**The Empty Name**

**Part 1: The Weight of Parchment**

Salt Lake City breathed history, exhaled reverence. For Sister Eliza Vance, fresh off her mission in the damp, grey heart of England and now immersed in a prestigious fellowship at the Church History Library, it felt like coming home to the source. The air here, crisp and dry under the looming Wasatch Front, tasted of potential, of connection. Surrounded by the tangible echoes of the past – pioneers’ journals brittle with age, photographs capturing resolute faces squinting into unforgiving suns, the faint scent of aging paper and binding glue – Eliza felt a profound sense of purpose. Her work wasn't just archival; it was resurrection, linking hands across the veil, weaving the tapestry of generations spoken of so often in Sunday School.

She moved through the climate-controlled stacks and quiet reading rooms with a competence that belied her twenty-four years. Her fingers, accustomed to tracing lineage charts and deciphering faded cursive, handled the artifacts with gentle reverence. She saw the library not merely as a repository of facts, but as a waiting room for souls, stories yearning to be rediscovered, names waiting to be spoken aloud in the hallowed halls of the nearby temple. Her own patriarchal blessing had spoken of a gift for “uniting families,” and she felt the truth of it resonate with every file retrieved, every microfilm reel spooled.

Her fellowship focused on digitizing and cross-referencing early pioneer diaries from the Sanpete County settlements, a task she found deeply fulfilling. But in the quiet hours, after the official work was done, her attention invariably drifted towards her own lineage. The Vances and the Kimbles were well-documented, pillars of their respective stakes, their lines traced back through Provo and Nauvoo with satisfying clarity. Temple work completed, sealed and secured. It was the other branch, the one whispered about in hushed tones during family reunions, if mentioned at all, that snagged her curiosity like a burr on wool trousers: the Blackwood line.

Her great-great-grandmother, Inger, had been a Blackwood before marrying into the more prominent Vance family. The Blackwoods had arrived later, settling not in the established communities but carving out a harsh existence in a remote, high-desert valley further west, near the Sevier River's unpredictable meanders – a place ominously referred to in fragments of family lore as “Shadow Creek Hollow.” They were converts from Scandinavia, passing through England, arriving sometime in the late 1860s or early 1870s. Beyond that, the record grew thin, patchy. Inger rarely spoke of her childhood or her parents, and the official family group sheets listed her father, Jedediah Blackwood, with frustratingly little detail: born circa 1830, Norway; died circa 1885, Utah Territory. No specific dates, no locations, no spouse listed for him, though he clearly had children. Crucially, his name lacked the customary temple ordinance dates beside it. An empty space. A missing link.

This emptiness bothered Eliza. It felt like a tear in the sacred fabric she was so dedicated to mending. Driven by a familiar spiritual prompting, that gentle nudge she’d learned to trust on her mission, she began dedicating her evenings to Jedediah Blackwood.

Initial searches in the main databases yielded little beyond census fragments listing Jedediah as a farmer in that sparsely populated western county, his birthplace simply “Norway.” There were mentions of two sons, Lars and Magnus, who seemed to vanish from records after their teens, and Inger, who left Shadow Creek Hollow around age sixteen to work in a larger town before meeting Eliza’s great-great-grandfather. No wife was ever named.

Eliza requested access to more obscure county records, territorial archives, anything pertaining to that specific region during the relevant decades. This was where her fellowship access proved invaluable, opening doors usually reserved for seasoned historians. Brother Abernathy, a senior archivist with eyes that seemed to hold the accumulated dust of centuries and a kindness that softened his scholarly reserve, facilitated her requests.

“The Blackwood line, you say?” he mused one afternoon, peering over his spectacles as Eliza filled out a request form for Box 73-B, containing miscellaneous correspondences from the Sevier district, 1870-1890. “Don’t recall much mention. Settled late, kept to themselves out west. Rough country back then. Rougher than most.” He tapped the form. “Shadow Creek Hollow… aptly named, perhaps. Always felt there was a certain weight to the histories coming out of those marginal settlements. Places where faith had to fight harder against the desolation.”

The contents of Box 73-B were a historian’s treasure trove and a genealogist’s frustration: faded letters discussing water rights, disputes over stray cattle, pleas for supplies, reports from traveling bishops. Amidst the mundane, Eliza found the first tremor of unease. It was a letter from a Bishop Heber Olsen, dated 1879, reporting on his visit to the scattered families near the Sevier River.

“…The settlements progress, though hardship tests the Saints’ fortitude. Brother Davison’s family thrives, Sister Emmett delivered a healthy son. Yet, I confess disquiet regarding the Blackwood homestead in Shadow Creek Hollow. Brother Jedediah Blackwood remains apart, seldom attending meetings, though his daughter Inger is faithful when permitted. The sons, Lars and Magnus, are… watchful. There is an air about the place, Brother Brigham, not entirely of the Spirit. Their farming methods are peculiar, relying on older ways Brother Blackwood seems unwilling to relinquish. Neighbors speak of strange markings on his fence posts and odd noises from the hollow at night, especially during the dark of the moon. Sister Rasmussen swears she saw him performing some ritual over his fields, speaking in his native tongue, not in prayer. I attempted counsel, but he is a stone wall, quoting scripture defensively while his eyes hold a different knowledge. I fear some darkness lingers from his past, unconsecrated by the waters of baptism…”

Older ways? Strange markings? Rituals? The words sent a chill down Eliza’s spine despite the library’s warmth. This wasn't the profile of a typical struggling pioneer Saint. This hinted at syncretism, a blending of the restored gospel with something else, something older and potentially forbidden.

Brother Abernathy found her staring at the letter, her face pale. “Find something interesting, Sister Vance?”

Eliza hesitated, then showed him the passage. He read it slowly, his brow furrowed. “Yes,” he said quietly, handing it back. “I’ve encountered similar sentiments about settlers in exceptionally isolated areas. Faith under pressure can take… unusual forms. Some clung fiercely to the prescribed path, others… seemed to grasp for purchase on whatever spiritual handhold they could find, even if it reached from shadows.” He paused, adjusting his glasses. “Be thorough, Eliza, but be careful. History has sharp edges. Some doors are best left unopened.”

His warning, meant kindly, only solidified Eliza’s resolve. If Jedediah had strayed, if darkness clung to his name, wasn’t it even more imperative to bring him into the light through temple ordinances? To cleanse the lineage, offer him the peace he seemingly couldn’t find in life? The empty space beside his name felt heavier now, charged with implication.

Over the next few weeks, Eliza became consumed by Jedediah Blackwood. She cross-referenced Bishop Olsen’s letter with other contemporary accounts. She found another mention in the diary of a circuit-riding judge, describing the Blackwood sons as “possessing a feral quality” and Jedediah himself as having “eyes that seemed to look through a man rather than at him.” There was an oblique reference to a dispute with local Goshute tribesmen that ended ambiguously, followed by a period where the Blackwoods seemed unusually prosperous while neighboring farms struggled.

The most disturbing find came from a brittle, water-damaged journal kept by a woman named Martha Phelps, whose family had attempted to settle near Shadow Creek Hollow for a short time in the early 1880s before fleeing back east.

“October 12, 1881. The wind howls like a hungry wolf tonight. Can hear noises from the Blackwood place across the ridge. Not animals. A chanting, low and guttural. Husband says it’s just the wind in the rocks, but I know different. It chills the soul.”

“October 30, 1881. Found one of our sheep dead this morning. Not torn by coyotes. Throat cut neat. Placed on that flat rock formation on the edge of Blackwood’s land. The one with the carvings. Husband is furious, wants to confront Jedediah, but I begged him not to. There’s a wrongness there. A deep wrongness.”

“November 5, 1881. Little Samuel is feverish. Cries about ‘the man with no shadow’ watching him from the window. Jedediah was here yesterday, asking to trade for flour. Said nothing, just stared. Samuel has screamed ever since. We leave tomorrow. This place is cursed. Blackwood’s Hollow holds something unholy. He talks to the land, and I fear… I fear it talks back.”

Carvings. Chanting. Blood sacrifice? Eliza felt physically ill. This went far beyond simple eccentricity or lingering folk beliefs. This sounded like active engagement with dark forces. She searched for information on pre-Christian Scandinavian practices, finding unsettling parallels in descriptions of Norse shamanism, Seiðr rituals, and pacts made with land spirits or vættir. Could Jedediah, isolated and potentially struggling, have reverted to, or perhaps never fully abandoned, such practices, twisting them to fit his new life in Zion?

She searched for the symbols Martha Phelps mentioned, finding crude drawings of them in the margins of the journal. They weren’t standard pioneer markings or cattle brands. They were angular, unsettlingly organic, evoking images of roots, antlers, and grasping hands. She felt a jolt of recognition – she’d seen something similar recently, a fleeting shape… where?

That night, sleep offered little respite. She dreamt she was standing in a desolate hollow under a bruised twilight sky. The air was unnaturally still, thick with the smell of turned earth and something metallic. Strange, runic symbols pulsed faintly on the rocks around her. A tall, gaunt figure stood with his back to her, facing a gnarled, ancient-looking tree at the center of the hollow. He was chanting in a language she didn’t understand, the words seeming to draw shadows towards him. He turned, and his eyes were empty sockets, yet they fixed on her with terrifying intensity. He held out a hand, beckoning. Eliza woke up gasping, her heart pounding, the faint scent of damp soil lingering in her nostrils.

The dream spurred her to action. Jedediah wasn’t just a genealogical puzzle; he was a spiritual problem, a potential source of darkness tethered to her family line. The need to perform his temple work became an urgent, almost feverish conviction. It was the only way to break the chain, to offer redemption, to silence the echoes from Shadow Creek Hollow.

Ignoring Brother Abernathy’s cautious glances and the growing shadows under her own eyes, Eliza compiled the necessary information. Jedediah Blackwood, born Norway circa 1830, father of Inger Blackwood Vance. Enough to submit his name. She filled out the temple ordinance request form, her hand trembling slightly as she wrote his name.

Jedediah Blackwood. The empty name. Soon, it would be filled. Soon, he would be claimed for the light.

She submitted the form through her local ward’s family history consultant, setting the process in motion. A date was scheduled for the baptism for the dead ceremony at the Salt Lake Temple in three weeks’ time. Eliza volunteered to act as proxy. It felt right. Necessary. A responsibility she had to fulfill.

As she left the library that evening, the setting sun cast long shadows that seemed to writhe at the edges of her vision. Passing a steamed-up bus window, she saw a shape traced in the condensation – angular, familiar. One of the symbols from Martha Phelps’ journal. Her breath hitched. It was probably just a random doodle. Coincidence.

But as she walked towards her apartment, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something had shifted. That by writing his name, by setting the sacred wheels in motion, she hadn’t just opened a door for Jedediah’s salvation. She had opened a door for him. And she wasn’t entirely sure anymore what lay on the other side. The weight of parchment felt heavier than ever, imbued now with a chilling, watchful presence.

**Part 2: Echoes in the Stacks**

The three weeks leading up to Jedediah Blackwood’s scheduled temple baptism were marked by a peculiar blend of heightened spiritual sensitivity and encroaching dread. Eliza threw herself into her work at the library with renewed fervor, the familiar routines a comforting bulwark against the unease that prickled at the edges of her consciousness. Yet, the ordinary world seemed subtly altered, as if viewed through a slightly distorted lens.

It began subtly. Late one evening, alone in a rarely used section of the archives dedicated to territorial land deeds, Eliza heard a distinct whisper. It wasn’t English, nor any European language she recognized. It was guttural, sibilant, seeming to slither from the gaps between the shelves. She spun around, flashlight beam cutting through the dimness. Nothing. Just rows upon rows of bound volumes, silent and still. She tried to dismiss it as the building settling, her imagination working overtime.

A few days later, while examining a microfilm reel containing parish records from Jedediah’s suspected region of origin in Norway, the machine jammed abruptly. As she fiddled with the mechanism, the projected image on the screen flickered, shifting not to static, but to a fleeting, nightmarish tableau: a dark forest, gnarled trees etched against a moonless sky, and shadowy figures dancing around a bonfire that cast shapes like writhing serpents. It lasted only a second before the bulb blew with a soft pop, plunging the small viewing cubicle into darkness. Her heart hammered against her ribs. Equipment malfunction, she told herself. Eye strain.

But the incidents grew harder to rationalize. She started finding objects slightly moved in her meticulously organized workspace – a pen angled differently, a stack of papers infinitesimally shifted. Once, a heavy, leather-bound plat book slid silently from a shelf right beside her, landing with a heavy thud that made her jump. Brother Abernathy, passing by, simply remarked on the dryness of the air affecting the old bindings. His calm dismissal felt increasingly hollow.

Then came the symbols. The angular, disturbing shapes from Martha Phelps’ journal began appearing with unnerving frequency. Scratched into the frost on her apartment window one morning. Formed by spilled sugar on the counter. Traced in the dust on her car’s dashboard. Each time, a jolt of ice-cold fear shot through her. Was she imagining it? Was stress manifesting in paranoid observation? Or was something actively trying to communicate, to mark its territory?

Her nightmares intensified, evolving from the desolate hollow scene into more invasive horrors. She dreamt of suffocating darkness, of unseen things whispering her name from just beyond her perception. She dreamt of the Salt Lake Temple, its familiar white granite stained black, the golden Angel Moroni atop the spire twisted into a grotesque, beckoning shape. In one particularly vivid nightmare, she stood before the baptismal font, but the water within was black and viscous, like oil, and when she looked at her reflection, Jedediah Blackwood’s face stared back, his empty eyes burning with cold fire. She woke up tangled in her sheets, gasping for air, the phantom smell of decay clinging to her.

Sleep deprivation began to take its toll. She grew pale, jumpy. Her usual bright energy dimmed, replaced by a haunted watchfulness. Colleagues commented on her tired appearance, suggesting she take time off. Even her cheerful roommate, another returned missionary working downtown, expressed concern.

“Liza, you okay?” Sarah asked one evening, finding Eliza staring blankly at a bowl of untouched soup. “You seem… elsewhere. Stressed about the fellowship?”

Eliza forced a smile. “Just tired. Lot of detailed work. And… I’ve been doing a lot of family history research. Found a tricky ancestor.”

“Oh, cool! Anyone famous?”

“No,” Eliza said, the word tasting like ash. “Just… complicated.” She couldn’t bring herself to share the details, the whispers, the symbols, the nightmares. How could she explain her fear that researching her great-great-grandfather felt like inviting a haunting? It sounded irrational, unstable.

She sought refuge in prayer, in scripture study, clinging to the familiar pillars of her faith. She reread her patriarchal blessing, focusing on the promises of protection and guidance. Yet, the comforting words felt distant, muffled by a growing static of fear. Was her faith strong enough to confront whatever darkness Jedediah represented? Or was her attempt to save him inadvertently putting her own soul in jeopardy?

Brother Abernathy watched her with growing concern. One afternoon, he called her into his small, cluttered office, ostensibly to discuss a cataloging query, but his gaze was searching.

“Eliza,” he said gently, after dispensing with the archival matter. “Forgive an old man’s meddling, but you seem burdened. More than the usual pressures of the fellowship. Is everything alright?”

Eliza hesitated. She trusted Brother Abernathy, his quiet wisdom, his deep, lived-in faith. Taking a deep breath, she confessed, not everything, but the core of it – the discovery of Jedediah’s disturbing history, the hints of folk magic and dark practices, her decision to submit his name for temple work, and the strange occurrences that had followed. She omitted the more extreme nightmares and the symbol appearances, fearing he would dismiss her entirely.

He listened patiently, his expression unreadable. When she finished, he was silent for a long moment, steepling his fingers.

“Jedediah Blackwood,” he murmured, testing the name. “Shadow Creek Hollow.” He leaned back in his chair. “Eliza, the history of the Church is filled with accounts of spiritual struggle, of individuals wrestling with darkness, both internal and external. The pioneers faced trials we can scarcely imagine. Some… made compromises. Some sought power or protection from sources outside the bounds of the gospel.”

He leaned forward again, his voice low. “There are accounts, mostly anecdotal, suppressed, perhaps rightly so, of certain individuals or families in intensely isolated settlements who… integrated older, pre-conversion beliefs into their lives in ways that became corrupted. Pacts with the land, some called them. Seeking to control the elements, ensure fertility, ward off perceived enemies. Usually, such deviations faded as communities grew and priesthood leadership strengthened. But sometimes…” He trailed off, looking troubled.

“Sometimes what, Brother Abernathy?” Eliza pressed.

“Sometimes the influence lingers,” he said softly. “Like a stain. Especially if rooted in blood sacrifice or binding rituals tied to a specific place or lineage. Performing temple ordinances for such individuals… it’s spiritually complex. The intent is pure, redemptive. But if the spirit is wholly resistant, unrepentant, bound by darker covenants…”

“What?” Eliza whispered, dread coiling in her stomach.

“Baptism cleanses, yes. But it also connects. Seals. Usually for salvation. But perhaps… perhaps some spirits might see the ordinance not as an embrace of light, but as an anchor. A conduit. A way to strengthen their hold on this side of the veil through the proxy, through the lineage.”

His words mirrored her deepest fears, the implications of her most terrifying nightmares. “So what should I do?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly. “The baptism is scheduled for next week.”

Brother Abernathy sighed, running a hand over his face. “Prayer, Eliza. Fasting. Seek confirmation, true confirmation, from the Spirit that this is the right path for this specific soul. Not just a general sense of duty, but a clear affirmation for Jedediah Blackwood. And arm yourself spiritually. The temple is a house of power and protection, but the adversary is cunning, especially when his grasp on a soul is threatened… or potentially solidified.” He looked at her intently. “Be prepared for resistance. Not just distractions or unease. True spiritual opposition.”

His validation of her fears was both terrifying and strangely comforting. She wasn’t imagining it. The threat was real.

That weekend, Eliza drove out towards the area Jedediah had settled. Shadow Creek Hollow wasn't on any modern map, but she located the approximate area using old territorial surveys – a desolate, windswept valley several miles off the main highway, accessible only by a rutted dirt track. The rental car struggled, bouncing over rocks and washouts. As she drew closer, the sky seemed to darken, clouds gathering overhead despite the clear forecast. A palpable sense of stillness, heavier and more menacing than the library's quiet, settled over the landscape.

The track ended at a rusted barbed-wire fence and a faded No Trespassing sign. Beyond it lay the hollow, a shallow depression cradled by low, rocky hills covered in sparse, grey-green sagebrush and clusters of gnarled junipers. There were no standing structures visible, only the faint outline of stone foundations nearly reclaimed by the earth, and at the center, a single, ancient-looking cottonwood tree, its branches bare and claw-like against the bruised sky. Even from a distance, the place radiated desolation and a profound sense of wrongness.

Eliza felt an oppressive weight settle on her chest, making it hard to breathe. The silence was absolute, unnatural. No birds sang, no insects buzzed. She felt watched, not by human eyes, but by the land itself – an ancient, malevolent awareness. This was the place from her nightmares. This was Jedediah’s domain.

She scanned the visible rock formations near the foundation outlines. And then she saw it. Carved into a large, flat slab of sandstone, partially obscured by tumbleweeds, was one of the symbols. Larger than the sketches in Martha Phelps’ journal, etched deep into the rock. Seeing it here, in its place of origin, sent a wave of nausea through her. It felt like a sigil, radiating a cold, dark energy.

A sudden gust of wind swirled through the hollow, carrying the scent of dust and something else – the faint, coppery tang of old blood. It moaned through the rocks, sounding disturbingly like the whispers from the library stacks. Eliza scrambled back into her car, her hands shaking as she fumbled with the keys. She drove away as fast as the treacherous track allowed, the image of the hollow, the tree, the symbol burned into her mind. She didn't look back.

The visit solidified her fear but also, paradoxically, her resolve. Jedediah’s influence was real, tied to that blighted piece of land, lingering like a poison. The temple ordinances were the only antidote she knew. She spent the remaining days fasting, praying, immersing herself in the scriptures, seeking the strength and clarity Brother Abernathy had advised. She felt a fragile sense of peace settle over her, a conviction that she was doing the Lord's work, however perilous. She would face the resistance. She would be the proxy. She would bring the light to Jedediah Blackwood, whether he welcomed it or not.

The night before the scheduled baptism, she laid out her white temple clothing, pressing it meticulously. As she hung her dress, she noticed something on the sleeve, near the cuff. A small, dark smudge. She rubbed at it, but it wouldn’t lift. Leaning closer, she realized it wasn't dirt. It was a mark, faint but distinct, resembling one of the angular, root-like symbols from the hollow. Drawn or perhaps even burned into the pristine white fabric.

Her blood ran cold. He was closer than she thought. He wasn't just resisting; he was marking her. Claiming his proxy. The fragile peace shattered, replaced by icy terror. Tomorrow, she would step into the House of the Lord to perform a sacred ordinance. But she wouldn't be going alone. Jedediah Blackwood would be going with her.

**Part 3: Within Hallowed Walls**

The Salt Lake Temple stood serene and majestic under the morning sun, its granite spires reaching towards a cloudless sky. Throngs of white-clad patrons moved with quiet reverence through its ornate gates, a familiar scene of peaceful devotion that normally filled Eliza with warmth. Today, however, the familiar felt alien. The temple’s imposing beauty seemed less like a beacon of light and more like a fortress bracing for a siege. Every shadow seemed too deep, every whisper of wind through the manicured grounds sounded like Jedediah’s sibilant threats. The symbol on her dress sleeve, though scrubbed relentlessly, felt like a brand against her skin.

Inside, the customary hush, the soft organ music, the atmosphere of profound peace – it all felt muted, distant, as if she were experiencing it through layers of gauze. She presented her recommend, the brother at the desk giving her a standard warm smile that didn't reach his eyes, or perhaps it was merely her perception that was skewed. She changed into her white clothing in the locker room, the familiar ritual feeling heavy with dread. Other sisters moved around her, their faces serene, their quiet conversations focused on family, service, the joys of the gospel. Eliza felt utterly isolated, trapped in a bubble of fear only she could perceive.

She made her way towards the baptistry, located in the lower levels of the temple. The corridors seemed longer than usual, the portraits of Church leaders gazing down with impassive eyes. Was it her imagination, or did the air grow colder as she descended? Did the faint scent of damp earth and decay follow her from Shadow Creek Hollow?

The baptistry itself was, as always, visually striking. The large font, perched atop twelve life-sized sculpted oxen symbolizing the tribes of Israel, gleamed under soft lighting. The water rippled gently. Sisters and brothers waited patiently on benches, their faces reflecting quiet anticipation as they prepared to act as proxies for the dead. Usually, Eliza felt a powerful spirit here, a tangible sense of connection to those who had passed on, awaiting this essential ordinance. Today, the room felt… charged. Tense. Like the moment before a lightning strike.

She checked in with the officiator, confirming her role as proxy for Jedediah Blackwood. The elderly brother smiled kindly. "A service of love, sister. Bringing souls unto Christ." His words, meant to comfort, felt like stones dropping into a deep well.

As she waited her turn, sitting on a bench near the back, the whispers started again. Not from the building this time, but seemingly from within her own mind. Jedediah’s voice, clearer now, layered with contempt and a chilling amusement. ‘You think these walls can hold me, little descendant? You think this water can cleanse me?’

Eliza squeezed her eyes shut, focusing on a silent prayer, pleading for strength, for protection. ‘Your faith is a thin shield,’ the voice mocked. ‘My roots run deeper than your shallow prayers. This land… this body… you are mine.’

Her name was called. “Eliza Vance, proxy for Jedediah Blackwood.”

Her legs felt like lead as she walked towards the font. The water, usually clear and inviting, looked dark, opaque. The officiator and the witness, two kindly-looking brethren standing waist-deep in the water, smiled encouragement. She forced herself to descend the steps into the font. The water was shockingly cold, far colder than usual, seeping into her thin clothing, chilling her to the bone.

The brother officiating placed his hand for the blessing. "Sister, are you ready?"

Eliza nodded, unable to speak. Her heart hammered against her ribs. The whispers intensified, swirling around her, a vortex of malice. ‘Foolish girl. You perform my sealing, not my salvation. You give me anchor. You give me voice.’

The officiator raised his right arm to the square. "Jedediah Blackwood," he began the sacred prayer, "having been commissioned by Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."1

As he prepared to immerse her, Eliza felt a sudden, violent pressure building inside her head, a psychic onslaught. Images flooded her mind with blinding speed: the desolate hollow under a blood-red sky; strange, writhing shapes moving beneath the earth; the terrified faces of Martha Phelps and her feverish child; the glint of a knife over a sacrificed animal; Jedediah’s face, no longer with empty sockets but blazing with triumphant, ancient hatred. She felt his consciousness pressing against hers, cold and sharp, trying to push its way in, to merge, to possess.

‘Mine!’ the voice screamed in her skull.

Terror, primal and absolute, surged through her. This wasn't resistance; this was invasion. This wasn't salvation; it was damnation – for him, and potentially for her. Brother Abernathy’s warning echoed: an anchor, a conduit. She couldn't let him complete the ordinance. Not like this.

With a choked cry, just as the officiator began to lower her into the water, Eliza wrenched herself away. She stumbled backwards, splashing frantically, scrambling up the steps out of the font, gasping for breath.

Silence fell in the baptistry. Shocked faces turned towards her – the officiators, the witness, the other patrons waiting their turn. Water dripped from her clothes onto the pristine white floor. The officiating brother stared, his hand still raised, his expression bewildered.

"Sister?" he asked, his voice echoing in the sudden stillness. "Is something wrong?"

Eliza couldn't answer. She was shaking violently, tears streaming down her face, the psychic pressure slowly receding but leaving behind a residue of icy terror. Jedediah’s enraged howl echoed faintly in her mind before being abruptly cut off, as if a door had slammed shut.

"I... I can't," she finally stammered, wrapping her arms around herself. "I can't do it. He... he doesn't want it. Not like this."

Confusion and concern rippled through the room. Temple workers hurried over. Someone gently guided her out of the baptistry, towards a small waiting room, wrapping a towel around her trembling shoulders. The sacred rhythm of the ordinances was broken, disturbed by her inexplicable flight.

Later, sitting numbly in an office usually reserved for temple presidency members, Eliza tried to explain. She spoke to a kind-faced sister, the assistant matron, and then to one of the counselors in the temple presidency, a man with wise, troubled eyes. She spoke of Jedediah, the research, the warnings, the intense spiritual opposition she felt, the overwhelming conviction that completing the baptism would have been catastrophic, a perversion of the ordinance's intent.

They listened patiently, sympathetically. They didn't dismiss her out of hand, acknowledging the reality of spiritual warfare and the complexities that can arise with difficult ancestral lines. But they also gently questioned whether extreme stress, lack of sleep, or an overzealous imagination might have played a role. There was no protocol for a proxy fleeing the font mid-ordinance due to perceived demonic resistance.

"Sister Vance," the counselor said gently, "the work of salvation for the dead is sacred, vital. But it requires discernment. Perhaps... perhaps Jedediah Blackwood is not yet ready to accept the gospel ordinances. Perhaps more prayer, more seeking is needed on this side of the veil before his heart can be softened on the other." He suggested she take time away from family history work, focus on her own spiritual well-being, counsel with her bishop. There was an undercurrent of concern for her stability, veiled in compassionate counsel.

They assured her Jedediah’s name would be temporarily removed from the active ordinance list, pending further… consideration. The implication was clear: her experience was an anomaly, likely stemming from her own overwrought state.

Eliza left the temple feeling drained, hollowed out, yet strangely relieved. She had failed in her mission to "save" Jedediah, but she felt with chilling certainty that she had averted something far worse. She had looked into the abyss, and for a terrifying moment, it had tried to pull her in. The pristine white walls of the temple felt different now, not less sacred, but less simple. She understood that light casts shadows, and even the holiest places could become battlegrounds.

Back in her apartment, she stripped off the damp temple clothes. The dark smudge on the sleeve seemed fainter now, almost gone. Had the confrontation, the refusal, weakened his hold? Or was he merely waiting, lurking in the shadows of her lineage, resentful and patient?

She knew she couldn't continue her fellowship at the library. She couldn't spend her days immersed in the very records that had led her to this precipice. The weight of parchment had become unbearable. She needed distance, air, a place where the echoes of Shadow Creek Hollow couldn't reach her so easily.

**Part 4: Unwritten Futures**

Leaving the fellowship early required explanations Eliza wasn't fully equipped to give. She cited personal reasons, stress, a need to re-evaluate her path. Brother Abernathy accepted her resignation with a sad, knowing look in his eyes.

"Sometimes," he said, as they stood for the last time amidst the silent stacks, "the most important discoveries we make in history are about its limits. And our own." He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Be well, Eliza. Trust the Spirit, even when it leads you down unexpected paths, or tells you to stop walking down a certain one altogether."

Eliza moved out of Salt Lake City, away from the constant visual reminder of the temple and the library, away from the heartland of her faith’s history which now felt shadowed by her experience. She took a simple administrative job in a different state, sought solace in the mundane, in anonymity. She still attended church, still prayed, still believed, but her faith was different now – less bright-eyed certainty, more cautious reverence, tinged with the knowledge of the profound darkness that could exist alongside profound light.

She boxed up all her genealogical research, sealing the boxes tightly and storing them deep in a closet. She couldn't bring herself to destroy the records of Jedediah Blackwood – the journals, the letters, the evidence of his dark practices and her terrifying encounter – but she couldn't bear to look at them either. They felt radioactive, dormant but dangerous. Perhaps one day someone else in the lineage would feel the prompting, stumble upon the empty name, and begin the search anew. She prayed they would have the discernment she initially lacked.

Occasionally, late at night, when the wind rustled the leaves outside her window, she would feel a fleeting echo of the cold dread from Shadow Creek Hollow. A flicker of movement in her peripheral vision, a momentary scent of damp earth. Reminders that Jedediah was still out there, tethered to the blighted land, perhaps tethered still, in some subtle way, to her lineage. He was unbaptized, unsealed by earthly ordinance, but bound by older, darker covenants.

Her refusal in the temple hadn't destroyed him, hadn't saved him. It had simply… refused him entry through that specific door, at that specific time. The battle wasn't won, merely postponed. The empty name on the family group sheet remained, a blank space that felt less like an oversight and more like a deliberate, watchful void.

Eliza Vance learned that some histories refuse to be buried, some spirits refuse salvation, and some doors, once opened, are terrifyingly difficult to close. Her work was no longer about uncovering the past, but about protecting the future from its grasping, shadowy hands. And she knew, with a certainty that chilled her more than any nightmare, that Jedediah Blackwood was waiting.