

'Til the End of the World

Year 1: Blood Ties

Story 1

Stand By Me – Part I of II

It's always hard to think where to begin. At what point in someone's story is destiny really written? Is it at the beginning when we're all so innocent? Or way before we're born – back in some ancient ledger inked by cosmic hands? I prefer not to think of it that way. Instead, I like to think we make our own destiny as we go along, turning each day into a story of our own making.

With that in mind, I'll begin with the first action I can name. The time when six people, some of them friends and some of them not, began to be drawn into the Battle. Some were already there; some of us joined a little later. All of us were called in the end. Because, as much as I hate to admit it, as much as I would love to be able to say my friends and I made all our own choices, behind each action was the guiding presence of an unseen hand nudging us towards the end.

Only one choice was ever truly ours. Whether we would win...or lose...

Opening

The rain beats down heavily in the night on the sleepy town of Calendar. People are shut up in their homes, listening to the precipitation lashing against the windows, leaving trails behind that

fade with time. It is a set, a stage on which players will be placed. The pieces on the board never knew that unseen fingers and hands moved them in worlds they never saw. Their lives would intertwine, and together, their story would be woven until it reached its natural end. Then all would be decided, all would be lost and won.

We can visit now on the hill above the town. We can see the lights twinkling in so few houses, while yet others are in weary darkness. The lights rise onto the Old Man of Calendar Hill behind them, growing fewer and fewer as the inky blankness of the encroaching forest becomes indistinguishable from the inky blackness of the cloud-covered sky. Who knew such a small, quiet town somewhere nestled in the Lancashire valleys would be the setting, the place from which the world could potentially fall.

We are getting ahead of ourselves. Tonight is for us to see. To visit.

So, we move finally from our spot overlooking the town across the river. Through the night, we travel silently and unseen to come upon the first of our houses. One where dreams are being dreamed, and silence settles over them all. Our first visit is to Sara Carpenter. She is sleeping soundly in her own bed, surrounded by family in other rooms. A warm mid-terraced stone house leading up the slopes of the hill.

Her dreams we can only touch, for she is deep in the world of sleep. Within these, she dreams of we know not what, but we feel her empathy, her warmth and her love coming from them. Does she contemplate those she loves? She shudders as though sensing our presence and turns over to her bedside table, upon which is a framed photograph of her and some friends. Their youth and vibrancy radiate in the casual way of the young.

Yes, we think, she is dreaming of those she loves.

We leave her, moving now through the night, but a whisper in the minds of those so foolish as to still be awake. The hill is steep, but it matters not to us as we reach the top of the road; the

view behind us now overlooks the cold, deadened South Side of the town. We turn not that way because now we can sense two further actors in our play, two further pieces on the board. They sleep next to one another because they are together.

The male we know as Luke Cross, a healthy, young boy on his way to becoming a man, but caught in the in-between. Beside him is his young love, Samantha Summers, a raven-haired beauty. Together they form a tableau of life, entwined in one another as though carved from an ancient sculpture. Eternity is made more endless when relative to the young. We can sense the connection between, the deep and powerful bond of first love.

Both are sixteen, both have so much ahead of them, both only dream of one another. But neither of them knows the heartache that doing so will cause.

Still, the night is too late for us to linger if we are to see all. So, we depart, leaving the young lovers to their dreams.

Our third stop brings us to a detached house in a leafier estate, the kind that speaks of modest money made far less modest in an old terraced town. We will find it difficult to stay long as we approach slowly. Here is the home of Amy Donaldson. We sense her sleeping alone in her room, having fallen into the dreamworld through the cracks in her floor, in front of an old rerun of *Scooby Doo*.

It is a confusing room, a juxtaposition of serious and ridiculous. Well-worn Harry Potter next to advanced-level textbooks. A cartoon dog is on the screen next to the first prize trophies. She is a girl who has advanced so much in her talents yet stubbornly holds onto the remains of her youth. And yet the intellectual and academic capacities of this particular fifteen-year-old are not what give us pause.

It is the raw, untapped and untamed power brimming beneath the surface. She will bear further scrutiny in the time to come.

With regret, we move away as swiftly and silently as we dare.

Our next-to-last stop brings us not to someone in a dream, but to someone tirelessly awake. He burns the midnight oil, though midnight has come and gone, remaining awake and vigilant throughout the night. He is a guardian in many respects, a watchman in the darkness, burdened by knowledge and understanding.

Mark Matthews, his small office lamp light illuminating some ancient tome, sits hunched over his work with only half a mind on his work. He cannot sleep, cannot dream, until his mind is set at ease. Somewhere out in the darkness awaits our final visit of the night, and it is for him we feel his concern reaches out into the rain. Sleep will come to him eventually; it comes for us all in the end.

For now, he allows himself the indulgence of a glance out of the window of his office. The void is impenetrable; he does what all watchmen do best: pushes away distractions and focuses on the task at hand.

Moving quickly now and further into the emptiness around us, we seek our final visit of the night. A boy has grown into a man too soon. His journey began some time ago, but his path remains veiled to him. He does not know, cannot know, what lies ahead of him because in the end, all will be decided by him. The choice, the victory or the defeat, will be his and his alone to bear. He is the Guide.

He does not know what it means. He will.

We find him alone, soaked to the core with the rain, but with no mind paid to it. He skulks in the shadows of a darkened alleyway, a hunter attuning his senses to the sights, sounds and scents of the scene around him; waiting patiently for the prey he's been waiting for to come by. It has been a long wait, a long night for him, but he is poised, coiled and ready to act.

Ricky Kent, the last of the Guides, knows little sleep. It is not thoughts of love, or the random, or even concern that stalk his dreams. It is the fields of ash, the sky of burning fire and the

endless, undried blood of those he loves on his skin. It is the end and his failure that are played film-like on the inside of his eyelids as he tries to settle himself into a state of rest.

Only the hunt calms him now. It is to this we leave him.

We will return.

* * *

His blood was up; the night's hunt was unyielding. The creature of the night, torn from the pages of so many pulp and young adult novels, found itself stalked. The reversal of tone, the unfortunate nature of it, unsettled it somewhere deep behind its blood-red eyes, and streaked through to the casual observer: the worst case of conjunctivitis they'd ever seen. We're guessing.

It rushed along the alleyway, attempting to break the hunter from his prey by simple speed. And the creature's speed was legendary, but somehow his hunter kept pace. It raced, only to be broadsided by a body blow that flung it down onto the grit and grime of the alleyway floor. It span, its eyes glaring with unending fury. This *should not be happening*.

Worse? What it saw was a human child. The cocky swagger of a teenager, the dress sense of a child born in the last millennium. Okay, so yes, when it was human, it was born in the previous millennium also, but anyway...

"Child," it snarled, its demonic voice clouded by both confusion and indignation. The hardened look did not change, even when the creature rushed at its attacker, slamming his back against the alleyway wall.

"Wanker," the child snarked back, before driving its head with the absolute disregard of the bulletproof towards the creature's all too human nose. It crunched, broken under the barrage and

leaving the beast tasting its own hot, fetid blood. It stumbled, screaming in as much surprise as pain. None of its victims, and there had been many over the years, had ever fought the way this demon child fought. "Sorry, thought we were stating the obvious."

The time for any holding back was done; the creature was fighting for its unlife as much as anything else. It drew its only weapon, blade glistening in the pale moonlight, spackled by the driving rain. Slick, poisonous, enchanted. A weapon bestowed upon him by the master. It would make quick work of the boy.

Confidence. Cocky and unyielding, it remained, despite everything. Despite all other instincts screaming that it was facing something beyond its experience, the creature could not admit its own hubris. Shame, it could have survived otherwise.

The creature managed to drive the dagger deep into the boy's shoulder. The scream of pain was deeply satisfying as cartilage, and flesh gave way under cold mystic steel. But it was not enough. The boy was not done. His eyes burned with a greater fury even as the pain flashed through them.

Finally, the creature that had lived for three hundred years did something it never expected again. It ran. The smartest thing it could have done.

Smartest...yet still too late.

His left arm dangling limply at his side, the boy grabbed the nearest bin lid and, with an insane level of strength, flung it as though a giant discus. It crunched into the fleeing creature's back with a satisfying snap of bone as the beast fell to the floor, groaning and moaning like so many helpless victims before it. Breath, though not necessary in the same quantities as humans, struggled to move down into its bruised lungs. It wouldn't matter. Not anymore.

With deliberate slowness, the hunter child stalked. This was not the actions of some heroic slayer; this was a psychological torture enacted by the devils of the world. It knew its time was up.

And the boy knew it knew. Death came to the deathless, as the boy reached down and between his hands felt the skull of the creature – and twisted.

The hunter child stepped back; the creature's consciousness was gone. It would be a small mercy, as the body burst into a pillar of flame, shooting three feet above it. It consumed all, leaving only ash behind—the remains of a now dead vampyr.

Adrenaline flooding him, Ricky Kent, the boy hunter, removed the knife from his shoulder and let it clatter to the ground as he gritted his teeth against the pain. It was these dreams of blood and violence that haunted him most at night, which meant he rarely slept.

But it was his duty. Or something like it.

He turned and slipped back into rain and darkness, the night's hunt now done.

'til the End of the World

Episode 1 – Stand By Me – Part 1

Starring:

Ricky Kent, Sara Carpenter, Luke Cross, Amy Donaldson, Mark Matthews and Sam Summers

Act I

The rain continued to last against the windows of the stone brick terraced house where, at an ungodly hour, Ricky returned home. He did not need quiet; his older brother would be out at his job, meaning he could move with almost impunity. He kicked off his sodden boots, leaving them scattered messily in the hall and rushed for the stairs straight ahead.

In the shared bathroom, the light above the sink blasted on, burning white. It was searing his eyes after the darkness of the hunt. He felt repelled by it but drawn at the same time. He needed it; he needed the cleansing water, his entire shoulder was on fire, and it was spreading throughout the rest of his body.

The pain was unlike anything he'd felt before; it was mythic in its scope and loud in its voice. Since his awakening and his learning of the forces that were truly running around his home town, he'd not had such an injury. Anything even close. He was stronger, faster – he was somewhere short of a superhero. But now he could feel how deeply superheroes could bleed, and the label, already worn and tattered and ill-fitting to begin with, now felt further away.

He pulled off the tattered remains of his vest, his coat already thrown somewhere deep into the confines of his room. Bare-chested, he could see now the bright red throbbing wound in his shoulder. It did not look clean or neat. It looked angry with him, the throbbing sensation within it joining with his own heartbeat.

Worse was the feeling overcoming his mind, a kind of slow fog. Was it tiredness? He was beyond exhausted, pushing his body to the limits by day and now night. He couldn't think; it was all jumbled. The face of the vampyr swam before his mind, snarling. The pain stabbed again, as he realised it was only his shoulder screaming once more in protest as he collapsed onto his bedspread.

Even the minute distance between his room and the bathroom across the landing had slipped from his mind in the fugue.

His body took over, the adrenaline inside him collapsed, imploded under the weight he'd placed upon it. It shut him down, and he fell into sleep with no further thoughts.

* * *

“Hey, Ricky,” the voice came from the entrance. “You all ready for school?”

His brother’s tone was light and breezy, though Ricky had to wonder if the sight of his dirt-stained boots messing up their IKEA brand shoe rack was not ratcheting up his annoyance level just a little. If so, he was remaining an oasis of calm. It wasn’t too hard, but he was still exhausted, the night wearing on him like a bad hangover.

Not that, at fifteen, he knew what a hangover was like. Honest.

It was the morning after the night before. The daylight drifted through the slightly ill-fitting cotton windows in their lounge and filtered into the kitchen cupboards he was rummaging through earnestly. The hunt had left him ravenous, it often did – and so his young body was now screaming in more than just pain in his shoulder.

“I would be,” he called back from the kitchen, “But someone ate all the Cheerios.”

He heard his brother, Rob, coming into the lounge. His steps were heavy, for the night shifts weren’t exactly too easy. Then again, he could think to himself with some bitterness that he had more experience than most.

“That was you,” Rob answered as Rick made his way into the living room, half-eating a cold PopTart instead. “Replacing popcorn with Cheerios on movie night must have been distressing. I understand why you repressed.”

It wasn’t just the tone, or the dryly sarcastic tone. Rob *looked* tired. And why wouldn’t he? He was only twenty-two, seven years Ricky’s senior...and he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. A weight completely different from Ricky’s own, of which, thankfully, he still had no idea, but a weight nonetheless.

The year since their parents died, thanks to a drunken truck driver crashing into their car, had been a long one. Rob had just finished his degree in business (or something more specific that Ricky, though “listening” could never remember the specifics), and was fielding some opportunities in

graduate programmes around the country. Then the unthinkable happened, and Ricky, only fourteen at the time, could not live by himself.

So, Rob returned from his travels, gave up the graduate programmes at obscure companies on the other side of the country, and took the only local job he could get. As a security guard on the night shift, he looked after local warehouses. He did so to convince the local services that he was a fit guardian, able to see his brother through the final four years of school. Live in a house nearby where they grew up – if now in a smaller one, a few streets away, which was more affordable.

The weight of that grew heavy on Rob's face, so similar to his own. Older – chunkier – but similar to his own. The bags under his eyes, the weary expression. He wished he could tell him the reason he wasn't the perfect younger brother, the A-grade student he could be proud of. But some weights were not Rob's to bear. Not yet. Hopefully never.

"Good shift?" Ricky settled on asking him, nibbling at the edges of the block of sugar that paraded as food. It was hopefully a relatively neutral question.

"Lots of rain, the wet kind," Rob responded, slipping into the armchair and sighing a little bit older sigh than his face should suggest. He paused for a moment before picking up a conversation which Ricky was hoping to deflect, "Speaking of school, how's it going?"

Rob tried. But Parents' Evening appointments, school reports and the mire of teen life were not exactly his forte even when he was in school himself. Now, with all the distractions he was taking on to keep their little family afloat, he was surprised he could keep track. Truth was, Rob probably didn't, but he knew what was expected at least.

"As always, there are people with higher marks than me," Ricky answered diplomatically, finishing his PopTart in three bites and attempting to straighten his school tie. He headed for his bag, hoping to pick it up and be out the door before the inevitable question.

"What about people with lower marks?"

“They’re...” he fumbled for an answer while fumbling for the door lock, “...in shorter supply.”

Before any more recriminations could begin, he rushed out the door, wincing as, somewhere deep beneath his school uniform, he felt the wound tug with the movement. He didn’t want his brother to see what his nights had become.

It was his own weight to bear. Happened to be world-heavy as well.

* * *

That September was bound to be unseasonably warm, and the sunlight that drifted onto them was a little threatening. Would it be a day of warm glory as they basked in the limited outdoor social space? Or would it mean unbearable heat in the third-floor English classrooms, where Dante’s *Inferno* was not only the syllabus, but a description of their literal air-conditioning-free space?

Sara Carpenter did not know, but whimsy – and the softly layered texturing of her own reality she cultivated carefully – meant it wasn’t so much of a problem. There were, after all, many more pressing matters in Sara’s world that morning. Things which she could only share with her best friend, as they meandered slowly down the street.

“You know, ever since *Will & Grace* went off the air, I have no fun,” she moaned, “There is *nothing* to do in this town.”

Her friend, Amy Donaldson, frowned up at her. She held a stack of books in her arms like she was auditioning for some *Pygmalion* rom-com, her navy blue school blazer done to button-level perfection, her glasses ever so slightly askew. She had been, undoubtedly, reminding herself of exactly which classes she had that day, having memorised the timetable. She was also likely musing

on the book she had read the night before. Yet she was also paying full attention to Sara's self-indulgent rambling, which had been enacted since picking her up at Amy's front door and beginning the short journey down the hill to their destination.

Calendar High School, an institution of learning to some, a prison of the mind and matter to others. Where aspirations are made, but immediacy goes to die.

"Sara," Amy began sympathetically, "I understand your pain."

Her best friend in the whole world was quietly taking the piss out of her. And thus, the door was wedged open to Sara's revenge, carefully premeditated.

As she often told herself, one could not simply walk into torment. It wasn't Mordor.

"So...now I've finished rambling, can we finally talk about what you're not talking about?" she pried. Amy did not miss a beat. Her eyes narrowed, but she responded,

"Clog dancing?"

Oh...so we were going sarcastic. The battle was on.

"Mark," she told her firmly, "Today is the day."

"Ah, how silly of me not to check my Calendar."

Her friend began to root around in her bag, shuffling her book on calculatables (or something similar) with a history text she needed to return to the library because, for some inexplicable reason, Amy did not take history but just liked to read it for fun. Sara felt a shiver.

"Come on," she continued, not content to let it go. "You have been giving him eyes for weeks now. I need some vicarious dating."

This was painfully true. Though Sara was only fifteen years old, the Year 11 scramble to gain validation through coupling was becoming painfully clear. Her other best friend in the whole world

(she pretended not to understand Amy's insistence that 'best' could not be applied to more than one of the same quantifiable), Sam, had been with her boyfriend Luke since the dawn of time. That slag Julie Winters was snogging every face known to man – including what she swore was once a lamppost. Their final year of high school had only just begun, and yet Sara was dateless. Snog-less. Man-less.

She was attractive; she knew that—a pretty face, blonde hair down to her shoulder, a warm smile. The guys looked at her; she got that all the time. And it wasn't even as if the other kids were put off by her friendship with Amy, who was attractive in a book nerd kind of way; this wasn't Sunnydale for Christ's sake. People were bitchy, but there wasn't exactly a social hierarchy of doom. There was just...kids.

"You could have any guy you want," Amy reminded her, as they rounded the school gates and set foot onto the premises. The bell tolled for them (well, for everyone to remind them it would soon be time for form). "So why don't you?"

"You aren't taking psych until next year, stop practising," she scalded her, before adding, "And stop deflecting."

"If he doesn't ask me out on a date, then he doesn't want me," Amy reluctantly relented. Now this was again one area in which her friend was an idiot. She was somewhat short for a human being (though not exactly tiny), but she was not not attractive. She had warm brown eyes, a round face, and slightly reddish-brown hair that she kept tied back. It was a classic hot librarian vibe she had going on, replete with the uniform done to full school regulation. She just...lacked all kinds of confidence. Not the interest that she had managed to glean from her from many, many conversations on the way to school.

"Have you flirted with him?" Sara asked, already knowing the answer.

Amy's pale cheeks flushed bright red, and it was not with exertion. Cue Sara's roll of eyes as they headed through the big double doors and into the school itself.

"Okay, we are *going* to the Library."

There would be a protest, but, lucky for her, it would be interrupted. Before Amy could tell her, she didn't want to go to the library and flirt with the nice young man who was substituting after their old librarian had left, her other best friend in the whole universe, Sam Summers, approached with her boyfriend.

They crossed the entrance, milling about as students and teachers alike did. Students rushing to get to form, teachers reluctantly headed to various duties, fuelling themselves with coffee that Sara would have no doubt contained a touch of whiskey. Or so her mother would have told her, these days simply doubling the Nescafé must do the trick. Or not. She didn't often consider adults.

Now *here* was the couple. Like, if anyone could have approached the 'it' girl, it would be Sam. She wore her school uniform as though Versace had crafted it for a Milan runway. She would be told to lower her skirt, call her form tutor a pervert, play the human rights card and somehow still manage to come out the end of the day with no detention. It showed off her long legs, full figure, and her pushing of the age of sixteen to the max.

And yet, Sam was not some vapid airhead out for a good time. She had, in fact, had only one boyfriend since anyone could remember. Luke Cross. Of course, Sam, being Sam, had not settled for just anyone. He was gorgeous, even if Sara said so herself. Casual good looks, a shock of closely kept blonde hair that spiked around casually like he was some boy band member without making him look douchey. He could have been captain of the football team, but instead he was...well, she didn't really know. Maybe it was music or something. People would look at him anyway; he had one of those faces.

“Sara, where have you been?” Sam greeted her with undoubtedly faux concern. “I’ve been looking like everywhere!”

“I only just got here,” Sara corrected her, before adding, “I don’t sleep in the school.”

“Just wanted to make sure we’re still on for tomorrow night?” Sam continued, ignoring the sarcasm. “The party?”

Ah, the party. Sara could not have forgotten even if she’d tried. The phone her parents had gifted her for her fifteenth birthday had been blowing up with repeated texts from Sam about every aspect of her sweet sixteenth: cake, candles, decorations, and the location (her parents’ house). At one point, there’d been a three text-text which may or may not have led to the inclusion of a pony. Sara had, admittedly, lost track.

“I’ll be there at eight o’clock?” Sara assured her, asking out of courtesy. Of course, she had circled it on her BoysII Men Calendar. The one she kept under her bed and the one suitable for parents, she kept on her bedroom desk. Sam nodded, and the brief exchange was done, her mind already likely off elsewhere.

Without responding to Sara directly, save for the briefest of smiles, Sam’s eyes caught another of her bestest friends in the whole wide world,

“Oh my God, Julie, where have you been?” she called out, wandering off without further explanation, “I’ve been looking like everywhere.”

Luke hung on a second longer, as Amy regarded him with a stern look.

“And I’ll see you at 10?”

“Sure, I just gotta go to my locker,” he agreed, signalling with a small salute before heading off indeed in the direction of the lockers. Sara and Amy continued their walk, Sara taking the lead and gently pushing them back towards a particular location in the school.

"You still tutoring Luke?" she asked, politely.

"Maths mostly," Amy agreed, "Though he does occasionally ask for English."

"Instead of your native Spanish?"

"Si," Amy joked with a grin. There was absolutely nothing Spanish about her, but the girl, of course, took the language option, "Por Favor."

Amy's look darkened as she saw the looming double doors of the one place she'd intended not to go. Sara, in her machinations, smiled at her friend. Amy did her best to pout.

"I'm not going in there."

"You believe this to be a negotiation?" Sara asked her friend, before the thought came to her, "I have always wanted ten thousand pounds and a pony."

"I'm worth that little?" Amy frowned.

Sara rolled her eyes. Faux woe-is-me would not work on her. A gentle push later, and Amy Donaldson fell through the double doors of the library behind her, into whatever future she could muster with the flirting skills she currently had. And Sara felt glad.

Until she noticed something else,

"Sorry, didn't see the plant."

* * *

Amy glared as the doors swung shut in front of her. Sara's look was only mildly sheepish and endlessly devilish, as she usually managed to achieve when she was meddling. Amy's glare was as

ferocious as she could muster, but somewhat muted through the small piece of fern poking out of her hair. Luckily, the majority of the plant didn't spill, and there wasn't even any dirt on the floor.

"Are you okay?"

She nearly screamed; it was in fact poised in her throat as she whirled around to see him emerging from the little office behind the counter. Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, her throat caught in her mouth, and she found instead only rising heat burning through her cheeks. Embarrassment, shame... possibly Sara was right: a mild bit of attraction. All of it was surfacing, and she didn't quite know how to manage it when spitting leaves.

"Perky," she squeaked, far higher than intended. "I just...love plants."

She died a little inside, though Mark Matthews did not seem to notice; he merely stepped up behind the counter.

"So how can I help you?" he asked, politely moving the interaction forward.

Mark Matthews.

Okay, so he was two years older than she, having just started his final year. She didn't know what he was taking, only that it was probably super smart. Like he was. She'd seen him around school her entire high school life. At some point last year, he'd agreed to man the Library on behalf of the school in between his classes. Rumours were the old – and actually paid – Librarian, his brother, had left town a few months earlier, and he'd just volunteered. Then again, with their headteacher 'volunteered' may have been a sugar coat and a half.

He was cute. A bookish charm, intense gaze, and clean and neat brown hair. Great fingernails too, like really well taken care of. Perhaps she should ask him if he ever got manicured...and suddenly the thought came to her that it was being an endless amount of time with her just staring at him with nothing to say, which would probably come across as strange.

And his look was beginning to cloud a little.

“Um...well...I need a book!” she finally blurted. Duh, obviously, they were in a library, so it would naturally be the thing they’d want. Breathe, Amy, breathe. “I heard a rumour that this is where they keep them, so...”

She let herself trail off, but Mark’s grin helped to melt whatever she was about to say into slush.

“Appreciate the logic,” he answered, “I heard a rumour students like to check out books, but I have yet to have it confirmed.”

She barked a laugh that sounded way too much like she was taking the mick. It was a genuine laugh, enhanced somewhat by her brain and heart racing at a million miles an hour. Again, to his credit, he did not run straight away.

“So do you have a book in mind, or should I just close my eyes and grab one?” he asked her. Was he teasing? It sounded teasing, but also playful. Should she be playful back? She could do playful, couldn’t she? She could have picked something sexy.

“Uh, ‘Of Mice and Men’,” she answered with the first thing that came to mind. “We’re supposed to read it for English, so...I thought I’d read it for English.”

“Ah, I had that one last year,” he continued to smile with recognition, “Bit grim. And the ending? Get the tissues.”

She couldn’t help a little furrow of her brow, which he obviously took as her interpreting his statement in the rudest way possible.

“I meant because of the whole death thing, not...” he tried to fumble, clambering his way out of his verbal hole. Instead, he slumped his shoulders, “Allow me to get it.”

He headed off into the stacks while she composed herself. Okay, so they were talking. There were words back and forth, some of them not entirely awful. And he smiled. Like...oh that smile. He began to return from the stacks, and she had to take her moment,

“So, I was wondering, um...”

He wasn’t listening. The phone on the counter had begun to ring, and after a moment, he picked it up, still processing her book. He reached out for her student ID card, which she handed over.

“Library,” he greeted on the phone, his hands automatically moving about, checking the book out for her. “Yes, that’s right. You can sign for it, I’ll be there to pick it up in a moment. Thanks.”

He hung up, holding out the book she’d already read three times and done two essay assignments on, despite the lies with which she had tried to open their relationship.

“I’ve got to run, will that be all?” he enquired, his mind now clearly elsewhere. Amy sighed, nodded, and with that, the love of her young life was gone – out of the door and off to do whatever errands he needed to do. While she...was alone.

“So...what happened?” Sara asked, her head popping through the doors he’d just disappeared through.

“I told you I shouldn’t have come in here.”

* * *

“Would you relax?” Sara begged of her friend, as they moved once more through the corridors of mundane power. “From what you said, he seemed happy and charming. Perhaps even flirtatious. He knew the tissue thing.”

Secretly, she did not believe Mark, with whom she had never exchanged words, only seen from a distance, even knew what sex was, let alone innuendo. But she was not about to tell her best friend in the whole world, whose shoulders slumped as she processed what she perceived to be utter disaster, that fact. She'd wait until they were romantically involved before she'd tear the guy's character apart relentlessly.

"Until he ran off," Amy sulked. "No point in a romantic date if you follow it with a foot race. He rejected me. I am so rejectable. I am a reject."

"Stop saying reject," she chided her.

"You said it!" Amy protested.

"Anti-reject context, it's excusable," Sara waved her off. The bell rang once more, signalling the beginning of their day of torture. "Now, I am going to Food Tech, and you are going...to brighten up."

Actually, it was Biology – Amy was on the split triple sciences while Sara was with what she admitted were the Double Duds – but again, anything to lift her friend's brain away from the horrors she was perceiving.

Honestly, it really wasn't that bad. Mark did not seem like a boy who had his head anywhere near the real world, and so he would take some time to come around to the fact that a human female liked him. Perhaps there would even be some shenanigans involved. And Sara loved herself a shenanigan.

"You're not the boss of me," Amy continued to pout defiantly, knowing full well her bum would be on her biology stool before the rest of her class.

"Not now, but come Tuesday morning..." Sara joked, with a wink to her friend, who, having decided her fate was sealed, headed off in the direction of the science labs. Sara gave her a little pat

on the behind, to which Amy glared but continued. She would be fine. It would all work out. Nerd game knows nerd game.

She, however, needed to go down a different corridor. Though when she did, she saw an unusual sight. Ricky Kent, her oldest friend, is in school for a change. Coming in her direction as well, with purpose.

“Ricky!” she called out, momentarily forgetting that she needed to head to the Food Tech rooms well across the school grounds. “Hey, Ricky!”

Her voice drew him out of the world he was in. It was the world she feared he’d been in ever since his parents’ death, and he slowly began pulling away from everyone around him. It accelerated a few months ago, but basically it was the same shit, different day. To catch him here, by himself, and she by herself, was a rare moment she was not going to pass up.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked him, concerned over his somewhat dishevelled appearance. Sure, she’d seen school uniforms on some of the boys look like they’d been dragged through a bush, but something about the skewed tie and the broken brow sweat hit her a little different for her oldest friend. “You look like hell.”

Okay, so perhaps purely blunt honesty wasn’t the best option.

“Well, looking like and being in are often similar things,” he muttered, enigmatically.

“I’ve barely seen you the past few weeks. Where’ve you been?” she pressed on.

“Busy, look, I gotta...”

He tried to brush past her, a move so shocking she almost let him do it and forgot herself. But they’d been friends their whole lives, and he really did look like things were wrong. The kind of edge-of-panic wrong that sent her inner grown-up into overdrive. She placed her hand on his left shoulder as he tried to pass her. He tensed, his jaw suddenly grinding.

“Are you trying to avoid me?”

“What do you want from me?” he snapped at her, visibly irritable.

“Just let me know what’s going on with you,” she answered, before feeling the urge to remind him, “I’m your friend, remember?”

“I’m fine,” he told her through gritted teeth, the sweat breaking further into spots on his forehead. “Now leave me alone.”

He moved past her regardless, turning the corner and heading off deeper into the school. She didn’t see, because her mind reminded her, she needed to head to her class, but he stopped once he was around the corner.

He stopped because the pain in his shoulder, where her hand had touched, was immense. The wound continued to throb; his world continued to fall apart. And the only person he refused to speak to about it was the one he wanted to. But he couldn’t do that to her.

He just couldn’t.

* * *

The day ground away slowly, as late summer days (which some evil wizard must have decided was going to coincide with early academic year days) tend to do. First period came and went without too much fuss, and as mid-morning gave way to late, Amy found herself sitting in a classroom with her recent tutee – Luke Cross.

Their circles were Venn diagrams of completely different groups, and, truthfully, until they were asked together by the teacher, neither of them had anything beyond passing knowledge of the other. Yes, Luke knew Sara, but really only through Sam – the two of them had never hung out

together by themselves without escorts. Meaning by proximity, Amy, as a friend of Sara, was only tangentially connected to that world. It was messy, complicated, and endlessly annoying that the “popular kids” could somehow manage to navigate those intricate webs but could barely piece together a quadratic equation.

“So, if we know what x is, we can now solve the equation with respect to y ,” she continued, “So if we do that, the answer is...”

She allowed her words to hang in the air, the expectancy inviting an attempt at solution. The big, dumb, yet conventionally handsome young man in front of her stared blankly.

“Are you being philosophical?”

“Nope, mathematical,” she assured him. He shrugged, giving in to the inevitability of his own inability.

“Then I’m sorry, I have no idea,” he admitted. The thing was, she believed him. And she did not think it was through a lack of trying. She’d seen it before, in the kids who bunked off from doing their work because there was something new and shiny out there. He tried, probably less than he could, but he did try. It just wasn’t going in.

“Luke, you can do this,” she reassured him, while shuffling around the papers on their shared desk.

“Sure, except I’m the man with two brain cells, not the two brains,” he joked. She frowned at him, both exasperated and impressed. How could a boy who could make that reference not understand quadratic equations? It was endlessly frustrating.

“Look, Luke, you have brains, I know it,” she reminded him, “And I know you can do this, but if you’re going to crack jokes and give up, you’re wasting my time and yours.”

“Hey, I’m sorry,” he answered, taken aback. “I’m just kinda losing faith in the whole school thing.”

“We all do,” she reminded him, “until it’s over.” She began to flip through the thick textbook on their desk, wondering if he’d ever flicked through its joys in between their tutoring sessions or waited until they next met up, “Maybe we should leave quadratics for a bit. How’s about some circle theorems?”

“Is everything alright with you?” he asked her perceptively. At first, she wondered if he was mocking her again, but a glance at his rugged yet earnest features told her he was not.

“It’s nothing,” she tried to brush off. He wasn’t letting it go, however.

“Come on,” he urged. “Despite the ‘drop in my social status’ Sam keeps warning me about, I’d consider us at least friendly. You can tell me. ‘less it’s about the lady bits, then you should tell Sara.”

“Oh, please, last time she ended up recommending cheese in my bra,” Amy answered quickly, unguardedly, and while confused by circle-theorem diagrams. Her eyes widened as she realised the depths of what she’d revealed, “I didn’t...”

“Hysterical deafness,” he interjected before the rising panic of her flushed cheeks could begin again. They could only take so much. “What were we talking about?”

She decided, against perhaps her better judgment, to trust this young man – the boy who would be C grade if she died trying. He was right, they were friendly, perhaps one day friends or acquaintances as much as High School allowed. But he was still a boy, so she answered with only coded responses.

“It’s just boy troubles.”

“Ahhhhh,” he sighed, “Although I am male, I have no experience dating them. But I do know guys like sports and action movies.”

“You also enjoy fire and hunting for wild game,” she agreed with a smile, which he warmly returned. She turned back to the book, ready to continue their hour with some progress, before the door swung open and their headteacher popped in.

Miss Drake. She was the only High School headteacher they’d ever had – and yet somehow, despite the pencil skirt and power suit, Amy Donaldson had a hard time imagining her in the role. She was strict, well put together, and authoritative... and yet there was a quality about her that, despite her appearance, somehow belied an unprofessional air.

“Have either of you two seen our son-of-a-bitch Librarian?”

Maybe it was that. Maybe.

“Have you tried the Library?” Luke asked, eyebrows raised in innocent supplication. Perhaps she detected the sarcasm; maybe she was too distracted by her own inscrutable adult thoughts.

“No,” she answered sarcastically, folding her arms, “I started by looking into the six-foot hole he is soon to be drop-kicked into.”

“I wouldn’t in that skirt...” Luke offered.

“He might still be at reception, I think there was a parcel,” Amy interjected, before Miss Drake’s mind could be pulled back onto more present matters. Thankfully, whatever issue had drawn her ire was too gargantuan to pick up on the nuances of defiance Luke was throwing her way.

“Here’s to hoping it’s a letter bomb, thus ending my dilemma.”

With that, their Headteacher disappeared back into the corridor, off to the world of adults. Amy had to admit to herself that, though they were a small-town high school and therefore not

precisely in the public eye, she did sometimes wonder how Miss Drake made it through the OFSTED inspections.

“This is a positive learning environment, isn’t it?” Luke queried, dryly.

She had to agree.

* * *

“Finally caught you.”

Mark sighed without turning, knowing the voice behind him with all the sunny recognition of cholera. Miss Drake. He could picture her. Grey power suit – it was Monday after all, heels higher than strictly professional, arms folded. Her hair would be in a bun as tightly wound as she and her face as sour as though sucking on a lemon. For a thirty-something, she was remarkably old in her schoolmarmish vibe.

“And here I didn’t see the net,” he muttered dryly, picking up the wrapped parcel from the reception and eventually turning around. She was exactly as he’d pictured.

“We need to talk.”

“I assumed you wanted to Morris dance,” he answered, before walking past her. Annoyingly, she kept pace and followed him several steps behind down the corridor. It had only had a slight chance of working anyway; she was as tenacious as she was...intense? Intrusive? Demonic? He had yet to find the correct descriptor.

“Don’t you want to know what we have to talk about?” she challenged.

“I also assumed that it wouldn’t interest me, so I decided to leave,” he answered honestly.

“You’re over budget,” she snapped at him.

“See, I was right.”

“You’re a library, not a hospital,” she continued, falling into easy rhythm beside him. “You have to stick within the school’s assigned budget.”

“Sure, but with seven hundred students, a dictionary and a stick of gum might do so well for the curriculum,” he corrected.

“This is not a negotiation.”

“Since when do you negotiate?” he queried, generally seeing a new side to her. Not a nice one, obviously, he doubted if Miss Drake had any nice sides. “There is no negotiation anyway. I’ll continue to overspend for the good of the students, and you’ll continue to bitch at me until the end of the world. We can only pray it’s not that long.”

“You can’t talk to me like that,” she reminded him, wholly and indignantly ignoring her own tone thus far.

They reached the doors to his beloved sanctum, the school library, where, beyond, he hoped she would be unable to enter without an invitation. Sadly enough, his research had revealed that particular piece of lore to be inaccurate – vampyrs didn’t need an invitation. He had yet to investigate it with headteachers.

“As long as I’m the only Librarian around you don’t have to pay...yeah, I can,” he reminded her, before adding, “And please don’t pretend we’re my parents.”

“What parents?” she snapped. Mark, a long-time orphan, glared at her but said nothing and moved through the barriers into his sanctum. Unfortunately, the dousing with holy water and the crucifixes did nothing. He heard Drake cross the threshold behind him. He placed the books on the

counter as she continued, "I assume while you're thinking of a witty retort, you'll also decide to stick within budget?"

"I'll cut it down," he agreed, "Sure. But stick completely within your budget? I think I'd rather let pigeons eat my eyeballs. It would be good for the wildlife."

He turned and headed into the small office behind the counter, but, alas, she followed.

"Do better for the school field," she snarked, "Make good fertiliser considering you're so full of...Ricky."

He admittedly did a double-take when he heard the conclusion to her sentence, but following her gaze, he saw indeed Ricky sitting on the couch in his office, picking at the ruffled, worn edges where the fraying began. They did not have a scheduled meeting, and in fact, he was reasonably sure Ricky was supposed to be in double English.

"Despite the rumours, we're just friends," he joked, not bothering to stand up.

Drake's glare doubled as her arms crossed once more. If there was one thing that irritated her more than Mark's brazen defiance, it was students. Any students, but in particular those who happened not to fall into her conventional idea of what constituted an easy life. And Ricky, with his repeated school absences, failing grades, and somewhat flippant attitude, was not giving her an easy life. The fact that he, along with Mark, was helping to save the world was not something she was privy to. And therefore, she hated him.

"Right, like the mafia and the city council were just friends?" she countered.

"If I were a criminal organisation, I'd assume I'd be a lot more people," he quipped.

"Look, Miss Drake, I'm sure we can discuss this later," Mark urged, knowing Ricky's unscheduled appearance must have meant something was afoot. "For now, I'll think it over. Okay?"

"This isn't over," she made sure he knew, though her glance at Ricky suggested it was not merely Mark she was threatening implicitly.

"No, because the wishing well is drained of mystical powers at the moment," he muttered loud enough for her to capture, loud enough for her to glare, before she disappeared as though in a puff of smoke back out into the hallways of mediocrity, which she patrolled. "Five minutes with that woman and I'm mentally bleeding from every orifice."

"And yet she seems lovely," Ricky joked, "I'm sure I've mentioned that."

"What brings you here so early?" Mark probed, "I know one of us has classes."

It was then that Ricky took off his hoodie, revealing the blood stain beneath. Clearly, he hadn't dressed it, as the red pressed through the white school shirt he'd placed on it. He unbuttoned, drew it back and finally exposed the raw, angry wound he'd sustained. Mark sighed.

"Well, *Dad*, I thought dagger-wielding vampyrs would trump morning classes," Ricky pointed out.

"And you didn't even think of putting something on it, you arse?" Mark challenged, while slipping the first aid kit out from under the desk, "So what happened?"

With that, Ricky regaled him with a tale of confronting a vampyr in the alleyway, right up to the pillar of fire, and of the creature turning to ash.

Mark listened patiently while cleaning and dressing Ricky's wound in an appropriate and practised manner. Ricky, as was their agreement, left out no details – though they were sparse on the ground.

Vampyrs, according to the lore, were once human. Transformed by the power of blood, the vampyric disease spread through an overwhelming blood transfusion. They were not undead, as common parlance would have you believe; they were instead transformed into a fast and deadly

predator – able to switch between appearing perfectly human and a red-eyed demon insatiable for blood.

Thankfully, they were rare until they coalesced. Three in one week? Coalescence.

“So, as I said, I think this group is up to something more than murder and mayhem,” Ricky continued, as Mark stepped back and began to dispose of his gloves. “If they’re wielding ceremonial daggers...maybe they’re some kind of cult?”

“Vampyrs are not usually so much with the big plans,” Mark reminded him, “Last time they tried that, they were nearly wiped out, remember?”

“It’s been four hundred years,” Ricky correctly remembered, “You don’t think they might have figured out a different way to...y’know, fill their quota faster than usual?”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Mark relented, “But without knowing what they’re planning...”

“I know, we can’t do anything,” Ricky agreed, “We need more information.”

“And how exactly are we supposed to get that?”

“You get serious with the research,” Ricky suggested, assessing his newly dressed shoulder, which was, admittedly, beginning to feel a little better. “And I’ll hit the streets.”

“Hard.”

* * *

The descent felt immeasurably slow as the body hung in the space between flight and gravity. Glass shards fell around it, sparkling like falling stars in the orange streetlight flooding in

through the broken window. The corner shop, closed for the night an hour earlier, was now becoming a space of transformation—a place of light, and darkness, and blood-soaked violence.

The vampyr slammed into the ground with such force that it was momentarily stunned. And just like that, with contact, normal speed resumed, and the world around the creature returned to frantic, pounding energy.

Ricky leveraged his own momentum and flung the second vampyr, his arm locked around his throat as he grabbed him from behind and awkwardly slammed him into the rack of peanuts that some poor shop hand had likely spent hours putting together. The little scattered shards of anaphylactic doom burst across the floor. He moved seamlessly into a roundhouse kick at the third of his foes, rushing at him through the now useless (and utterly destroyed) front door. The third creature fell backwards into the booze shelf, smashing bottles as it went. Alcohol, pungent and aseptic, stung his nostrils, as the river of spirits doused the vampyr in an unholy baptism.

“You know they actually charge for that?” he joked, fumbling in his pocket for his Zippo lighter. He lit the flame in one smooth movement, and a flick of his wrist turned the baptism of alcohol into one of blue fire. Seconds later, the vampyr itself lit like a wick, bursting into a bright candle of death for mere moments before it became nothing more than ash.

The fire continued to burn behind him, the light flickering over the remainder of the scene as he turned towards his remaining two foes. The first remained groaning on the floor, very likely having broken something important in the several body slams. The second – peanuts – was recovering and rushing at him. At the last second, Ricky twisted, allowing the vamp's barrel charge to turn into more of a headlock situation with the vamp's deadly fangs inches from his midriff.

He clung on tight, dragged the creature over to the counter and spied his next tool of interrogation. The small, grotty microwave on the counter – likely there to help shoppers warm their salmonella-infused pasties during the day – seemed like a perfect idea.

He shoved the vamp's head inside, door open, one hand at the scruff of its neck, and the other holding the open door threateningly.

"Talk, or I fry your brain," he snapped, hoping that this vamp at least understood the mechanics of x-ray radiation – or whatever it was that microwaves gave off.

"You can't turn it on while the door's open..." the vamp struggled for breath. Reality momentarily sank in,

"Oh."

He did the only other thing he could think to do. He slammed the microwave door shut, ripping it through flesh and bone. A second inferno began as the creature burst into living flame and ash as he stepped back to avoid being caught in it. That left him one. One potential pile of dust – or one potential informant.

He turned, and the third pathetic creature was still struggling to get to its feet. So, he helped it, grabbing the vamp around the throat and lifting it into the air. He could see, despite the red-stained fear in its inhuman eyes, that it knew the situation it was now in. The piles of ashes which had once been its blood brothers, so to speak, were evident. As were the scorch marks of their passing and the very little inferno burning through the cramped corner shop.

This child, this boy, was a darkness the likes of which the vamp hoped never to experience again. So, relief washed through it when, with a snarky raised eyebrow, the boy asked,

"You feeling chatty now?"

Act II

The fire burning around them was not being abated; instead, it worked its way with unsurprising relentlessness first through the cheap booze and then onto the cigarettes, before finally consuming crisps. Who knew crisps were so flammable? A Walkers-laced inferno with wafts of salt and vinegar. At least it meant his interrogatee was becoming nervous, eyeing as it was the spectacle.

“Hey, not happy about the fire here,” it spoke, a dribble of its own blood tipping over its lip. Bit itself, with its own fang, probably. Ricky felt no sympathy.

“It will kill us both, sure,” Ricky shrugged, “Might take a bit longer for me, though.”

“I don’t know anything!” it insisted. Ricky now found himself feeling disgust. The squirming creature he held aloft no longer seemed like some potent supernatural threat. Instead, it seemed like a young man, maybe in his twenties, with a dress sense and a Metallica t-shirt that screamed he died sometime in the nineties. He seemed...pathetic. Save for the murderous red eyes and the razor-sharp fangs. It could not hide the inner demon.

“As much as I believe that, I don’t,” Ricky snarked at him, “Who’s in charge? Who runs your little pack?”

“Satana!” the vamp blurted out, “Her name’s Satana!”

“Nice, but as much as I love old rock bands, who’s really in charge?” Ricky snapped once more, feeling more annoyed at the blatant attempt at playing him than anything else. He squeezed tighter. He didn’t know if vamps needed to breathe, or, indeed, how long they could go without oxygen, but the discomfort should at least keep shaking something loose.

“I told you, I swear!” the creature insisted, wheezing.

“What are you up to?” he demanded next.

It was then the wave hit him. He could have held the creature aloft with his right arm all night long, such was the strength he felt, regardless of the adrenaline. But the wound which had been bothering him since the night before was beginning to burn again. He felt the world sway, a darkness enveloping the edges of his vision, and...unfortunately...the creature noticed it too. It lashed out, whether through sheer dumb luck or foreknowledge, managing to hit directly into the centre of his covered wound.

The pain was intense, flaring to life with freshened vigour. He felt something within the wound tear anew and fresh hot blood seep into the bandage as he cried out in pain, unable to help himself. He dropped the vamp, whose parting words as it ran from the shop bridled with passionate lameness.

“You’re going to die. All of you...”

It was gone, and Ricky was left alone in the burning corner shop, alone save for his enduring pain.

He managed after a moment’s composure to stumble his way out of the office and into the fresh open night air. Luckily, the corner shop was just on the fringes of the ‘good’ part of town, far enough from prying eyes that there were yet to be any sirens to be called. It wouldn’t last forever, even the biggest shitholes were eventually noticed by someone, but for now, he had some breathing room.

Funny, he thought, as the vicelike grip of pain banded its way again. He fumbled in his pocket, digging deep and dragging out a cigarette. He was underage, it was a crappy habit, but he had picked it up – sometimes the heady hit of nicotine was the only thing which could counteract the adrenaline and the flood of pain hormones racing through his body. It was a false calm, but false calm was all it seemed he had.

Next, he searched for his lighter, remembering in a flash that it too was burning in the inferno behind him. Luckily, he had a light. He moved back towards the flames licking from the front of the store and lit his cigarette, dragging down that first sweet puff. He sighed, relaxing into it, and leaned once more against the old stone wall leading away, a streamlet of the river gurgling its way by behind him somewhere in the darkness.

“Those things’ll kill you, y’know?” a voice came from said darkness. He would have liked to have jumped, but he sensed the presence on the edge of his vision before it spoke—a human, he’d deduced quickly, someone attempting to be mysterious.

“Lotta things out there’ll do that for free,” he answered, before looking in their direction. It was a girl, not much older than him. She was pretty (he did not have a lot of time for dating considerations, but he could still tell when a girl was pretty – he wasn’t dead). Her hair was kept short and spiky, and she wore dark black like him. She almost blended into the night behind her, save for her pale face. She slowly began to walk towards him. “You’re not screaming in fear. I’m guessing you know what those things I killed were?”

Other people around the world must have known about the forces of darkness – Mark would be unable to get so much great information through his lore research if not, but there didn’t seem to be many of them in Calendar itself. Too small a town, in too small a playing field, he supposed. Therefore, he was surprised to see anyone so calm.

Unless, of course, she was one of the bad guys.

“Know more about them than you do,” she confirmed, a bit up herself if he was allowed to think that.

“Great, know any information or are you just here to do a whole enigmatic informant thing?” he retorted, before adding, “Because I never rated the whole David Borenaz thing. I mean, you’re cute and all...”

“Enigmatic, mostly,” she answered, with a wry smile. She wasn’t taking the bait, the little cute comment designed to get under her skin. He was impressed, “Vamps don’t bother me.”

“Why not?”

“If I told you that, I wouldn’t be enigmatic anymore.”

He rolled his eyes, feeling irritation more than normal levels from the strange encounter. The open wound in his shoulder may have something to do with it.

“There are others out there, y’know,” she continued after a moment’s silence. “Others fighting, just like you.” She shrugged and looked out at the darkness, towards the South Side, where few lights punctuated the night.

“Then why are you here?” he asked, irritation seeping into his tone.

“Not all those fish are the bad guys.”

She smiled, and he realised he didn’t quite get it right. She wasn’t just cute or pretty; she was beautiful. Sad, he could see a haunted look in her eyes, but beautiful nonetheless. Then she was gone, walking off down the street, while a fresh bolt of pain in his shoulder took away any other thoughts he had.

He needed help.

* * *

The midnight oil was burnt late at Calendar High School Library, the soft office light was the only pool in the whole building. It had become sadly routine, even the maintenance crew now knew

that Mark Matthews was dedicated to his unpaid job – enough that he had his own set of keys to let himself in and out. A sad late teen with no life, perhaps? Better than them knowing the truth.

In truth, he was deep into his research. A massive tome chronicling the last time the vampyrs attempted mass murder and world domination had grasped his attention. So much that he'd not even made it back into his office and stood at the counter, reading through the arcane, quaint English script and trying not to look too hard at the flamboyant engravings. He somehow doubted that when they attempted to overthrow the crown, they all had their knockers out—bloody artists.

He heard the door hinge go but didn't need to look up. He was becoming used to the sound of Ricky's steps.

"Mark..."

"Did you know the Babylonians did not have a Babylonian to English dictionary?" he joked, having previously switched from an even more ancient text to give himself a little breathing room. "Sort of rude that."

"Mark..."

Ricky sounded more insistent this time; something in his tone finally made Mark turn around. His friend was in a state. He stood, barely, swaying as if in a fierce gale. His eyes were bloodshot, his face was ruddy yet almost white with fever and sweat dripped down his brow.

"Oh God, what's wrong?"

"The shoulder..." Ricky told him breathlessly, "...pain...just gotta...y'know..." He attempted to step forward, and one shaky knee gave way, sending him pitching forward. Mark managed to prop him up before he slammed against the ground, "...collapse..."

With that, the hunter was unconscious, the mighty felled. Mark knelt beside him, looking toward the office and considering his own untested physical strength.

“Well, I guess this is a sleepover,” he muttered to no one, trying to remember where he kept the blankets.

Deep inside himself, he was scared. Their friendship was relatively new for both of them, but deep. Ricky was the only other person in the world that he could talk to about the things in the dark. And now, he was struggling – and Mark had no idea what he could do.

* * *

The morning when it finally came was grey in its intensity. A drizzle continued to saturate and fog that would lift by late morning, was still clinging to the buildings as Mark returned to the library. He was glad the town council had finally relented and allowed a Costa onto the high street, one that opened early for commuters. He’d managed to snag two Americanos and two cinnamon buns before attempting to return to his charge.

Ricky’s condition remained steady but not in a good place. Mark had managed to get him onto the sofa, despite the dead weight of the passed-out boy, put a blanket over him and remained at his desk the rest of the night. Sometime around four o’clock, he’d grabbed himself two hours of accidental sleep, awakening to find he’d slept on a Post-it note. Nearby, Ricky continued to sleep, mumbling a little as he went, sweating and shaking with fever.

As he entered back in through the doors, he was surprised to see Miss Drake already standing at the reception counter. Blue power suit this time, it was a new day after all, but otherwise a carbon copy of the last time they had spoken.

“Can we talk now?” she asked. Mark felt his hackles rise, bristling instinctively.

“If it’s about the same subject, I told you...”

"It's not," she cut him off, finally looking up from the forms she was signing to look at him. She glanced at the Costa bag in his hands and offered further preamble...

"Look, the attitude doesn't surprise me," she began, "All children are born without a soul, so..."

"Some adults end up without one, too," he agreed.

"You're right," she answered. "I can't physically or diplomatically touch you. But what I can do is talk to the head of sixth form, which I have been, bigoted little bitch troll as she is –" (the animosity between Miss Drake and Miss Code was the stuff of legend) " – and it turns out you've not been doing so well this year. Missing classes and all."

"Is this the part where you threaten to cut me off from the library if it's affecting my school work?" he snarked, feeling a rising panic in his chest that it might be exactly what she was hinting at.

"No, you're right, I do need a librarian," she admitted with a shrug, "And unfortunately, you fit the best, cheapest bill there is. I'm just...concerned."

"Real human feelings, I'm actually surprised." As snarky as his words sounded, even to him, they were genuine. He had never seen anything as humanising as Drake's words to him that morning. It was oddly unsettling.

"You could be the best damn librarian in the world, but you're not much good if you self-destruct," she reminded him. Again, all true, but disquieting.

"I'm fine, seriously," he told her, the look shared between them honest and open. "Can we go back to bitching? I prefer that to this uncomfortable stuff."

"Sure," she agreed, turning back to her form, "Delinquent."

"Troll."

With that, he moved on, heading back towards the library and his visitor. But in the back of his mind, he had to wonder what he had just witnessed. A real human being underneath their matriarchal warden. Today was turning out to be a crazy day after all.

He had no idea how right he would turn out to be.

* * *

The beast boy began to stir as Mark re-entered his office. With the characteristic groan of the growing teenager, Ricky struggled to sit up from his blanket, blinking hazily at the world around him. The fresh scents of coffee and cinnamon helped to ground him back into where he was—the high school, the library, Mark’s office. The night returned to him in a wave.

“You know you can sleep on my sofa as long as you want, but you’re going to have to talk to your wife sometime,” Mark joked, placing the bag on his desk and beginning to dish out the goods.

“God, I feel like crap,” Ricky moaned, stretching. After several nights on the same sofa, Mark knew how uncomfortable it was – not the place for a growing and mildly injured Guide.

“Hopefully you feel a little less like crap,” Mark offered as he handed him his americano. “I changed your bandage last night.”

“What happened?” Ricky asked, hoping his clarification would align with his own.

“You collapsed,” Mark supplied, “When I was changing your bandage, I didn’t see any signs of infection. No red lines, no pus. And if you’ve been using the disinfecting agent I told you...”

“It’s something else?” Ricky finished. Already in their short-lived alliance, he’d come to know that ‘something else’ was never something good. The unknown was danger, and an unknown cause of his illness was a very personal kind of danger.

“By the looks of it, I would say a poison or toxin,” Mark agreed. “Probably on the edge of the dagger.”

“Well, I haven’t been given any apples by my stepmother lately, so I’ll assume you’re right,” Ricky agreed. He groaned again, a fresh wave of pain bolting through his shoulder. When it began to abate, Mark offered him a cinnamon bun. Frosting helped, it was true. “I’m guessing a hospital is out of the question?”

“And explain to them how you got a mysterious knife wound despite being a regular guy?” Mark countered. Ricky had to admit his logic was flawless; they had very little reason to believe anyone in a position of authority knew there were bumps in the night. “They probably couldn’t help anyway.”

“I could always say I fell on a barbecue fork,” Ricky joked, but saw the reference go over Mark’s head like a powered frisbee. He was already deep in thought, machinations turning as he chewed almost mechanically on his own cinnamon bun and sat back down at his desk. The man, well, boy really, did not have any qualms about going into his own world when in thought mode. Ricky, who did not have his same inner monologue, often stayed quiet in those moments.

“There are thousands of poisons out there the doctors haven’t even heard of,” Mark ruminated. “Some of them have mystical components undetectable by conventional lab tests. I don’t think we’d be able to solve it, even with their help.”

“Then what do we do?” Ricky reflected at him, a sounding board.

“I think the first step would be to retrieve the dagger,” Mark continued, almost without hearing him. “After that...I don’t know, some chemical analysis. But I’m completely out of my depths here.”

Ricky placed the coffee back on the side table, groaning as he lay back down and drew the blanket around him. This cut through some of Mark's brain fog, unused as he was to seeing his friend – and supernatural hunter, to boot – in pain.

"How's your temperature?" he asked him, kindly.

"I don't think the sun is on the Kelvin scale," Ricky moaned. Not one to kick a boy when he's down, Mark elected not to correct him. "How goes the research?"

"Slow and painstaking," he admitted, "Apparently, when vamps try to destroy the world, they don't leave behind an instruction manual on how they tried to do it. What about last night? Did you find anything out?"

"Well, either the vamp was a heavy metal fan, or the leader is," Ricky explained, "He said 'Satana' is responsible."

"While I pretend to get that reference, I'll add it to my 'to research' list," he muttered.

"Just don't try the internet, you'll never find it."

Mark, for whom computer research and the world of Yahoo was a threshold to which he never wished to cross, smiled at his friend and responded dryly,

"You obviously don't know me very well."

He decided with certainty that next steps were needed and that forward motion would feel better than none. He stood, pulling on his light coat from the rack, even as Ricky shuffled to make himself more comfortable on the sofa.

"You stay here, I'm going to get the dagger," he determined.

"What if someone comes by?" It was not precisely the night hours anymore, but the idea of someone sleeping on the librarian's couch would still raise a few eyebrows.

“Pretend you’re working for me,” Mark suggested, “Just try not to, you know, bleed or collapse on them. I’ll be back soon.”

With that, Mark headed for the door and left his friend to sleep. He could only hope that the dagger was still in the alleyway where it was left, and that it held the answers he needed. He was quite literally out of his depth, and the feeling was not welcome. As he exited the school's front doors, he turned up his jacket collar and headed out into the greyness.

* * *

Mark followed Ricky’s description perfectly, turning away from the school and moving down towards the slightly less glamorous part of town. He passed the fire-engine idling beside a decidedly crispy corner shop and turned left down to the street of many takeaways – what the locals tended to call Dysentery Drive. The alleyway, where Ricky had encountered the vampyr with the dagger, ran behind it.

The drizzle did not precisely mask the wonderful scents that filled the alleyway. The drifting smells of rotting garbage, some of which actually made it into the dumpsters. With so many food-based establishments nearby, the scene was undercut with a thick, meaty compost smell that turned his stomach. And was that urine?

Even the smell of the wet woods nearby was not enough to combat the olfactory assault to which he was subject. He resolved to make his visit brief and doubled his pace down the shady little non-street.

To one attuned to the nightly struggles, it was easy to spot the scorch mark, indicating the vampyr’s place of demise. It was approximately halfway along, behind the fish and chip shop, a

dumpster nearby filled with things he'd rather not describe or ever remember. Underneath the dumpster, however, there was a metallic flash.

He knelt, wrapping his hand in his handkerchief before reaching for what looked like an ivory handle.

"Ornate," a voice came from behind him. "But I don't think that's elephant bone."

He jumped, unaccustomed as he was to fieldwork, and turned a little too forcefully towards his new acquaintance. She smiled, amused by the startling, in a way that only made his indignation worse. And his mood.

"Who are you?" he asked, curtly. The woman, girl really, she must have been about his age, stood there calmly. She was dressed casually in all black. This was not a girl heading to school. This was a person he was struggling to categorise.

"Well, more polite than you are, that's for sure," she responded, her words and tone dissonant. She did not sound put out or offended in the slightest.

"I'm guessing not, sneaking up on people and all," he retorted, "Unless you want to venture your name?"

"Claire," she surprised him by answering immediately.

"And I'm Mark, aren't we all friends now?" he responded sarcastically. He still felt the sting of his own surprise at being snuck up on and felt himself bristle with it. He went to move past her, unsure what the encounter would further hold, and remarkably uncurious. He slipped the dagger into his coat pocket as he went, ensuring he still wrapped it in the handkerchief.

"You know if the police catch you with that thing, you won't be able to save the world," she admonished, "Definitely not with bars in the way."

He did stop at that, turning to face her. Some instinct was finally being heard over his initial defensiveness.

“Okay, barring your name, who are you?”

“A girl with her ear to the ground,” she answered. “You run with the Guide, which makes you a good guy. Doesn’t protect you, though, you’re both playing in some serious shit these days.”

“The Guide?” he asked, picking up on the term. He was assuming she was referring to Ricky, but the term seemed alien to him.

“Apparently, doesn’t make you knowledgeable either,” she mused.

“What is it you want from me?” he demanded.

“Be careful, Mark,” she warned him. He was unsure whether she was actually answering the question. “You stick with Ricky for too long, you could get yourself killed.”

“Small price to pay,” he retorted, “given what’s at stake.”

“Oh, you really don’t know what’s at stake,” she countered, “But you will...once you’ve lost it.”

The girl, Claire, began to walk away. Her tone sombre, her shoulders slouched. It was as if speaking to him unlocked memories, things she didn’t want to say. He’d seen someone hiding their pain enough to know what it looked like. But her words, her behaviour, her very appearance were a mystery.

“Which side are you on?” he asked.

“The one that lives.”

* * *

Calendar was a town divided in a fundamental and binary way. Settlements had been in the area since at least Roman times, with a through route (now a modern bypass) following the trail north to south through the valley to connect the deeper parts of rural Lancashire above (and connecting motorways to cities like Preston and Lancaster) with the more urbanised Greater Manchester below. The Calendar River, a larger tributary that eventually converged with the River Irwell downstream, followed a similar trajectory.

On the “North Side” (which was, in fact, the majority of the east side of the slightly diagonal winding river) was the majority of the town. The hub, the heart. A high street, a High School, old mill houses and all manner of residential and business leanings. This is where people stayed, where they lived, where they grew up, and where they died—the wheel of life.

Until the 1930s, the South Side (in reality, the majority of the west) was the affluent area. The one where socialites glistened, and mansions reigned. It was slightly higher, thus more protected from flooding. But, over time, it had changed. Stories persisted – of course – about ghostly goings on and brutal murders. Entire dynasties lost to suicide and curses. The truth was, in the minds of the majority at least, more mundane. The rich moved to bigger houses on the “North Side”, high above in the forest and slopes of the Old Man of Calendar, with spectacular views across all of the county. And a slow ruination began to take over the South Side. When the money moved, so did the life, until all that was left were abandoned buildings. Old mills, windows smashed out, now given back over to nature and time. Some industrial warehouses and operations still ran, but the place was pretty much abandoned most days. Save for drunken, horny teenagers and a bit of a seedier component.

“Twenty years and this is the crap they gave me?” Officer Jeff muttered to himself as the patrol car crunched through the detritus of the car park.

“Hey, they gave it to me too,” Officer Taylor, his irritatingly younger partner, protested.

The two police officers, bound solely by their superior's decree, stepped out of their patrol car and regarded the remains of the old police station. The newer one, a small satellite office on the North Side, was nowhere near as grand as the sandstone monstrosity in front of them. The valley's police force had moved to a new hub in Rawtenstall, a few miles away, a couple of decades earlier, and thus the last fully functional building was left to ruin with the rest.

"And you're three months out of training, *I'd* give you this assignment," Jeff reminded him.

"If only you had an office," the younger man teased, before heading towards the litter-strewn front steps. Their orders were a quick sweep, after an anonymous call to the station indicated there may be possible squatters inside. This was not an unusual call, especially for the South Side, and was not on the high-priority list.

Strangely, you might think, given what we know of the town, Calendar was quiet on the police front – and thus a broad daylight visit to check out the minor possibility of crime was easily doable—strong emphasis on the broad daylight.

"Brat," Jeff muttered to himself, as he followed his new – and hopefully brief – partner up into the abandoned building.

Though outside the day was bright enough grey to see by, inside it was a very different picture. The grime of years of neglect had fogged most of the windows, the ones which hadn't been broken altogether or replaced by creeping vines and moss.

"God, look at this place," the young officer Taylor muttered as he shone his police-issue torch into the grim gloom, "someone needs to call the maid." The more sour-faced older officer, likely thinking of his comfy desk chair and a spot of lunch, remained silent. Somehow, entering the world of abandonment, even if the mundane explanation-"they simply built a new one elsewhere"-pervaded it, seemed to deserve more reverence. "Never mind, I'll check the offices."

"It's probably just kids pissing about," Officer Jeff grumbled, unable to deny the slight shiver working its fingers up and down his spine. "I'm sure we don't actually need to search the place."

"Protecting people, fighting crime, remember?" Officer Taylor smugly returned. It was Jeff's turn to glare once more,

"Ah, I forgot, you're not cynical yet. Give it five years."

With that, he turned his back on the irritating young man and headed instead in the direction of the cells. The youthful exuberance and determination to do things by the book were already grating on him. The lad didn't know what being a small-town police officer generally involved, nor did he quite get how the creeping sense of anxiety at stepping into the unknown was not so much thrilling as it seemed. There was no glory in their future, no grand drug busts or newspaper fame. There was only the possibility of getting hurt and leaving behind a family.

Well, in his case, a fat dog and a miserable wife, but still family.

He paused at the entranceway to the cells, feeling the pervasive gloom even more. The atmosphere of the cloudy day had followed them indoors and was pushing him further towards the edge of his patience.

Then came the shuffle. Just a touch, from nearby. Somewhere behind him. He whirled his torch around, attempting to appear as controlled as he did not feel. There was nothing.

"Hey, dick, quit pissing about," he called out, sure his partner was taking the opportunity to spook the older man. "Been on the job twenty years, ain't ever believed in ghosts yet."

He meant it, too. He rolled his eyes, somewhat theatrically for the benefit of his prankster, then turned. Right into the torch-lit face of the young cop, mocking him with the old 'light under the chin' gag.

"You're an arse," he told him mutely.

"Greatest arse there ever was," the young man agreed, not phased in the slightest by the failure of his prank. "Come on, there's nowt, let's get out of here."

The young man moved past him, back in the direction of the front door. Jeff lingered a moment longer in the corridor, shining his light back into the gloom. Yeah, ghosts he left to a different world – the realm of idiots like Taylor. Still, what he hadn't said was that he believed in evil. And there was definitely a sense of that here.

The fresh scream prepared him for another chastising of his young charge. The man would just not quit. But as he prepared to turn and follow his partner out to his stupid prank, the sudden shock of his body landing at the far end of the corridor, blood running down his throat that pulsed with the raw sinew and bone of having been ripped out, his preparation broke down.

Pure, abject terror struck him then, unable to comprehend the horror before him. The body was dragged away by hands unseen, leaving behind a grim trail of its passage. Urgency thundered into his brain as his body was told to run, lunging forward like some drunken maniac.

It did little to stop his inevitable fate. Something struck behind him; he, like his torch, clattered to the ground, spinning around in the chaos of the attack. All that remained, before the older officer's screams died in the depressing gloom, was the thick drip of fresh blood on the cracked glass of the torch.

Then it too died.

* * *

The midday lesson dragged with a slow uncertainty. Would it end? Was there truly an escape from this prison of intellectual torment? Or would this be her cell for eternity, doomed to listen to

endless speeches about pace, cadence and the voice of the inner child or whatever? She didn't know. It seemed a hopeless proposition, and the unnatural warmth from the radiator made her eyelids grow somewhat heavy. The school maintenance guys seemed to have two modes – turn on the radiators when it's warm, even if there's a speck of rain, or keep them off for a deep freeze in the middle of winter. There seemed to be no in between.

"I know it is not strictly recommended reading on the curriculum, but *The Shining* is one of those stories that everyone should read," the teacher, Miss Fogley, droned on in the background. "Not because it's modern, or even that well written. But because there's a lesson to be learned within its pages that few of us learn until it's too late. A lesson that's impossible to believe until you begin to see it."

Sara's consciousness swam at the periphery. She was thinking about her recent conversation with Ricky, triggered by the picture of the two of them in her planner, tucked discreetly between the pages. A few years ago, happier times. The English lesson was being held by a substitute who was clearly into horror fiction and had been going on about the works of Stephen King for what felt like seventeen years (it'd been forty-five minutes).

"Whether it's our husband, our wife, our brother, our sister, or even our parents – someone in our life, sometimes even ourselves, will begin to slip," she continued. Sara's mind started to drag itself slowly closer to awareness, despite the oppressive warmth, as if the sub was speaking directly to her. "Be it through trauma or through depression, something will begin to give. Like Jack, we try to hold onto our lives, even when they're poisoned. We self-medicate, refuse to believe what's right in front of us until it's too late."

She was finally present once more in the room, though her mind was split with thoughts of Ricky. His behaviour, his demeanour, the growing distance between them – encapsulated by the words spoken by this strange adult.

“The sad fact is, we don’t see the signs until it’s too late,” she continued, “Until we’re holding that mallet to our son’s face, so to speak. And yet the signs are there, always. We refuse to believe them. Seeing...is not always believing”

As she finished, her eyes locked with Sara’s own right before she opened her mouth and began a metallic screeching.

The school bell signalled the end of the lesson as Sara’s mind snapped back into her body and she realised she’d been daydreaming. The teacher was not a sub; she was their regular old grey-haired demonic English teacher. She wasn’t discussing *The Shining*; she was talking about *Of Mice and Men*. And she was not screaming, the bell was blaring above them, signalling the end of the lesson and the beginning of freedom and lunch.

Only, Sara wasn’t quite ready to eat yet. She, instead, had someone she needed to speak to. And after having seen him shuffle from the canteen into the library, she had a strange feeling about where he might be.

“Sleeping at school these days,” she joked, “Didn’t know you’d fall in love with the place.”

Her hunch had proven correct. Ricky Kent, her oldest friend, woke from his slumber on the school librarian’s couch. In the middle of the school day, he looked like he had the worst hangover of his life. Not that he’d even drunk. Of course...

“Sara, it’s not really a good time...” he began, with the croaking voice of someone woken too early from sleep. Which he had, because she’d interrupted it. Again, in the school librarian’s office, during the school day.

“When is it going to be?” she asked softly. He blinked, raising himself into a sitting position and allowing the blanket to crumple to one side. Her soft tone belied a deeper sadness, and to this he finally responded, looking a little more like the old, kinder Ricky she knew.

"I don't know what you want from me, Sara," not angry, just sad in some way. She sensed his sorrow, but also the lie he was telling himself behind it.

"For starters, please don't lie to me," she asked him. "You know exactly what I want. I want you to let me back in. To let me be part of your life again."

"It's not that easy," he dismissed.

"Why?"

"It's just not!" he snapped. There was the anger she'd seen in him the other day, the same quiet rage that boiled underneath the surface. She wasn't surprised to see it, but it still stung to hear them in her direction. She couldn't help the look of hurt on her face, but he could see that clearly enough. It softened him again, "Sara, you've been my best friend since before I can remember, but things are different now."

"Between us?"

"No...and yes," he answered, looking unsure of himself. "I've got something going on in my life now that you can't be a part of."

"Why not?" she asked, unsure if she wanted an honest answer. What could be so bad that he couldn't share it? "Even if I'm not a part of it, you know you can talk to me about it."

"Because you can't fix it," he told her, "It's not something we can chat about, and then everything's better. It'd just suck you into it, and it might get you hurt."

"Ricky, it's hurting you," she pressed, sitting down next to him on the sofa. "Whatever it is, you need to tell someone before it gets you killed."

"I can't," he moaned, "Sara, I just can't." He held his head in his hands, and for a moment she wondered if the boy she'd grown up with was crying, a sight she'd not seen in their shared fifteen years. "You know I love you, right?"

"You know the same goes for me," she answered honestly. "But love means nothing if you're dead."

"Sara, do you trust me?"

"Ricky..."

"Do. You. Trust. Me?"

She thought for a moment, then reluctantly nodded. It was true, she did, even when he was acting like this, even when the possibility hung between them that he was caught in something dangerous, even with the spectre of his simmering anger still lingering behind his eyes.

"Then please, trust me now," he begged of her, "I'm not going to get hurt. It's not going to kill me. I will survive." She didn't know whether to believe him, but the earnest look in his eyes sold the lie.

"Promise me something?" she asked of him.

"Sure."

"Whatever it is, you won't let it get in the way of our friendship anymore?" she finished. He looked at her for a long moment, a sadness behind his soft smile.

"Promise."

Was it a lie? Only time would tell.

Act III

The clouds had finally parted by late afternoon, allowing the grey day to turn into orange splendour, bringing a seasonable warmth and setting the fronts of the redbrick terraces aflame. Ricky's eyes blinked awake once more, having lost himself to a dose that felt more like unconsciousness than genuine sleep. His shoulder still throbbed, though the more it went on, the more detached he felt from the process.

Nearby, he could hear the sounds of shuffling papers and tilted his head to find, unsurprisingly, Mark sat at his desk, nose in a book. Even at seventeen, only two years older than himself, he looked incredibly boyish in the afternoon light. Ricky was struck by it, by how the world was already changing them. From young boys who should be bound by no darker purpose than schoolwork, now lost into the nighttime calling that had taken them.

"You sneaking into everyone's make-shift bedrooms these days?" he joked weakly, as he tried to get himself up into a seated position. It took more effort than he liked; his energy had not been restored from his nap.

"How are you feeling?" Mark asked him, the concern clear on his face. It softened and warmed him.

"Like the firemen set me on fire, after they'd hit me with their truck," he answered colourfully, but honestly.

"It's getting worse," Mark said more to himself than for Ricky's benefit.

"Well, being on the receiving end of the poison, that's painfully clear," he responded, feeling more than a bit of sarcasm there. "What did you find on the dagger?"

"The markings are clearly ceremonial, but they don't match anything I've come across so far," Mark admitted, the frustration taking over his features. "I have some people looking into it."

"Wow, it's almost like we're a government agency or something," he joked again.

"This isn't funny," Mark snapped at him. The concern was bubbling away now, brimming over with a frustration Ricky didn't have the effort to feel for himself.

"Dying man is aware of that," he agreed, without any reproach. He understood his friend's concern and the ways powerful emotions could undermine one's sense of decorum.

"Sorry."

"You'll figure it out," he assured him, "You always do."

"In other news, what do you know about the Guide?" Mark asked him, pivoting away from another potential emotional moment.

"You mean Girl Guides?" Ricky responded, confused and unsure if he was actually joking, "They sell biscuits and shit, right?"

"No, 'The Guide'," Mark corrected, "as a mystical term. Haven't you heard it before? Or had anything come through in...well, those dreams?"

"No, no dreams," Ricky responded quietly, feeling the echo of their memory, the beginning and the screams behind them. "Not the same anyway, not after...well, after..." He felt the heaviness in the air between them, memories of their beginning, of the events leading to their thrusting together, and of the call to their action. It hung out there, like a rain cloud. But now was not the time for remembering, for going back. Now was the time for moving forward. "Why do you ask?"

"I was approached by someone in the alleyway when I was finding the dagger," Mark explained, "She used the term, and I think she was referring to you."

"'bout 5'9, short hair, brown?" Ricky asked, "Likes black like Snoop Dog like the leaf?"

"I assume so," Mark answered, lost by another cultural reference, "You met her as well?"

"Sure," Ricky explained, "She popped up at the corner shop, did the whole mysterious informant routine without any actual information, then disappeared off into the night."

"Replace night with day, and it sounds like her."

Mark sighed, feeling the frustration and the ticking clock's urgency loud in his ears.

"Screw mysterious, we need some real information," he determined.

"Where are you going?"

"To get some answers."

With that, he headed for the doors and out into the afternoon. He had been deliberately non-descriptive, for there were a few secrets he still hadn't told Ricky about.

He headed home.

* * *

The Matthews household was a relatively modern detached house, halfway up the hill. In what many would consider the 'nice' part of town. His Aunt and his Uncle, with whom he lived, were academics and, as such, they were relatively well off. But even so, the house he came home to was a house, not home. That much had always been clear to him, in the perfectly manicured lawn tended to by a local gardener.

He didn't remember his parents; he was far too young when they passed for anything but the dream-like glimpses of old memory. All he knew was growing up under the care of Uncle John and Aunt Beth, and he and his older brother – and he had moved out at the first chance he could get.

That left Mark alone. Uncle John had always maintained that he had taken them in for the memory of his sister, Ruth, their mother. Otherwise, children were never part of the plan for him and Beth. A life of quiet academia – punctuated by short trips away – was all they'd ever wanted.

To be a child of duty, not choice, seeped into the way they were raised. Thus, as Mark headed back to the house, he didn't feel the warmth of coming home – merely back to a place of sleep and performative security.

But there was something else he had slowly woken up to over time. His Uncle John and his Aunt Beth were not entirely who they claimed to be. Yes, he was a professor of history at the local university, and she taught piano in between writing papers on musical theory. That much of their life was true. However, they engaged in something far more intriguing. Some of the books in his Uncle's library were remarkably occult-focused; he'd managed to sneak occasional looks when they had gone on their trips. Then there were the occasional phone calls overheard by a child, being seen but not heard, and references to something they called 'The Covenant'.

Which was why, when his path had crossed with a young man learning about his supernatural powers, Mark was not in the least bit surprised. He had known from a young age that there were things that went bump in the night, and he also knew his Aunt and Uncle knew as well – though neither had acknowledged it.

He came across his Aunt first, his Uncle clearly out for the afternoon at the office. She was washing dishes in the way she always did, with a slow but deliberate efficiency, while her gaze passed out into the beautiful rose garden at the back of the house. There was no music, no radio on in the background, there was only the sound of birds flittering through the window.

He walked up to her; she must have sensed him but did not greet or turn around and placed the ceremonial dagger on the draining board within her line of sight.

"We need to talk," he said. She hesitated, just a second lingering on the soaped plate in her hands, before the tea towel began to move concentrically and methodically back over the porcelain.

"Where'd you get that?" she asked, her tone even, betraying nothing of her emotions. Feelings he was unsure she ever even felt.

"It doesn't matter," he dismissed.

"You're carrying around a bladed weapon, I would say it does," she responded. Though her words had meaning, her tone could have been discussing the weather rather than the potential for her guardianship's criminal actions.

"I know you and Uncle John are involved in something," he revealed, "I know what you do. You know about the supernatural, about the things which plague this town. And I don't think it's just the two of you alone. What's the Covenant?"

At that, the plate clinked into the rack with a bit of extra force; she had nearly dropped it at the name-drop. The Covenant meant something to her; the fact that it came from his lips had surprised her. Terribly. For the first time, he heard a slight breathless concern in her voice.

"We're not having this conversation."

She picked up the next dish, but finally turned her face to look at him, their gaze levelling at one another. The tension continued to grow.

"We need to," he insisted, "People's lives are at stake."

"You don't know what you're getting yourself involved in," she warned him, "The things you're talking about, they're...dangerous."

"I know there's a struggle out there, every day and every night," he answered, "People fighting for their lives, for the lives of others, and you two and your precious Covenant don't seem to do anything about it."

“How did you learn the term?” she asked. She was attempting to move him off the conversation, distract him with false leads.

“Overheard conversations, the books Uncle John carries around,” he answered with a shrug, “Didn’t take a genius to figure out, once I knew the truth myself.”

“Listen to me, Mark, these people watch, they don’t interfere,” she explained, “But they will stop anyone who tries to. Your Uncle didn’t want to tell you any of this until you were old enough to be brought into the fold, to join us. You’re still too young.”

“What’s the Guide?” he pressed, “Who’s Satana? What mystical poisons are there?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Please!” he begged, feeling his frustration at the wall of stoicism he was receiving begin to bubble over. Her cold indifference to their plight, to the things which were plaguing the town in the night. “My friend’s life is in danger; he’s dying even as we speak.”

“Then he shouldn’t have gotten involved,” she slammed the door shut between them. She turned her gaze back away from him, her hands completely steady again as she returned to washing the next of the dishes. Cups now, the ones in which his uncle enjoyed his peppermint tea. “I’m sorry, I don’t have the answers for you, Mark. It’s too dangerous. This matter is finished, Mark, it’s over.”

He stared at her a moment longer, the way her face refused to crack with emotion at his plea. He knew they had never been close; her maternal nature was never strong. There was no bond; there was only reciprocal acknowledgement of their familial obligation. But some small part of him, perhaps some inner child that had never lost hope, had thought maybe, maybe he could appeal to a better nature. Possibly, some protective instinct may emerge. But he had been entirely wrong.

Realising he was getting nowhere, he turned and began to head for the door. She spoke again, quieter now, not quite as harsh.

“Don’t interfere, Mark, please,” she asked of him, “If you do, and they find out...I won’t be able to stop them. I will not be responsible for the consequences.”

“I can’t do anything,” he told her honestly. After a long pause, she nodded,

“I won’t tell your Uncle we had this conversation,” she offered, “That’s all I can do for you.”

She didn’t look at him, didn’t turn around. Like that, they were done with the conversation. Perhaps she was being honest; she would compartmentalise it completely and never think of it again. He did not know how, but something had clearly and fundamentally shifted in the relationship. They said you could never go home again, but home was never an option in the first place.

He left, more hopeless than he entered.

* * *

Sara struggled to think. Being unable to pay attention in class was pretty standard, especially in sixth-period History. But her thoughts this time were not the usual wondering what she was having for tea or whether she’d be able to convince her mum to switch to the Sky Package with the music channels. It was Ricky.

Their conversation had helped her anxiety but had not alleviated it. He was in trouble; she could feel it, see it on his face. He was scared, he was tired. But deeper beneath all that, he was still trying to hold on. She wondered whether it was just down to the loss he’d suffered, the death of his parents, or whether it was something else. Something dangerous.

“Hey, you look distant,” a voice floated over to her. It drew her back into the present, where the majority of the class were packing up and getting ready to go for the day.

"What?" she asked, probably a little ruder than she intended. Sam Summers, her other bestest friend in the whole world, was standing in front of her, glaring down at her befuddled friend.

"I was calling you distracted," Sam pointed out, "This is my day for people proving my point."

"What is it, Sam?" she asked, beginning to pack her own books away, desperate to get away from purgatory for another day.

"Just checking you're still coming tonight, right?" Sam asked her, expectantly. It took a moment for Sara to dig through her brain banks enough to remember the birthday party.

"Sure, whatever."

"Really?" Sam asked, sceptical, "Once more with feeling would be nice."

"I said okay, Sam, stop hounding me," she snapped, as she finished packing her bag and started to move past her to the door.

"It's important."

"Right, I get it, see you later."

Had she taken a moment to pause, to look at her friend's face, she might have seen some genuine hurt. But as Sara's thoughts were occupied elsewhere, she didn't. And Sam, a confident young woman, hid it quickly enough. Sara could not appreciate at the time the irony that while she worried about one friend pushing her away, she was doing the same. And that was not cool.

* * *

The school day was over for anyone but Amy Donaldson. The sunlight flitted through the blinds and into the small science lab classroom, where, half an hour after the final bell had rung that

day, she sat, peering into her microscope and making notes with her free hand. The rest of the world ceased to exist as Amy drew herself down into the microbial world. There, cells moved, organelles floated, and life was made.

The thing about being the most intelligent person in the school? Teachers were actually pretty cool with you. Meaning, even though some of the (admittedly locked) cupboards contained bottles of things that could cause havoc in the wrong hands, she was often allowed to continue working later into the evening. Sometimes, later than most of the teachers, unsupervised. Because she was smart, she was trusted.

Possibly unfair, but true – and anything that helped her add the extra edge to her learning, the better.

“Oooh, mitochondria,” she part-sang to herself as she adjusted the magnification and began to count the little powerhouses in front of her. “Miiiiitoooo...chondriaaaaaa....”

A polite little cough dragged her back into reality, out of the micro and into the macro world, where her cheeks began to flood with colour and shame. Singing, someone had caught her sitting and singing about mitochondria to herself like a pillock.

And oh, of course, it had to be *him*.

“I like biology,” she told Mark weakly, her brain feeling a little on fire, “I’m an idiot.”

“No, you’re really not,” he corrected her, thankfully hiding that bemused little smile which only made her ears even hotter. “And that’s kind of why I need to speak to you.”

“Come again?” Her mind wasn’t sure what he said or could not quite believe that he had said it. To her, right now. Had he sought her out? No, that couldn’t be right. She was the crazy person flung into his Ficus that morning. Why would he want to speak to her?

Okay, shut up and let him get to it, she reminded herself.

"I need to find something out," he explained, "And I need it done rather discreetly."

"Is it extra work or something?" she wondered. His look grew ever more uncomfortable; he shuffled on his feet a little and hunched his shoulders.

"Yes and no," he answered enigmatically, "It's not exactly school-sanctioned work, anyway."

"Are you in trouble?" she asked, worried.

"Yes and no," again he answered, "It all depends on your point of view. You won't get into trouble if you help me, I can tell you that much."

"What do you need me to do?" she asked, feeling the pit of her stomach doing more than just the normal butterflies. With that, he pulled a little something out of his pocket, a vial she recognised as a blood sample tube. Within it was a small sample of the very thing it was made for. It seemed so incongruous that for a second, her brain would not process.

"I need to know how to save a life," he quipped.

"Oh, I love that song," she blurted out, before self-correcting and putting back on her serious face. Yes, serious was the appropriate response. "Sorry, go on..."

"There's a poison in that blood sample," he explained, "Science was never my strong point; it's not something I could even have a hope of identifying. I need to know how to get rid of it from someone's system, without harming someone in the process."

He handed her the small vial, which she realised with some confusion was warm – meaning it had been drawn recently. She asked a question which may have sounded like the stupidest one she had ever heard,

"Is someone poisoned?"

Mark looked at her for a long moment; she could sense his hesitation. She could not in a million years picture a world or a reason why this sweet, handsome young man could need help with a poison and not be able to speak to the authorities. There was just no conceivable notion.

“I realise this is a weird request,” he admitted, “I also realise that we hardly know one another, so perhaps I’m barking completely up the wrong tree. There are things I can’t tell you, but I am out of options, and you are the only person I can think of who has the skills and the heart to help. You could go straight to Drake, or to your parents, or hell, even the police – and tell them what I have asked you to do. I wouldn’t blame you for it. But I am asking, kindly, that you don’t. Because that will only make things worse – and I was not being melodramatic when I say lives depend on this.”

“So please, for argument’s sake, let’s call this hypothetical.”

She glanced down at the vial in her hands, turned it over once more. A million thoughts ran through her brain, possibilities. What he said was true – the standard response should have been to speak to some adults and let them handle whatever was going on. Common sense said that was the best course; they knew how to manage life-and-death matters.

But her heart said something different. Her heart said every word he said was true.

“How soon do you need it?” she asked, her decision cemented in her head after its consultation with her heart.

“Soon as you can,” he told her, before with thankful eyes he added, “I hope this isn’t too much to ask.”

“I hope I can help you in time.”

His genuine, warm smile returned, the look lingering between them, before he headed for the door. She looked back down at the vial, thoughts racing through her mind about potential analytical techniques and tests she might run. Somewhere behind all the racing considerations and plans laying down the track, she allowed herself one dreamy and indulgent smile.

“He knows my name...”

* * *

Sam could barely focus on the magazine in her lap, which would generally have drawn her entire attention. She cared about fashion, about makeup, about how she presented herself to the world; there was a comfort in it. And the new Vogue always made her feel excited in a way other stuff just didn't. But today, intrusive thoughts were winning, and she kept finding herself bursting into snippets of conversation.

“You know, we've been friends for like years and stuff,” she moaned, “You think she would pay me a little attention on my birthday.”

“Uh-huh,” Luke agreed from nearby. Not pointing out that the day of her party was not actually her birthday – that was the week before, on the same day as Luke's. They'd both turned sixteen, but as it was a Sunday, her father would not allow her to have her birthday party on the same day.

“I mean, it's not like I've even been bugging her about it,” she continued, slipping the magazine off her lap and putting it onto the arm of her sofa, “I only reminded her like, once, twice...”

“...six...” Luke dutifully corrected.

“Okay, six times, but even then, you think she'd have given me a definitive enthusiastic answer as my oldest friend,” she continued. Again, Luke was also kind of her oldest friend and boyfriend and things, but facts often got in the way of a good rant. “Not just blatantly ignoring everything I've been saying.”

“Good for you,” was his response.

She glared up at him, where he was tacking up the banner using the white blue tack her father had given them – ensuring they would not leave any marks on the freshly painted Dulux heritage walls. Mr Summers would have liked that less than a party on a church day. Okay, so he was in the middle of doing a job preparing the house for *her* birthday party (which may have a small amount to do with him as well), but did he have to be so distracted while she was pouring out her heart?

“Are you blatantly ignoring everything I’m saying?” she asked.

“Uh-huh,” he agreed.

She glared, but of course, he was busy holding a string in his mouth. She knew one thing that would get his attention, so she made a show of looking down her top.

“Oh, no, my top has fallen off,” she muttered dryly.

The ladder clattered to one side as he gave her his full attention, the banner hanging half-down behind him.

“Men,” she rolled her eyes.

“You lied,” he accused, jokingly, “All the lies...”

Picking up the ladder, he took his cue to take a break from the party prep and sat down on the sofa beside her. One arm around her, he drew her close to him.

“Look, I know you’re worried about Sara,” he explained, “But you don’t have to be. Friends have a way of coming into your life, and then the good ones stay, and the rest...they leave. And if they do leave and never come back...what made them good friends in the first place?”

“I’m confused,” she admitted, his ramble had lost her (and the slight scent of his aftershave was admittedly a little distracting and intoxicating).

“Sara likes you, you like her,” he continued, “If she’s friend enough, she’ll get over whatever she’s going through, and you’ll still be friends. If she doesn’t, then it’s better not to put yourself through the wondering.”

She looked at him for a long time, into the face of the boy she loved who she was beginning to realise was growing into a man before her very eyes.

“You’re way too insightful recently.”

“Does it help?” he asked, smiling that lopsided grin.

“Yeah, it does.”

With that, he gave her a deep kiss, the kind that fluttered her heart in ways no other sensation could. Well, other than the one they had both begun to cautiously explore together after their sixteenth birthdays. Then he stood and went back to working on the banner for her. She realised, watching him prepare the house for her honour, how much she loved him.

“You’re not going to leave and never come back, are you?” she asked, the flutter momentarily darkening as the horror of the thought came to her.

“I was talking about friends,” he pointed out, “We’re well beyond that, babe.”

She smiled. Maybe there was only one thing she needed.

* * *

The gentle rhythm of her friend’s heels knocking against the front of the cupboard was distracting her from her mission, and yet she could not ask her to leave. Sara had something on her mind, so she needed to vent. Luckily, given it was once again down to a boy and said troubles, Amy

only had to listen with one ear. Sara really wasn't looking for advice, and the same advice applied every time anyway.

"I just don't know what his problem is," Sara moaned.

"He's a man," Amy muttered, the standard response, not lifting her eyes from the microscope in front of her. "That's your explanation for everything."

"That does explain a lot," Sara admitted, again, things only going in tangent to the conversation. She sat nearby on the desk, swinging her legs and unsure why they had to do this at the school and not... well, anywhere else. "I mean, even if it is because he's male, he's always been a dude before. Unless he's had a transition at six months, I would have noticed."

"Uh-huh."

Her friend's distraction and disinterest finally pierced through Sara's self-indulgent veil, and she finally noticed Amy had been spending all of her time staring at machines and microscopes like some nutjob. Exams weren't even until the summer, and the coursework didn't have to be done until like...sometime before that. She should really check her assessment calendar.

"What are you working on then?" she enquired of her friend, lowering herself down from the desk and beginning to fiddle with the gas taps. Without looking, Amy smacked her hand away the moment she heard the rush of gas. "It's taking forever."

"Something I can't tell you about," Amy told her, looking up from her microscope, but straight onto the output of some other whirry machine, as Sara peered over her shoulder.

"You're hiding science from me?" Sara questioned sceptically. "The aliens back again?"

"Nothing like that," Amy assured her. This wasn't *Roswell* after all. One of Sara's latest obsessions, mainly because she liked the idea that aliens were hot guys.

"Then what is it?"

"I was told not to tell anyone," Amy reminded her, "Kinda means I can't tell you. You do class 'anyone'."

"But not 'everyone'," was Sara's sage response. This finally earned her a visible frown from her studious friend, who questioned,

"That's an argument?"

"Is in my world," she quipped, "Now come on. Tell me."

"No."

"I'll hold my breath."

"You'll just give yourself a headache."

It didn't matter; Sara's heels were digging in, and so she held her breath in a show of utter childish defiance. Her cheeks puffed out theatrically, her eyes squinted at her friend in a lovingly menacing way. Amy rolled her eyes but relented – she was not going to let it go, even if she started breathing again. Next would come friction burns or a wedgie.

"Okay, fine," she relented, "Mark asked me to look at a blood sample."

"His?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "All I know is I'm looking for like a poison or a substance or something."

"What, does he think you're Grissom or something?" Sara joked. Another of her latest obsessions was forensics, like the *CSI* franchise. Something about hot guys with brains. She lowered into a theatrical trailer-man voice, "CSI: Calendar, low budgets, shite effects...real murders." She picked up the blood vial, which was now half empty, as a thought finally occurred to her. "Hey, so Mark must have spoken to you, right?" Amy nodded, "You bitch! How come you didn't tell me?"

“Because when he said it was urgent, my first thought was not to pore over every second of the conversation with you,” Amy explained, waiting patiently for the following printout. “I decided to help him out first.”

“You are way too duty-oriented for your own good,” Sara reminded her, “I see a bright career in the post office.”

Amy glared at her, and thankfully, Sara finally took a hint.

“I’m not helping, am I?”

A shake of a head later, and Sara began to pack her things back up into her backpack dutifully. Which admittedly, had been her water bottle and half a pack of Haribo. Amy finally glanced down at the latest printout.

“Eureka!”

“You do *not* have to like me leaving so much, you know,” Sara chastised her, “Wait ‘til I’m out of the room, like the teachers do.”

“I’ve just found it!” Amy explained excitedly, before a frown clouded her momentary geek out enjoyment. “Listen, I need to get my hands on something we’re not quite old enough to buy yet, but which...you know...could save a life.”

“Oh, I love that song,” Sara exclaimed, before the cognitive cogs began to turn once more, “Is this in aid of getting down with your bad self?”

“Probably,” Amy admitted.

“Then I think I know the place...”

Which is how, about ten minutes later, Amy found herself in the middle of the first naughty thing she’d ever done. Well, remembered doing anyway – there may have been a crayon on the wall incident when she was three. Her dad loved to drag *that* one out at family events. But otherwise,

yes, this was the first. Sara, however, had gone over the admittedly weak plan with her moments before – like a practice pro.

She hid around the corner as the door to Drake's office opened. She ducked back, listening to the sound of the new music teacher and Drake's tail end of the conversation.

"Let them know I mean a literal flaying..."

With that, Miss Solano, flautist to the stars apparently, headed out of the front doors and she heard the comforting click of the lock behind her. She took a risk to peek back around the corner to find Drake, handbag slung over her shoulder, finally emerging from her office at the end of the day. It was then Sara's plan went into effect, the lights from the auditorium nearby flickering back to life.

She heard Drake mutter to herself,

"Fucking janitors..."

The click of heels came towards her, suddenly and swiftly as Miss Drake headed for the corridor, straight down and to the right, passing Amy's hiding place behind the sports trophy case by inches. Luckily, in the dimming light from the outside world, she went unseen.

She had to be quick and careful, and so she snuck on her socked feet (her clunky shoes, Sara had threatened to throw in the bin and finally allowed her to simply leave them in the science lab for this operation) towards the closed office door.

Inside, she found the ordered and neat world of an organised adult and admitted to herself there was at least one trait of Miss Drake's she admired. Oooh, was that a colour coded calendar on her wall? Wait, no...back to the mission.

"Okay, so if I were death in a bottle, where would I be?"

Her eyes scanned the neat office and ultimately down to a small locked cabinet beside her desk. Seconds later, she had her hands on the first bottle of booze in her entire life. She had no idea

that the bottle of vodka she was holding was worth about a hundred quid. But she was fully aware that Sara, with her television skewed view of the world...had been right.

“Yay for cliches!”

* * *

Mark hurried along the street in the fading light, hoping that the poison was slow acting enough that Ricky would still be okay, if not better, when he finally arrived back at the library. His mind raced with a thousand thoughts, of his Aunt’s cryptic warnings. He had passed a point of no return now – she knew he knew, and actually the entirety of everything he knew about the Covenant. But the consequences for another day.

He was more annoyed that the discussion had ended fruitlessly. There was nothing more he could do. Not unless...his phone began to ring in his pocket.

“Mark Matthews,” he answered with practised ease. The tinny voice coming to him sounded as though down a long tunnel, their connection symbolic of the thousands of miles between them.

“This is a very dangerous business you’ve found yourself in Mark Matthews,” Cornelius opened, “Very dangerous indeed.”

He could picture Cornelius now, wire rimmed glasses and clipped moustache like some holdover from the 1920s. He would be sat in his study, a loving recreation of a quaint manor house library, books lining every wall. Of course, the study itself was in an old palace in northern India, where Cornelius seemed to believe the time of the Raj was still in full effect. Of course, independence had happened, but not everyone had decided to leave.

They had met six months earlier at a convention, one of the few Drake had agreed for him to go to. The old librarian had been visiting family and was not particularly shy about his knowledge of the supernatural. Thankfully, delivering a talk on the real potential faeries from historical accounts kept his audience small, but due to his safari hunter attire very little believed.

“Astute assessment,” Mark agreed, “Have you got anything for me?”

“You seem tense,” his acquaintance quipped.

“Sorry, but as it is my friend’s life at stake, I’m rather worried,” he answered dryly, “You know how it is.”

Cornelius, who had never explained his full back story to Mark, but who lived a solitary life for a very clearly traumatic reason, very likely did.

“Of course,” he answered, turning quickly more business-like. “I asked a few of my older contacts, great fellows – one of them owns a unicorn – about the term ‘Guide’ and you know I got a rather lot of sarcastic comments about little girls and cookies. However, there was one bloke, a Jesuit preacher in the Holy Land, if you believe it. Great chap keeps bees. Anyway, he claimed that there was reference he came across once to a ‘Hall of the Guide’.”

“Hall of the Guide?” Mark echoed, having found no such reference in his own research. “What is that?”

“I did a deep dive into the lore, you know, not easy – some of these books are in ancient Sumerian and you know how syntactically nightmarish those buggers were,” he continued. There was rambling now, but Mark knew from his previous conversations that it was a freight train you’d do not best to derail, simply wait for it to breeze by. “As far as I could tell, it is some kind of repository of knowledge for the Guide, whoever that figure may be. Something to aid him – wait, listen to me, assuming this ‘Guide’ is a bloke, how last millennium of me...something to aid *them* in whatever

quest he may be undertaking. But this is an old myth mind you, you never know what's true and what's worthless drivel, I'm afraid."

"Let's argue for argument's sake," Mark responded, "If it were real, where would it be?"

"Well, that's complicated, but I believe it's not anchored to this plane of existence," he explained, "So it may be accessible from wherever the Guide is. Perhaps you might find something I missed if you read the passage in the compendium of St Nephis yourself. You do have at least a passing knowledge of Ancient Greek, I assume? You didn't seem completely uncivilised at our previous meeting."

Mark, who had indeed given himself more than a crash course in several ancient languages, agreed. They made their thanks, and with renewed purpose, said goodbye. He felt things were shifting, a lead – however small – was something to hold onto. Momentum could continue.

Their conversation ended as Mark reached the gates of the school, still standing open with a final few teacher's cars in the parking lot. He did indeed have a copy of the Compendium of St Nephis, back in storage. If he could only remember what...oh for the love of God.

"You're a decidedly creepy lady, you do realise?" he snapped at the figure of Claire, who was standing in front of him with that neutral, but slightly smirky look on her face. Why did people who wore black snuck around?

"I've been told," she nodded.

"Still want to warn me off doing what I'm doing?" he asked, not minding the rudeness in his tone. "Waste of breath the first time."

"No warning," she admitted, "just giving you a different direction. A better direction."

"Do you actually want to help or are you here to give a dead end?" he snapped, "I'm not in the mood for games."

"Finding out what the Guide is, that's all well and good," she began. He had to be unsurprised she had been listening into his conversation, "But you two have a bigger problem right now, and that's Satana and her little cult of followers. I can help you to find them."

"How?" he questioned, sceptical, "You left a trail of breadcrumbs?"

"No, but they did," she smiled. "You ever noticed its now how the victims died, but where that's so telling?"

"Okay, where?"

"You don't read your own newspaper, Mark? They even have it online these days," she chided him, "Two police officers, went into the police station, never came out. Now where would that be?"

"You're talking about the South Side of Calendar?" he clarified. He couldn't help the hostile nature to his tone, she was infuriatingly indirect.

"I'm talking about a vampyr nest," she clarified, "Possibly *the* vampyr nest. It needs to be taken out, taken care of."

"Yes, all well and good, but I have a friend to take care of," he reminded her, before adding unkindly, "I'm sure you've heard of them, great things they are. So, if you'll excuse me..."

He brushed past her, fed up with her half truths and sure of his current path instead.

"If they're left to do what they're doing, they'll wipe you out," she called out to him. He whirled, feeling his anger rising.

"Then, if that's true, why don't you do something about it?" he challenged, "Why don't *you* fight them?"

"I'm afraid to do it alone."

Her devastatingly simple answer momentarily stunned him. The honesty, the simple emotion behind her voice, he could understand. He could relate.

“Then why not help us?” he asked her, softer now, consciously reigning in his snark. “Tell us everything you know? Join us.”

“Because then my friends will die,” she answered, “And I’ll just be alone again.”

She said nothing further, loneliness and sadness in her eyes, as she turned and walked back off into the night. And Mark felt a new weight, that of a potential future.

* * *

“Ricky, I have some more news,” Mark’s voice came to him from outside in the darkened library. Ricky smiled to himself, picturing exactly what Mark was about to walk into. He would bet money on the look on his friend’s face, so he waited and found he’d now won five bucks off himself. Mark’s face was a picture.

Inside Mark’s office, Ricky sat on the floor in the pool of light from the desk lamp, cross-legged, back straight. In front of him, with decidedly less form to her cross-legged-ness, was Amy, swaying gently. Between them, a couple of Mark’s coffee mugs and a half-empty bottle of vodka.

“I’ve...never...drunked...before...” Amy leant forward to Ricky, whispering with the loud conspiratorial whisper of an absolute drunk. Ricky was not surprised, she’d had two minor shots of the stuff and was already well past the point of stability. Ricky, however, had substantially more and found himself feeling better by the second. The shoulder was feeling less pronounced, the throbbing beginning to ebb back into the distance.

"Honestly couldn't tell," he went along with it. Ever since he'd awoken, an hour earlier, to find this girl he'd barely ever spoken to around campus, rifling through Mark's desk for some shot glasses, he'd come to admire her.

"I want my pen," Amy burped, confused suddenly as to where her pen was now. It seemed incredibly important to her as she began to shuffle through her pockets. Ricky finally looked up at Mark, who's look had gone from stunned to merely quizzical. Amy, now distracted once again, turned to follow his gaze, her face lighting up when she saw him. "Hi. Mark! Good Mark! You give people books...you save lives."

"What?" Mark could barely understand the situation in front of him.

"Without books...people would die..." she told him in the same conspiratorial whisper she gave to Ricky. Then something struck her as funny, she giggled and slumped against the couch a little harder than was necessary. After a long delay, there came a little "owwwwwwww...."

Ricky stood, feeling better than he had in days, looking better than he had in several months and walked over to join Mark. Amy was fine, she was already shuffling her bum around, so her face was no longer smushed into the fabric.

"What did you tell her?" Ricky asked him.

"Only enough to get her to find out what was in your blood," Mark admitted, "But I didn't even mention your name, or what was going on with you at all."

"She's a smart girl alright," Ricky commented, before glancing down as she tried to crawl herself up onto the sofa. "Just burst in here and started saying something about how ethanol would bind with the active ingredient and pass harmlessly out of my system. Then some science words I completely didn't understand...but..." He indicated to his revived health, "...it seems to have worked."

She slumped back down as the foot up to the sofa.

“In hindsight, I probably shouldn’t have suggested she try one with me,” he admitted to himself.

“Sleep now...” she mumbled to herself. “Much sleep.”

As the snores began to rise from the office’s new occupant, Ricky and Mark wordlessly shared a look and decided to talk away from drunken prying ears. Together they moved out into the darkness and left the young woman who had saved his life to begin sleeping away the night.

A very weird, and unexpected night.

Act IV

The television crackled on in the background with the sounds of some early evening game show, her step-dad loved to watch. Her own, the one in her room, was turned off because even though she'd tried, Sara could barely concentrate on it. Instead, she sat on her bed, legs curled with her knees under her chin, wrapped in thoughts that seemed far too adult for her age. She was dragged away from them, into the present of her Boys II Men posters, by a soft knock on her half-open door.

"Yeah?" she asked, looking up to see her mum standing in the doorway. She smiled,

"Y'alright, luv?" her mum asked her, her Yorkshire accent strong and lyrical. "You didn't say two words durin' tea."

"I'm fine, mum," she tried to assure her, but her face mustn't have been able to fool her mother, who raised a very mum-ly eyebrow.

"I may believe a lot of nonsense," she returned (and it was true, her mother loved a horoscope), "but I don't believe that."

She moved further into her room and sat down upon the edge of her bed, tapping one hand gently onto her floral covers.

"Come on, spill your guts."

"It's nothing," Sara tried to dismiss once more, but again her mother knew her better than anyone else in the world – and so the one raised eyebrow became two raised disbelieving eyebrows. The look was surprisingly effective.

"It's Ricky," she finally admitted.

“Ah, boys, that inscrutable breed,” her mum sighed, her shoulders visibly relaxing. “And annoying, most of ‘em. Bless their cotton socks.”

“It’s not like you think,” she tried to interject, but her mother continued down her train of thought,

“You two aren’t courtin’, are you?” her mum gently probed, “You’re a bit too young for that.”

Sara neglected the urge to remind her mother she was fifteen and was hardly too young to start understanding the things between boys and girls. They’d even done the whole condom on the banana thing at school which had turned into several condom balloons thrown around the cafeteria.

“No, we’re not,” she answered quickly, before adding with a trace of bitterness, “We hardly even talk anymore.”

Her mother’s understanding smile and nod made her feel defensive, but it was hard to be so in her mum’s presence. Her warmth and soft nature made everything seem like it was going to be okay, even in the darkest storms.

“You’re worried about your friendship,” her mother surmised.

“He avoids me,” Sara found herself continuing, “Ignores me in the corridors, he always looks distant and I think...”

She began to trail off, so her mother gently prodded,

“What d’ya think?”

“It’s like he doesn’t even want to be my friend anymore,” she finally said the words she’d been afraid to even think to herself. “He won’t let me be there for him.”

“And did all this start...?”

“A year ago,” Sara admitted.

The smile began to falter on her mum's face and became one of sadness. A year ago. The day Ricky had lost his parents, and her mother lost one of her best friends. Mrs Carpenter and Mrs Kent, the duo terrible of the Parents-Teacher Group. Ever since they'd given birth side by side in the hospital to Sara Carpenter and Ricky Kent, the two had been inseparable. She sometimes forgot that on the day Ricky lost his parents, her mother lost her best friend – and so she scolded herself for bringing it up in such a tween drama fashion.

"It's a tough thing, Sara, losing your parents, even at my age," her mother finally explained, "But to lose them in the way he and his brother did...the car crash...at that age...I can't imagine."

"Neither can I," Sara admitted quietly.

"We've all been grieving," she continued. "Whatever is going on inside that boy's head, you can grasp, but never quite understand. So, you shouldn't try to."

"You're saying just leave him alone?" Sara asked, afraid of the answer, but thankfully her mother shook her head.

"Just the opposite," she explained, "You go see him, pop your head round, let him know he *can* talk to you, but he doesn't *have* to. Sooner or later, he'll want to talk, need to talk...and you're the first person he'll come to. Just be there for him."

Sara smiles at her mum, feeling better than she had in a while. Somehow the simple clarity to her mother's advice cut through all the drama she'd been circling.

"Thanks, mum."

"You're welcome," her mother returned, before nodding towards the door anticipating the next step, "Now go on, I know it's Friday, but be back by ten."

Sara nods, fully intending to honour her mother's wishes. She leaned forward, giving her a big and genuine hug. The scent, fairy liquid and lavender perfume, was entirely maternal and her

mother through and through. For a second she was a little girl again, after a nightmare, letting the light back in.

“Love you, mum.”

“You too, luv. Now go get him.”

Sara scrambled off the bed, stuck on her trainers and headed for the door. Had she have turned around, she’d have seen a small knowing smile on her mother’s face. A smile that said ‘just friends, my arse’.

* * *

The ancient compendium sat upon the cold metal table in the storage room. The harsh fluorescent light above lit a page covered in ornate script as Ricky and Mark held their council. Somehow, despite the distance between the library’s storage room and Mark’s office, they could still hear the not-so-gentle snores of the sleeping Amy.

“Okay, we have two aims right now,” Mark began to summarise, “Find out what the hell the Guide is and find Satana. Which, by the way, it was Santana you were thinking of.” Ricky shot him a look of confusion and surprise, “I did my research.”

“Good for you,” Ricky admitted, impressed he’d used a search engine.

“Anyway, one of my sources got in touch,” he continued, “He hadn’t ever heard the term ‘Guide’ but he sure as hell managed to track down a fella in Jerusalem. Says there’s a hall, best I can figure some kind of repository of information on the Guide.”

“How far away is it?” Ricky asked him, sure the answer was about to be a few thousand air miles further than their combined pocket money would allow.

“Relatively? About fifteen minutes,” Mark told him. Visible confusion did not yield when he tried to explain, “Before you even say, it’s a hot-spot, a place accessible from various locations around the world. If our resident scientist wasn’t snoring her way into a drunken coma right now, I’m sure she’d be able to tell us about the physics behind it.”

Ricky didn’t need to know physics details to understand plans and motion, so he nodded acceptingly.

“Suit up, we’re heading out.”

Mark hesitated, unsure for a moment if he should explain further what Claire had told him earlier that night. But secrets never helped anyone and his hesitation had led Ricky to question anyway.

“What’s the problem?”

“I’m hesitant to mention this,” he admitted, “But my attention has been drawn to something else. By Claire. The mysterious informant. Mildly less mysterious now.”

“What’s she said?”

“Apparently there’s a vampyr nest,” Mark told him, “South Side in the old abandoned police station.”

“Vampyrs or Old Man Wickles?” Ricky joked, but once more it fell upon pop-culture-deaf ears. Even Scooby Doo? Et tu, Mark? Mark simply shrugged,

“Well, pretending I get that reference, I’m going to say vampyrs,” he offered, before giving voice to his further hesitation, “But of course...”

“We don’t know if we can trust her,” Ricky finished for him. He’d been thinking the same thing himself. “Even if we can, it’s still a vampyr nest, and if we can’t...can’t be much worse than that anyway, right?”

“Careful, that sounded strangely like logic,” Mark joked.

“Get ready for more of it,” Ricky prepared him, “Do you actually need to be the Guide in order to get to that Hall of the...y’know...”

“...the Guide?” Mark finished for him. He glanced back down at the tome, he’d only managed to do a cursory read of the text but enough to figure out a rough entry point nearby. He took a gamble, “Not so far as I know. And if the Guide isn’t meant to be evil, then I’m guessing the ‘you’re not the guide’ safety measures wouldn’t be life threatening to humans. Torturous, possibly, but deadly...unlikely.”

“Like a Barney Christmas special?” Ricky joked.

“Somewhat.”

Ricky nodded, turning to the weapon’s cabinet behind him. Mark was the only person with the key to the storage area, not even Miss Drake had access – or even knew she didn’t have access. Which made it a perfect place to keep their few weapons. It was a calculated risk, Ricky carrying weapons through the town. But considering the police force in Calendar were about as aware as a bat at a Nine Inch Nails concert, it was a risk he sometimes took. He would need firepower for a whole vamp nest, and so he chose the sword.

Their lives were not like normal people.

“Well, tell me what the scenery’s like,” Ricky determined, “I’ll go for a spot of light hunting before tea.”

“You’re not going alone,” Mark countered, “And definitely not in your condition.”

“I told you, I feel fine,” Ricky counter-counter. “Amy’s little cure worked, the vodka’s not affecting me at all.” He frowned, as the thought occurred to him, “Which is kind of a shame really. But it means I’m ready for hunting.”

“It’s a nest, you don’t know how many of them there are,” Mark warned him, “They could kill you.”

“So could watching Good Morning TV,” Ricky quipped, “But still...I can’t help myself.”

“Ricky...”

“This isn’t a discussion,” Ricky told him firmly, “We don’t have time for that. You’re going to the Hall of the Guide, and I’m going to the Police Station to find out what the vamps are up to. I’ll meet you back here in two hours.”

Mark wasn’t happy, but it didn’t matter – he respected the decision had been made. He nodded, reluctant agreement, grabbed his coat and switched off the light as they headed back into the main library. There, they both momentarily paused at the pool of light coming from his office door.

“Should we maybe...” Ricky wondered.

“It would be polite to...” Mark concurred.

The snores faltered, increased in crescendo, and then returned to their normal rhythm. They shared a look, collectively decided to give her two hours, and headed out of the door.

* * *

Loud thumping music came from inside the house, somewhat muted in the cooling air of the night garden. The door slid open, Luke emerging and the music momentarily swelling. Sam looked up from where she sat on the backstep, looking out across the lawn and the rose bushes, settling into the gentle blues of the night.

"It's getting quiet in there without you," he told her, with a smile.

A moment later, Julie Winters, her other best friend in the whole wide world, screamed a 'woo hoo' from inside the house to rival the ages. He frowned, the smile becoming a good natured grin.

"Well, the higher brain fun has gotten a hell of a lot quieter," he explained, before adding, "That's the most sophisticated thing she's said since you left."

Sam who was no stranger to Julie's party girl vibe and struggles with intelligent thought, smiled, "Try ever."

He stepped out into the night with her, sliding the French door closed behind him, once more muting the party inside and sat down in place next to her. Their arms touched, the goosebumps shivering up and down her skin, the electricity and static of young love and attraction. Even through her broody thoughts, it still happened.

"I notice you're doing the brooding thing," he explained, "Good timing?"

"At a party where the wittiest comment is woo hoo?" she queried, with an eyebrow.

"But at least it was said by Stephen Fry," he joked dryly. She tried to return his smile, but it was lame, she was struggling to feel it that night because other thoughts were on her mind.

"I'm sorry," she apologised, "I'm just..."

"You're wondering where Sara is?" he spoke out loud. She nodded. That was it in a nutshell. She didn't any qualification or clarification, she just knew it in her heart. Other friends, though there were many, were just so...surface. Like Julie 'woo hoo' Winters. Good company, but not exactly intellectually stimulating. Sara wasn't going to win any Nobel prizes, but she was at least somehow present in a way other friends were.

Well, had been present.

"She's the only girl that's ever been my friend," she explained, "As in 'friend', equal. Bless her, but Julie's got all the conversational abilities of a freshwater trout. Sara's just...real, y'know?"

"Sure, but she's got to have a good reason for not being here," Luke found himself countering, "You know that."

"Do I?" she challenged, "I don't know. Sometimes a person can mean more to you, than you do to them."

"I get what you mean," he agreed, causing her to frown at him.

"How could you?"

"Well, not to start an old argument, but I love you more."

She rolled her eyes, smiling despite herself at his ridiculous on point charm and cheeky grin. It was at this point that he produced something from his pocket, a small case, which he deposited into her hand.

"Here you go."

"You already got me a birthday present," she reminded him.

"Now you have more," he shrugged.

"You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do," he disagreed, "because I'm me and you're you. And if there's anything I want to do in this whole wide world, it's make *you* happy."

She smiled again, not realising but re-realising how much she loved this boy becoming a man before her eyes. Genuine, deep, thoughtful. Not like any other boy she'd ever met. He would do anything for her and she for him, it felt right, perfect, fairytale. Maybe the rest of the world didn't matter, as long as she had this wonderful human being with her.

She kissed him, soft and long, before opening the box. Her heart fluttered at the little pair of earrings. They were from the local accessory place, the one on the high street. He'd obviously caught her looking at them. They weren't particularly expensive – bless him, his family weren't well off like her own – but they were everything. Because he saw her, even when she didn't know she was being seen.

"You realise now I have to get you something even better for your birthday?" she reminded him, thinking that the season ticket to the local rugby probably wouldn't hold up against his thoughtfulness. A thought occurred to her, "Is that why you got it?"

"There were ulterior motives, indeed," he joked, grinning that cheeky grin. She laughed, slapped his shoulder and led another deep kiss.

Perhaps the night would be perfect after all.

* * *

Two truths led Mark to the place of awakening. One was the existence of lines of mystical energy that weaved themselves across the world. In places, they intersected and created powerful spots of energy. Calendar sat upon one of these intersections. Even when he'd discovered this, he realised with a groan how much that sounded like the ley line bollocks that spurred every horoscope-reading insufferable crystal-toting tit. Unfortunately, they were closer to the truths of ancient mysticism than was strictly comfortable. The meaning behind the energy? Well, that was a bit more complicated.

The second, was that Calendar was built upon a mountain, with an extensive underground cave network working its way through the limestone hills on which it was based. Meaning, once one

began to get a little outside of the town and up into the forest, one could find the odd opening to the underground easily enough.

According to the ancient tomes, to reach the Hall of the Guide required one of these 'thin-spots' and an underground entrance in which to invoke the incantation. What he had neglected to tell Ricky, was that once one had invoked the incantation and made their way into whatever pocket realm or plane of existence in which the Hall was tucked, there would be a trial.

Not the kind with lawyers and stuff, but the kind with tests of character, thought and body. He only hoped that his rash assertion that the trials would not be designed to kill a human being, was a good one. In truth they had little to no idea of the origins of Ricky's particular gifts. For all they knew the source was demonic, channelled for good through the power of Ricky's noble spirit. Good God, he groaned to himself, even the thought made him feel like he was on a tween special. The kind teenage girls with more time than sense liked to watch and gush over the boys who got their shirts off. Blah.

The air within the cave dropped several degrees as he stooped under a low hanging stalactite, it was thick with the scent of damp. As he moved low, struggling to drag his supply bag with him, he found the ceiling once more lifting away and allowing him to stand once more in a small cavern.

Well, the tome didn't say how far underground he needed to be after all. So, he stopped, lay down the bag and began to take out the varying artifacts needed for the invocation. A few candles, a relic he'd actually managed to find on eBay of all places, and several specific crystals. He sighed, again thinking that one day the Women's Weekly crowd would accidentally invoke a demon during a reiki session and the secret would be out.

As he switched off his torch and prepared to light the candles, he felt a drop on his hand. It was not unusual, the sounds of dripping were everywhere throughout the small cavern. What

surprised him was the warmth of it, the thickness of it. It felt more than water. He quickly brought the lighter to life, it's small orange flame flickering in the darkness and the slight breeze moving through the cavern. It also revealed the red droplet slowly moving down his hand, seeking the ground.

He did it. He had to. He looked up.

Pinned to the ceiling, suspended via it's midsection to the stalactite above, the creature had long since lost consciousness. It was alive, barely, moving slowly with what seemed involuntary movements. A moment's pity was lost when the creature's eyes caught a glimpse of him and the demonic vampyric red-eyed glare resumed. It's struggles to reach him became it's undoing, as the movement dislodged it from it's trapping and landed it hard on the ground below. Freed, the hole in it's chest no longer plugged, it's death inferno began, flames rising intense and hot leaving behind only ash on the sodden ground.

Mark's heart pounded at the thought of it, as two new realisations brought him fresh perspective. Firstly, vampyrs had been here – very likely they knew about the Hall of the Guide, even more so than he. And secondly, whatever protections were in place...

They could be deadly.

* * *

The building stood dark. Since the abandonment of the South Side pre-dated the creation of the electricity infrastructure of normal lampposts, the building existed only in moonlit shadows. Some streets had been modernised, but they were far behind him, closer to the industrial area. So, the night sky would have to be his only guide.

Of course, the potential that this was entirely a wild goose chase still lay like a spectre behind him. As did, he realised that it was not the only spectre there.

"It's rude to sneak up on people," he suggested without turning.

"If it helps, I don't have an axe," she joked, "So you'll get over it."

He stood, turning to see the face of the now named 'mysterious informant'. Claire, Mark had called her. It seemed right, she suited the name and it humanised her. Which given the black-on-black ensemble was no mean feat. He expected some aggressive nickname. Blaze. Throttle. Garotte.

"What do you want?" he asked her, keeping his tone even.

"I figured your nerd would give you the message," she answered, "I'm surprised it took you so long to get here, really."

"Don't call him that," Ricky cut her off, bristling himself at her demeanour. "He's a friend."

"A friend or your only friend?" she retorted.

"You've been watching me, tell me," he snapped, feeling his irritation with her growing.

"Though what gives you the right escapes me."

"Basic rule of the world we live in Kent," she threw back. "If you're against me, I need to know you. If you're with me, the same. It's all about information, the more you have, the better off you are."

"Then tell me something about yourself," he challenged, "Something real besides your name."

She smiled, moving near him to the edge of the rooftop, gazing down in the direction of the police station.

“That would take away most of the fun,” she teased, though a momentary look clouded her face. Sorrow made her seem a little younger, for a moment a fleeting glimpse of a girl underneath. She added softly, though possibly mocking, “But I do like horses.”

The moment passed between them, a quiet that descended. He wondered what had made her the way she was, so strange and so distant. Given the little he knew about the world he was emerging into, he could only image it was horrible and painful. His was already more than he could bear some nights.

“You going in?” she asked him, indicating towards the station.

“I do have a job to do,” he confirmed.

“Is that what this is to you?” she asked him, that teasing lilt back to her tone. “A job?”

“More like a duty,” he answered, “What is it for you?”

He expected another bullshit response, something else deliberately off-putting. Instead, she levelled a genuine gaze at him, as she turned and swung herself around the ladder leading down to the fire escape.

“Personal,” she admitted. “You coming?”

Bewildered, confused and somehow growing in interest at the same time. He had no idea what to expect, but something told him to trust. He could only hope his instincts were right.

* * *

It was a trip. As Mark completed the invocation, the air around him shimmered. He didn’t know what to expect, he’d only ever read about magickal rifts and the strange things that happened

with them. The first thought he had, the first salient thought, was that it had failed. The second was a kind of relief that at least he hadn't been slammed into a spiked death on the ceiling like the vampyr before him. The third was that the walls around him were beginning to melt.

Voices whispered in the corners of the cavern, things began to move around in the shadows. There were nameless voices and faceless beings moving around beyond the periphery of his vision. The language was something ancient, something far beyond his current knowledge and comprehension, but the feeling they gave off was something much more visceral. He understood they were judging him, weighing him up. Deciding.

What makes a warrior?

The thought popped into his mind full formed, in English, but in an intonation that was not his own. His mind spiralled with his own thoughts, examining the intruder that peered beneath his veneer and into the deeper places. It saw the scared child, the young man, the future to come. Was there light? Was there darkness? Was there life or a swift death?

The room was spinning, morphing, changing, becoming somewhere and sometime else. The end of the cavern opened up, the voices cried out in intensity. The light was bright, searing. A light, but of salvation? Damnation?

What makes a warrior?

The question again, he was mentally shaken as though an eight ball, and an answer was being demanded of him. How could he refuse the face of such forces? They wanted to know, they demanded an answer from the core of his being – a being that couldn't be penetrated, could not be defined. He was opening a door without a key, turning a lock without truth. His truth.

Courage? No.

Honesty? No.

Violence? No.

What makes a warrior...what separates the mind from the body and life from death? A riddle, he was a man of riddles, of historical puzzles and intellect, surely, he should be able to answer such a simple question. The light was growing, the fear eating its way through his closed heart. He was coming face to face with something, a truth undeniable and unyielding to the thoughts of men. Whatever this was, whatever forces he had summoned, he could not comprehend them.

But he could comprehend one thing. An ultimate truth, the answer coming to him a flash. He reached one hand to the flowing wall, finding the jagged rock he needed. In one swift motion, not allowing himself time to think or hesitate, he drew his palm sharply across the rock and carved out his own wound.

“Blood!” he cried out, with a voice that was no longer strictly in the physical. It was somewhere in between, waiting for him to return. Blood it was. Sacrifice it was. What separated life from death, was life. Without it, a warrior had no purpose.

The light stopped, dimmed and for a moment he feared he had failed. Slowly he began to realise, it had changed. The light became the soft glow of torch light, lighting the new corridor which appeared before him, the cavern giving way to a simple stone passage forward.

It had appeared. The test had been passed. He resolved himself to step forward, to process his feelings about the things he had touched in the light – or more accurately the things that had touched him – later. For now, he had a job to do.

He picked up his bag, winced at the pain in his hand, and moved forward.

Praying he was right, and it was indeed a passing grade.

* * *

“So, where’s all these vampyrs?” Ricky challenged, as they moved through the desolate lobby of the abandoned police station. Ancient paperwork and scattered leaves crunched underfoot as they walked. The place smelled of mildew and age in equal measure, moonlight trickling slowly through the various smashed windows and crumbled holes in the walls. A bird flittered away in the distance, a momentary shadow soon gone.

“They’d make sure they’re more protected,” Claire explained to him, “Both from the sunlight and from discovery. If this place has a basement, they’d be there. If not, I’m guessing the cells, somewhere near the back.”

“How do you know so much about vampyrs?” he asked. Part of him wondered whether they should be talking so loudly and openly, but another part of him was already questioning the validity of her claims. This place seemed dead, not so much undead.

“It’s a good thing to know what you’re hunting,” she answered.

“Is that all you hunt?” he pried further. She’d only been paying half attention to him, scanning the world around them, peering into the darkest corners. She certainly gave a good show of looking like she was hunting for something, looking for the vamps she claimed were here. But at his question, she turned her attention back to him.

“I’m wiping out every vampyr I can,” she told him, her tone acerbic. “Every, single, one.”

“Something ‘personal’?” he echoed.

“Yeah, and we’re not in that sharing place,” she cut him off in return, adding with the barest hint of a smile, “Yet.”

He echoed her smile, feeling on the edge of a turning point. Until suddenly he began to notice something from the corner of his eye. A light, faint and coming from under the edge of a closed door on the other side of the room.

“Hey, I think there’s a light there.”

The attack came swiftly and without warning. It was amazing the reflexes these things had, the ability to move without sound. He was barrel-charged from the side by one of them, like being hit by a truck. He slammed into the office door nearby, it’s glass viewing pane finally giving up the ghost and shattering all around him. He saw another grab Claire by the neck and lift her into the air.

“Claire!” he cried out, suddenly fearing for a moment the worst, already.

He needn’t have worried.

She grabbed the vamp’s arm and twisted hard enough that he heard the snap of either tendon or bone. Either way it screamed, it’s surprise and horror even stunning the one who was even now closing in on him. Together he and his attacker watched as Claire twisted the vamp’s arm around further behind it’s back, using it’s own momentum to drive it forward towards the broken window. Jagged remains of glass stuck up like the teeth of a crocodile and with surprising momentum Claire slammed the surprised vamp’s face directly down onto it.

The creature burst into flame, still screaming in surprise more than pain, as Claire turned back to him and his attacker, now hovering over him with red-eyes wide open.

“Come on? You think I’m entirely helpless?” she mocked.

A second vamp rushed her from the side but found itself running directly into Claire’s upturned boot that shattered it’s nose.

By this time the initial shock of the sudden reversal of vamp fortune had begun to wear off, both for him and his attacker. It had given Ricky the time to get out his sword, driving it up into the

chest of the vamp that barrel chested him even as he jumped to his feet. The vamp laughed at him, smirking at the blade in it's chest. It knew that was not going to work. What it didn't know, was Ricky knew that. He jerked the sword up in one swift motion that tore the vamp's chest wide open.

Luckily the pillar of fire consumed most of the blood that sprayed from him, otherwise Ricky's coat would have been ruined, and Rob didn't need more questions about the amount of laundry he was doing.

He turned back to see how Claire was doing, to find her straddling her attacker and slamming a knife repeatedly into it's skull. When it's screams dies, she jumped back, allowing the flames and ash to consume it's being and leaving nothing but the scorched floor as the reminder of it's existence. She looked back to him, grinning, blood pumping and breathing ever so slightly heavier than him.

The message was received. She may not have super-powers, his heart rate barely moved, but she was well trained, she was athletic and she could definitely hold her own.

"Think they were guarding that door?" she asked him.

"Yeah, should we knock?" he joked.

She patted him on the shoulder as she headed past, wiping off her knife as she slipped it back into her pocket. He realised something else in that moment. Slaying vamps had been kinda hot.

* * *

Sara hadn't expected to necessarily be able to get into the library at that time of night, but it had been surprisingly easy. The school gates were left open, a few cars left in the car park – and the side door leading to the corridor outside the library was likewise unlocked. She took it as a sign –

seeing there was a light still on in the small office – and so headed to what she hoped would be a chance for a private conversation with Ricky. Something majorly casual. She could do casual.

The Library itself appeared quiet, which was unsurprising, though the light spilling from the office gave her enough to see by. It was a little disquieting to see the school like this – quiet instead of full of life like she was used to it during the day.

“Ricky?” she called out, trying to keep a note of unease from her voice. There was nothing. No voices, no tinny sound of the radio, no shuffling or books (or whatever sounds books were supposed to make). “Ricky?”

She went further in still, heading for the open door of the office. She was not prepared for the scene she saw in the office. Her friend, inexplicably, lying on the sofa sound asleep and softly snoring, a half-empty bottle of vodka nearby. She raced through the possibilities, through the crazy turn of events that would mean Amy was not at home watching the soaps. It just...wasn't possible.

What she didn't know is that “wasn't possible” was about to become a new normal, especially that night. As she turned around and looked behind her, she saw a man, standing in the library. A full on man, an adult she didn't recognise, dressed like he was going to Duran Duran concert. Oh, and then there were his eyes, red, somewhat glowing. Oh, and the fangs. There were fangs. A man with fangs stood in front of her. Ready to party like it was 1983.

“Um...what?” was all she could manage. The man began to move towards her, so she decided to do the only sensible thing she could and scream her head off, diving beneath his stupid attempt to grab her and rush for the door. Where a friend of his, likewise going to the same concert. Oh, and with the eyes and the fangs, burst through. She saw a fist, then things began to go a bit fuzzy.

Now, the rest of it she couldn't quite believe was truly what was happening, because this was all unreal after all and she had just been concussed.

“Is that the Librarian? I thought it was a he?”

“Could be his assistant.”

“What happens if we come back with the assistant instead of the librarian?”

“What happens if we bring nothing back to Satana?”

They paused their conversation. One of them reached down for her, where she was rapidly losing not just her grip on reality, but on consciousness. The smell was something awful, like lynx Africa met a cemetery.

“Bring her.”

“What about this one?”

“Leave her, we’ve got what we want.” He muttered...actually muttered, “I hope.”

With that, Sara felt her unconscious body being lifted into the air and decided she would sleep for a while. Maybe then the world would make some sense again...

* * *

The room at the end of the corridor was...unexpectedly mundane. A stone room, sizeable but not gargantuan, with stone hewn on three sides. The fourth appeared to be the wall of the same cave or cavern he’d just exited. Only now, it poured with a waterfall into a pool of gloriously crispy clear water beneath.

Lining both sides of the room were bowls, burning with an unknown liquid.

The Hall of the Guide.

“Okay, so I was expecting a little more showmanship,” Mark muttered himself. Then again, this was his first dimensional folded pocket realm (or whatever actual scientific words those such as Amy may give it). The central feature, the waterfall, seemed like the most logic focus of the room, as such he moved towards it, taking his bag with him and hoping he had brought the right ingredients for whatever further incantations may be needed.

He stopped, knelt and placed the bag back upon the ground. When he stood up a new weapon, one which he had yet to even reveal to Ricky, was in his hands. An arcane wooden crossbow, loaded. He turned to face his interlopers, their presence and graveyard stench giving them away the moment he’d reached the waterfall.

Three of them, plus their leader. He knew immediately, because alongside the aura she projected, she was the only one of them with any dress sense. Granted, someone that likely should have appeared on a music video for those vampire movies teen girls like these days, but still. Goth was all the rage apparently, and Satana – he presumed – had it in spades.

She was tall, immeasurably beautiful, her skin a deep natural tan and her hair blacker than the darkness behind her. Her eyes were human, she needed not to reveal her demonic visage for people to know she was not of this world. She was clearly something darkly descendent.

“I knew you would find it eventually,” she spoke, without taking time to introduce herself. Her accent sang, the traces of an accent he couldn’t place. Perhaps it was the accent of ages, of time and eternity. “It was just a matter of time before you opened the door for us.”

He raised the crossbow to her, as a cold dark grin spread across her face.

“You are injured,” she pointed out, indicating to his hand. “You are outnumbered. And you have no idea what is even happening in your town.”

Mark felt weariness overtake him, nodding and lowering his crossbow ever so slightly.

“Yes. I’m fucked.”

* * *

No one else was there, that they made abundantly clear as they headed through the door and into the lit area behind. Here was the bullpen, the place where desks had been arranged in rows and police officers had done their day to day work. It was a large area, made larger by the fact all the desks and chairs had been pushed back to the side revealing a gaping hole in the floor.

But no vamps. Or should they say, no more vamps. No one was home. Creatures of the night were clearly off in the night, creaturing. But that they had been here was obvious – beyond the guards they'd faced outside the door. The place had been ransacked, destroyed and changed forever.

"Someone did a little redecorating," Claire joked as they made their way through the broken debris of a different but somehow still familiar time.

"I think there's a little hole in the carpet," Ricky agreed, dryly.

Both were merely distractions from what they were beginning to sense. A change, a charge in the air that was moving them inexplicably forward towards that gaping hole. Something down there, something calling to them both. A force, inexplicable. Ancient.

They had walked into the lion's den and there found raw power. Their first glimpse came at the edge of the expanse, nearly the diameter of the room itself. Inside it looked like something carved from rock. Ricky felt it strongest, the call of the unknown, the crying out of the night and from restless dreams.

They descended wordlessly into the abyss, taking the ladder down to the cavern beneath. There, somehow lit by moonlight and the burning torches, was a stone. Smooth, four sided, ten foot tall. A monument. A monolith. Something that was somehow alive with a force he couldn't name but

knew intimately. Carvings on all four sides, in languages that hadn't seen starlight in eons, but that whispered in his ears.

Every time he closed his eyes. Every time he tried to sleep.

He would walk on fields of ashes. Blood would rain. Fires would burn. In his dreams. In the stone.

One day, if left unchecked, in his waking world.

His hand reached out, his will slipping.

"What is it?" Claire whispered in reverence beside him. He knew only one answer,

"Power..."

To Be Continued...