge black, heavy-duty bin bag; however, at some point in the past two days, he managed to tear it with the sharp edges and ended up throwing it away that same morning somewhere along the Royal Mile. At least he is sure nobody would be able to read the ancient inscriptions engraved in the box. Still, the less contact with others, the better.

Phillip presses on, as it is getting later than arranged. Tavistock seems too busy, so he turns right. As he reaches Gordon Square, he feels a little dizzy, and his arms are numb and shaky because of the weight. He is forced to stop for a couple of minutes to regain his breath, with a cigarette, of course, and to rest his arms. In a careless move, he almost places the box on the floor, but a little vibration from the inside and a brief flicker of the streetlights remind him of the warnings against it. A few crows resting on the park trees fly away in panic. He reaches for the harmonica, but realizes it's not necessary, not this time. "Idiot," he reproaches himself as a chill races down his spine. He goes for the same method to free his hands as before, this time pressing



the box with his body against the bars of the park's surrounding fencing. He remains like that for a few minutes, with his arms hanging by the sides for the blood to reach the farthest corners of his numb fingers. Feeling a bit rested, he then takes a sip from his flask, lights another cigarette, grabs the box with renewed strength and conviction, and moves on.

As he approaches the Museum from Russell Square, he stops to study the area for a few minutes. Once convinced that it is safe, he then presses the box against the wall to reach for his flip phone. He inserts the SIM card he stole the day before, turns the phone on, and enters a number he memorized two months before while in Singapore. The voice of a woman answers right away,

“Murgatroyd?”

“Yes,” he replies. He detests his stupid codename.

“What took you so long? Never mind, I'll meet you at the entrance in two minutes.” She hangs up before he could say anything else, so he turns the phone off, removes the SIM, and throws the first one on a bin and the latter down a drain. Then he moves to the entrance previously arranged. The woman opens the door as he arrives; she looks around, making sure the street is deserted, and allows Phillip inside a narrow hallway, apparently used for suppliers to access the facilities without interfering with the regular visitors.

He examines the premises, looking for cameras, an ambush, or any other sign of danger. Noticing his concern, the woman reassures him, “surveillance has been taken care of, don't worry.” She is a small woman, in her mid-thirties, looking similarly pale and tired as Phillip, but not as beaten and worn out. “Is that it?” she asks with a look in her face that struggled between showing fascination and hiding dread.

“Yes,” he replies in his monosyllabic style.

“And you brought it like that, so that everybody could see it?” Again, she tries to disguise her fear with anger. “Any tail?”

“None that I can tell off. I've been careful,” he answers, hiding his own uncertainty after the episode in Costa Rica where he exposed himself like a novice and ended up killing two agents;



that time in self-defence, for a change. She sighs. Phillip can't decipher if it was relief, regret, or something else. Then she asks, nervous, almost pleading despite her role in the transaction,

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes,” he replies again with utter certitude.

“You know the consequences, don't you? You know what *they* will do with it, what *they* will ... !”

“Yes,” he answers for the fourth time.

“Well, I wish I were as confident as you are. Give it then, go on, I'll keep it in a safe place in the basement. I'm working there cataloguing some Visigoth artifacts, so I'll be able to keep an eye on it until the next solstice. There it will remain undetected even if someone finds it.”

“Don't place it on the floor,” he warns her as he hands the box.

“Yes, I know. ‘Ten inches at least.’ Wow, it's heavier than it looks. Who would've thought that such a wee...” she drowns the words down her throat. Phillip just frowned. “Anyway, your reward is here, take it” she says, pointing with her mouth to the right pocket of her trousers, authorizing him to introduce his hand to retrieve his “payment,” as hers are busy holding the box.

He carefully reached for his prize, something for which he had risked his life and destroyed his career, brought his sanity to the limits, and, in all likelihood, condemned life on Earth as we know it. From the pocket, he pulls two pieces of common ruled paper, clumsily torn from a spiral notebook and finally folded in four. With trembling hands, he unfolds the papers and skims the content. The handwriting, done with a cheap ballpoint, is neither careful nor clean. There are scratched words and phrases, a few stains here and there, but the message is clear and simple. Phillip, contented with what he holds in his hands, smiles as tears form in the corner of his eyes. He folds the sheets again in the same form as he received them and places them in his bag.

“Follow the steps to the letter. *They* added a note on places where you can get what you need for it. Perhaps much more expensive, but you'll get the results you desire,” she adds, noticing his satisfaction.



“Yes,” he replies, still smiling. “Oh, I almost forgot!” He looks in his bag and produces the rusty key, and from his coat, the harmonica. “Just in case,” he says, waving the instrument before placing both items in the woman’s pocket.

“OK, off you go,” she hurries him, “I can’t hold security much longer. Good luck!”

“You too,” he replies as both depart in opposite directions in the hallway.

Phillip helps himself out. Outside, he takes a sip from his flask and lights another cigarette; this one he will enjoy to the last drag with hands now free. Finally relieved, walking through the streets of London, neither the chilly air nor the weeks of sleep deprivation, hunger, stress, perils, and bloodshed, which rendered him sick and weak, mattered anymore. He can just think about the days to come, no matter how few, no matter the outcome, if *they* succeed, if he has doomed humanity to fall into darkness; what matters now is to bring her back to his side. Horror and pain are a small price to pay even for the briefest moment together; “she is worth it,” he thinks.



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