

THE FIRST MEMORY

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**DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY
OF NICHOLAS COURTNEY**

MY NAME IS ALISTAIR GORDON LETHBRIDGE-STEWART. I AM AN OLD MAN NOW; OLD and full of memories. Most of my memories come easily to me. I imagine this is the result of habitually keeping track of many important details. However, I feel some memories only come to me when I dream. Most of my dreams are actually quite pleasant. This one dream contains a memory that haunts me. It haunts me when the nights turn cold as the year trudges toward its end. And as the end of this year approaches I sleep and remember this dream again.

In my dream I remember a time long ago. I am eight years old. I am visiting Grandpops' home. I have awoken early in the morning. There is something special about this day, so special I must join the morning at once. I leap from the bed and wrap myself in my robe and slippers. I glance out of the window at my bedside. The glass is grey. I hurry to the sill and touch the glass. It is cold. I look outwards and down below to the courtyard. All is dark. Lightning flashes bright and tinges my vision white and blue. Thunder growls deep and heavy.

My eyes clear a little and see the world beyond. White covers everything. There is snow everywhere. More falls from the sky; the iron clouds above rush and rage. The storm from last night still survives. Just as the last of the lightning burst fades I see a small shadow slip between the trees. I want to peer closer but a soft voice from behind grabs my attention. I turn to see. I see a young, smooth face with long, dark hair and dark

blue eyes. It is Pops. He stands in the open doorway, dressed in his favourite holly-green and scarlet red morning jacket and black silk trousers. Pops smiles to me and speaks.

'Merry Christmas, Alistair. Your grandpapa is waiting for you.'

I push from the window and trot out of the room. I turn back to see Pops still standing in the doorway. I call to him.

'Won't you come, too, Pops?'

'This is your time, my son. But go, I'm sure you have a nice present below. I won't spoil the moment.'

What Pops means escape me, but the thought of a present crowds my thoughts. I race forward, eager to anticipate tearing open the gift. Through the halls and down the stairs I go. I pass through wide corridors of dark, panelled wood. Thrust from the walls are dusty, mounted heads of foxes, deer, elephants and rhinoceroses upon the wall, the trophies of Grandpops' conquest of the animal kingdom. The conquered eyes stare unblinking upon me. The fear of their final moments freezes them forever. The eyes are pleading, begging for movement. I dull my eyes to their pleading and think of the presents expecting me below.

I catch sight of the great staircase at a cross-juncture. It is one of many stepping stacks in the mansion. I bundle down the levels. My hand slides down the smooth banister to my side. At the last step I make a small leap and drop to the marble floor. I look back up the staircase for Pops to hurry and catch me but I no longer see him. I want him near but I feel compelled to hurry onwards. My eyes fall to the floor and study the alternate squares of black and white all around me. I feel like a game piece upon a massive chessboard, like the one Pops and Nannan used in India before our return to England, before Nannan...The air cools and whispers around me. The past dissolves in the air and dust.

I smell the air; it is prickled with coal dust, and aniseed. The scents of Grandpops. I follow the traces, past the vaulted arches of wood and marble, through the alabaster corridors, towards the open door ahead of me. Thick blackness fills its inner space. I run up against the darkness but halt at its warm, musty

edge. I stand framed in the threshold, uncertain where to step. A voice speaks deep inside the black. It is low and old. It is my Grandpops.

'You, boy, are quite on time.'

I hear his voice but I see no one in the gloom.

'Where are you?' I ask.

'Before the fireplace. The wretched storm cut down our new electric lights. Good thing I always prepare for emergencies.'

A rough, swift sound scrapes. A small, orange-yellow light flares, like the sun plucked from the sky. It flickers at the end of a match balanced between Grandpops' fingers. The light carves out the deep wrinkles in his sun-dried face. Trailing, white whiskers sprout from his cheeks, lips and chin. The white wires flow from his head. They are long and sharp. The light dances freely in the glass circle trapped over his blue eye and the medals pinned to his chest.

Grandpops turns and places the match light against the top of a candle on the fireplace mantle, and then another, and another. The captured sunlight fills the room. The light flickers and wavers. As the darkness retreats I see revealed the shadow-swathed portraits of bearded men in many cuts of uniform. The pictured men look like Grandpops, all whiskers and medals. The eyes of ancient men are watching, as if expecting to see how I move. These are the soldiers, the men Grandpops loves, the men he teaches me to admire. The eyes are dark; the eyes are light, the brightest light. No, the brightest light is not the eyes but the round, the round ball, the round ball of glass, the round ball of glass cradled within the golden stand resting upon the mantelpiece. Grandpops sees my attention shift to the ball. He lifts the glass round from the cup.

'This is very pretty, isn't it, my boy?'

'Yes, Grandpops. I like how the glass shines.'

'It's more than just glass, Alistair. This is an important heirloom.'

'What's an heirloom?'

'An heirloom is a special object passed down in a family from one generation to the next. I received this from my father. I intend you should receive it from me.'

'What about my Pops? Won't he have it first?'

Grandpops' smiles shrinks. He turns back to the mantel and replaces the glass ball in the golden cup. He keeps his eyes on the soldiers. Then Grandpops clears his throat and walks over to his smooth-sanded, oak cabinet. He turns a small key in one of the cabinet doors and pulls the wood panel open. Inside the cabinet upon one of the shelves is a long, thick, rectangular box wrapped in light brown paper. Tied around the box is a thin, black rope. It must be my Christmas present. Grandpops removes the box from the cabinet and shuts the door. He crosses the carpet to stand before me. The carpet is light green with darker spots, like the empty, hilled landscape of a massive field – no, a battlefield. The battlefield muffles Grandpops' footsteps. They sound like explosions far off in the distance. I kneel close to the battlefield and bury my head near the dark spots, behind the shadowed hills. I brush my fingers through the light, overgrown grass and pull the growth close around me. I must hide from the coming explosions, from the approaching monsters.

I see the tips of Grandpops' leather boots peering through the jungle. I sit up and stare at him. The stiff white wires thread and sprout sharply from his face and frame his expectant smile.

'My gift to you, Alistair. But you must promise me a gift in return.'

'What gift, Grandpops?'

'To receive my present you must tell me what you want to be when you grow up. Do you understand?'

The white wires tighten close around Grandpops' lips. They hide any smile. His voice is not smiling and I feel small.

'Yes, sir.'

'Perfect. Merry Christmas, boy.'

The exchange begins. He hands me the box. I loosen the rope and pull the brown paper apart. I expose a white, lidded box. I lift the lid and discover the gift within: toy soldiers, all arraigned in a neat double-row. Grandpops speaks once more. I look up and see a portrait face behind him. They stare at me with the same wires, the same glass, the same eyes.

Now then...What do you want to be when you grow up?’

I have no idea what to answer. I only am eight years old. I have never thought of my future. But I need an answer. An answer based on eight years’ experience. I look back to the box. Lightning flashes through the room. I see the soldiers lined in double-rows. I take one in my hand and study its painted face. He looks like me. I look back to Grandpops and speak.

‘Sir, I want to be...to be...’

I hold up the soldier to him. Grandpops nods.

‘An excellent choice, my boy. Where is your father?’

‘Upstairs, I think.’ I mumble the answer as I study my toys.

‘A capital choice. I shall let you get to know your new friends.’

Grandpops walks across the room and shuts the thick, oak door behind him. Alone, I hear no sounds but the beating of my heart. I begin setting up the soldiers upon the carpet. They must get to know their new battlefield. Something scrapes near me, behind me. I twist around and notice a large, window with large, green curtains hanging at its side. The something scrapes once more. It is a tree branch pulled by the raging winds beyond the house. I rise from the carpet and stand before the window. I see the snow slice white in the air, like a furious blizzard of bullets fired from icy cannons and firearms. The storm is its own battlefield. The glass is thick, like an invisible door. I hear nothing of the battle outside. I press my ear against the lowest pane and strain to hear the onslaught outside. A bright blue flash fills the room, so close it floods my eyes. A splintering noise cracks the air. The glass shatters and I fall backwards onto the ground. A thunderous roar drowns my senses. The hair of my head crackles and stretches. My eyes roam loosely

around the room. The lights of the candles sputter and extinguish in puffs of weak smoke. But there is still a light in the room, clear and white. It comes from the mantelpiece. The glass ball is shining with light; the light penetrates my eyes...

Moments slow and halt. I hear nothing, see nothing, feel nothing. Slowly, my eyes clear and I see the dark nest hanging over me. I see the nest of the dark hair and the two blue eggs cradled below. I see the dark hair, the two blue eyes, and oval of white. I blink once and I understand: there is a face above me, a child's face, a girl's face. Her small, mouth is moving, speaking, but I hear nothing. I shake my head to show this and the girl lowers her mouth to my ear. At last I hear her voice.

'Are you alive?'

The girl's question is so odd I sit up. I regret my speed immediately and clutch my head and ears. I feel nauseous. The girl extends her arms and clasps her hands over mine. Her skin is soft and cold. The cold relaxes me and the distress in my body dissipates. I exhale and stare at my visitor. She is young, perhaps my age. She is small and thin and raven black hair frames her pale, oval-shaped face. She looks very much like an elf. Shining under her thick, black eyebrows are two large, deep-blue eyes. The girl wears a full-length white dress with long, wide sleeves. She asks me if I am alive again. This time I answer.

'Yes. Who are you?'

'I'm not supposed to say. But I think I can ask your name.'

'I'm Alistair. What happened to me?'

'Some sort of explosion. Maybe in space and time. Look!'

The girl points to the window. I turn to see but there is a gaping hole chewed out of the wall. This surprises me. What shocks me are the sharpened fragments of splintered glass and charred wood and particulate plaster floating in the air. They spin and turn like weightless ballerinas. The girl steps forward and stands beneath one airborne glass shard. She stares at the floating object. Firelight reflects from the glass dances in her eyes.

'What's happened? Time is wounded here. Grandfather won't be happy at all.'

Nor am I. I look down and see my toy soldiers. Their noble metal forms are melted and warped, their battlefield charred. I feel the loss of brief and unfulfilled friendship.

'It must have been the lightning. There's a storm outside. My schoolmasters have said we're finding new effects of electricity all the time.'

'Of course, the storm! Grandfather said there was an anomaly in the vortex.'

'A what? Where?'

'The vortex. It's where we travel in our ship.'

'A ship? You mean you travel on the ocean? Is your grandfather a sailor?'

No, he's...well, he's my grandfather. And he said there was some kind of problem steering the ship. 'A temporal anomaly,' he said. He traced down the problem to somewhere near here. Where is this place?'

'This is my Grandpops's home. He's a soldier.'

'Oh. My grandfather doesn't like soldiers.' She looks into my eyes. 'But I know he likes you.'

The girl looks around the room and gestures wide.

'But what's the name of this pla-'

The girl holds still. She stares past me towards the fireplace. Her mouth curves a small smile.

'Of course, that's it!' she whispers.

'What's it?' I ask.

'The sphere,' she replies. She says nothing more and hurries over the fireplace. She stands before the sooty recess and reaches upwards towards the mantle, towards the glass ball, but she is too little to grasp it. She slaps her arms to her sides and scowls.

'Surely I'll grow sooner than later! Oh, wait, I know...'

She touches her fingertips to her temples. Her eyes squint closed. I think she is about to have a tantrum and I rush forward to the mantelpiece. I know I am tall for my age and I reach to take the ball. My fingers reach upwards; strain to touch the glass, the glass is just out of touch... the ball shudders, wobbles and falls from its golden perch. I flip my hand into a cup and catch the falling object. The girl opens her eyes and smiles.

'Perfect! My aim is getting much better.'

'Your aim? I'm the one who caught the ball.'

'Only with your hand. Now we need to take this back to Grandfather. Come with me.'

'Where are we going?'

'Back to my ship.'

'But we're nowhere near a port!'

'What's a port?' She sighs and scrunches her brow. 'This place is very strange. It's much different from the Capitol.'

'You must be from London,' I mumble. 'But I can't leave. Grandpops will be angry.'

'Then just hand me the ball. I can take it back just as easily.'

'But this is my family heirloom. Why should you take it?'

'Because if I don't there'll be another lightning strike, and next time it'll eat more than just your window.'

'Oh.'

'Good. I knew you'd make the right decision. But I have to hurry back to Grandpops now. Why don't you carry the ball and follow me? But we have to be very careful as we go. Those bits of glass may look frozen, but they're still very sharp.'

The girl turns and navigates the glass cloud towards the gash in the wall. She hoists up the sides of her skirt and climbs through the breach. Outside, I see her white dress and black hair framed below the lonely

iron-grey sky. She reaches back and beckons me to come. Fragments of her face and dress reflect along the glass fragments. I think of the soldiers melted on Grandpops' carpet. I know they protect young girls, no matter the danger. I want to be a soldier. I am a soldier. I tuck the glass ball into my robe pocket and follow.

She waits for me as I traverse the fragmented cloud of glass. After a few moments I climb through the wall gap. As I exit my home, I expect to see the outside courtyard buried under a blanket of driven snow. Instead I marvel at the transformed world around me. The white snow is an ocean, a vast sea of blue-white ice waves curving and dipping far into the distance. The waves rise high into the air, far above our little heads. The girl turns about to absorb the sight. She covers her mouth with her fingers and exhales horrified wonder.

'Oh, this is horrid! The anomaly has altered everything. Water, weather, energy, everything!'

'Please, what's going on?'

'There's no time now to explain. We must return to my grandfather. Our lives depend on it!'

'Then show me where to go!'

She nods and looks about. Fear rounds her eyes and mouth. Although she looks barely my age, for the first time she acts like a child. Then she chooses her way. The fear in her face fades, just a little.

'This way.'

The girl rushes forwards. She sways as she moves as if she is dancing a confused waltz. We wend our way through the rippled valleys of ice, two wanderers gliding across a surface of a frozen desert. A small part of my mind wonders why our feet never slip on the ice and why, if there is so much frozen all around, I feel no chill, no coldness. A sharp breeze prickles my skin. I glance around at the trees to see the bluster's direction but the plants are encased in solid, white-blue crystal shells. My eyes turn to search the sky I stop and gape in wonder. Swirling trails of every colour and hue I ever imagined, and most I never could, trace the space above our heads. The ribbons of colour in the air pulse and twist with fierce light. The pulses burst and sizzle and shower electric sparks. The girl throws back her head to watch the display. Her hands clench into small fists.

'Oh, no! The vortex is bleeding! Hurry! There's another discharge building. Only Grandfather can stop this. He must look into the ball.'

I reach into my pocket and pull out the ball. I stare at the object. The glass is dark, too dark to see any reflection. I squint my eyes in frustration. I halt and stamp my foot. The girl stops and spins around.

'Wait just a moment! I don't understand it! This is just glass! How can you think of it any differently?'

'Because it's the reason I'm here. Grandfather sensed it during our travels. He says it's something that shouldn't exist here. It's like a grain of sand in an eye – it must be removed. Somehow it must be causing all this terror. If we get the ball away from here, then everything should be all right.'

'Then why didn't he come and get it?'

The girl's face drains pale. She answers with barely a whisper.

'Someone is following us, someone dark. The person, he damaged our ship. When we arrived we had little time to escape so Grandfather told me to hide while he made repairs. I did, but I thought I could help him if I could find the glass for him. Now I have. Maybe he's solved our other problem already. But please, no more questions. Just help me make it right.'

I remember being a soldier. I remember what soldiers do. I half-smile and stride forward, the glass in my hand. I stop. Sharp, twisted vines trapped in dark ice loom before me. We are at the entrance to Grandpops' rose garden. I have only seen the garden during the daytime. In the iced darkness the bushes are towers of thorns and razor-edged leaves. The roses are vicious spiny blooms bursting from their vines, open-mouths filled with circular rows of jagged teeth ready to snap shut and shred the soft flesh of the earth. Or mine.

My teeth begin to chatter. It is suddenly very cold. My eyes are wide. My breath races. My heart pounds. My skin chills. I am a child, small and simple and scared. I feel a cool fingers brush against my face. The girl whispers to me.

'Don't be afraid. You can turn back if you want. I can go on alone from here.'

Do I want to turn back? How will I remember this moment if I do? Will I remember Grandpops and his medals looking upon me with pride? Will I remember the wire-haired men in the portraits watching me with approval? Will I someday wear the same uniform and medals as they do? Will I be fearless like them? I darken my eyes. I think of my uniform. I slow my breath. I picture my command stick. I calm my heart. My eyes open. I am fearless. I hold the glass ball forward in one hand. I extend the other hand towards the girl. She folds her fingers around mine.

'I'm not afraid. And I won't leave you alone. Forward,' I declare.

We step into the darkness. Here I feel cold. Shadows saturate the air. I cannot see the frozen leaves as they brush against my robe as we pass through the hedge rows. I am not afraid. I have played much in this garden during my holidays at Grandpops' home; and I know the way through its maze. Nevertheless, I have no idea where I need to go in this journey. I whisper to my new friend.

'Why did we come this way?'

'This is where our ship landed. It's at the centre of this growth.'

'Grandpops will be furious if any of his roses are trampled.'

The girl chuckles.

'He won't even know we were ever here -'

Far above, thunder rolls rumbling through the air. The girl groans.

'It's almost too late! Another lightning strike and it's finished!'

'How can I help you?'

'The glass - wait! I hear him. I hear Grandfather!'

I hear a voice, too. It is strong and grown-up. But why is it speaking? Does her grandfather hear us, see us? The voice is just beyond the hedge row bordering the garden centre. A few feet from us there is an arched entryway carved into the planted hedge. A man's shadow spills through the archway and runs along

the iced ground. The girl smiles to see it. She takes my hand and turns to lead us into the garden's heart. Just before she reaches the arch I see a second shadow slither along the ground. I pull back and grab my escaping companion. I raise my finger to my lips to silence her questions. I point to the second shadow. The girl stiffens in terror.

'He found us,' she whispers. We hear her Grandpops' voice.

'You, sir, are relentless.'

Another voice vibrates behind the icy petals.

'And you are determined, particularly in pursuing your own destruction.'

'Not destruction. My freedom. All I desire is the liberty to chart my own course in the cosmos.'

'My dear, old friend, how boring are your declarations of ideals. Now are you coming back home quietly, or shall I be forced to report your tragic death?'

'I have no wish for violence.'

'I may have.'

'Then I may defend myself.'

'I should hope so.'

Thunder roars directly above us. The girl pulls close and whispers in my ear.

'The lightning is about to strike. I need to help Grandfather. Give me the ball.'

'No! You're so little. It's may be dangerous.'

'Alistair, trust me. I'm older than I look. And I'm not afraid of danger. Please.'

I look into my friend's eyes and I see no fear, and so I fear nothing for her. I hand her the glass. Lightning bolts the sky. Its energy reflects in the ball, flashes white. I see my friend's reflection through the glass. She sees mine. Her eyes widen and she smiles to me.

'You will be a legend, Alistair.'

Then she spins about and rushes forward through the arch into the garden heart. I follow after. I stand in the archway. I see...

Lightning arrows the earth. The ground bursts. The ice shatters. The wind tears. The thunder booms. The glass shines. The light is the sun. The light explodes. My sight closes...

I blink and shake my head. I find myself face down on Grandpops' carpet. My toy soldiers are each perfectly formed and shining in the candlelight upon the mantelpiece. They stand ready for battle. Someone is shaking my shoulder. It is a gentle hand. I push up from the ground and look up. Pops is kneeling over me. He speaks.

'Alistair, are you all right? You were lying on the carpet. It took me several moments to wake you. Did something happen?'

I look at him for several moments. I have no idea what just happened to me. My memories are a jumble. Then I remember the light. I start and turn to the window. The glass and wood are intact and in their place. The wall is firm and complete. I turn back to my father and say the only answer I can give.

'No, Pops. I must have got too sleepy, but I'm all right now.'

Pops smiles and tussles my hair. Then his eyes shift above me.

'My word, someone's moved the ball.'

He stands and walks to the mantelpiece. I stand and watch. The glass ball, Grandpops' heirloom, has slipped from its golden cup and rolled to the corner of the wooden perch. Pops reaches out and touches the ball. He holds it before his face and studies its glass. He must be making sure there are no cracks. Suddenly, there is a brief flash of lightning. It reflects through the glass into Pops' eyes. He blinks, then blinks again. He steps back as if dazed by a small blow. Then he sighs and replaces the ball upon the cup. He turns back to me.

'Best to keep precious things safe, my son. Who knows when we might lose them?'

'I know you'll take care of the glass, when Grandpops passes it to you.'

Pops smiles but his eyes are sad.

'Perhaps. Now, run along and get dressed. It's almost time for Christmas breakfast.'

I smile and dash from the room and race up the stairs. The lights are falling. The house is fading. The details are blurring. I think the dream is ending. But every time before it ends I remember returning to my bedroom and looking out the window and seeing the white-washed courtyard below. And as the image fades to black I see my friend standing in the snow, all dressed in white. She smiles to me and waves. Quickly I turn the latch and lift the window. She calls to me.

'Everything is all right. The man is gone. I have to go now, but remember, the glass is your inheritance. I saw you must keep it. Grandfather says you must also keep it safe. Remember it one day when we meet again.'

I call out to my friend. I ask her name. She opens her mouth to answer but just smiles and runs away. I watch her run into an archway in the snow. There is a man standing in the archway. I cannot see his face but his hair is like ice. His arms reach out to meet her. They embrace and the snow closes upon them and collapses. All is white and dark and silence. Soon even that fades and I forget. Then I wake up.

THE HISTORY OF THE DOCTOR

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