

**'til the End of the World****Year One****Story Two****Stand By Me – Part II of II****Opening**

The rain continues for a second night, coming down hard through the streets as though nature itself is attempting to scrub the town of Calendar clean. As if the soul of a place is something so easily removed, once the rot has set in. It saturates, permeates, filters its way through all things. The bones of this town are sodden, deep down to their black core. We will visit once more, to check the pieces are upon the board and moving as they should. Once the game has begun, there is no interference.

And if the power emanating from the deepest darks of the abandoned side of town are any indication, it has very much begun.

The pieces move with elegance, and the illusion of randomness. We begin in the side of darkness, abandonment. The South Side of Calendar where now only businesses reign in the day, industrial and sterile – empty husks of dead buildings in places where condemnation is no longer financially viable. It is the rot beneath the sunnier, shinier side of town. The difference between them is not worth, it is merely honesty.

There, deep in empty bullpen of a ruined police station stand two figures. There, in a cavern so ancient its origins have been forgotten by the many, stands the Guide and the Hunter. He holds his hand out-stretched towards the stone before them, an obelisk which to them is dark black, but which

to us burns with an unholy light. It doesn't just feel like power, it is power, sickly and all too ready to heal – to the world's detriment.

The Hunter watches the Guide, little more than a boy really, with weary eyes. Already she admires him. A dangerous kind of admiration, the one of youthful hope. She should know better, has known better – and yet some small part of her never stopped believing in fairy tales. To her, he is a hero, despite the warnings of the ancient scrolls. Perhaps if she could see the clouded look on his face as he hears the siren call, she would not be so quick to trust.

He steps back, he is not going to touch the stone yet. That is good, we can move on.

Moving through the empty hallways and darkened streets, we come upon a church. Sacred ground left to rot along with the rest of the area. God, if such a thing exists, has slipped away from this space, allowing something else to crawl in. Here, in the back office, lies the blonde girl. The one with the Guide's heart. She is alive, breathing, but troubled. Soon she will waken. Soon she will come face to face with her captors. Soon, her denials of the things under her bed and lurking in the closet will be for nought.

We wish it could be different for her, knowing how it ends. But it isn't. So, we move on.

Our next stop takes us over towards the lights, twinkling still as the evening begins to wain towards darker, dimmer times. As people slip from evening to night, from wakefulness into walking dreams. The raven haired girl, Sam, stands in her own backyard. Alone save for the crowd inside her house, partying with the vigour of youth.

We can sense her emotions, complex and deep beneath the shallow projection she maintains. There she longs for her friend. For connection. She is in love, isn't everyone at that age? He is in the party, keeping things alive for her, playing defence and giving her time to be by herself. To think. To simply be. It is a simple act of service, and she loves him deeply for it. But it can't lighten her mood, or her heart.

Next, flittering through the downpour, we peak into the School Library. There, in the Librarian's office, is another little bundle of power. One of such purity, she shines. She snores loudly with the self-awareness of the unconscious, her first taste of vice one she'll be unlikely to repeat any time soon. She jumped straight into trust, into a battle she didn't even know was raging around her. And for nothing more than an interior moral compass.

Interesting.

In our final visit of the night, an ultimate tableau. A boy, a little older than the others, standing alone. There are five of the demonic creatures around him, the ones of the Vampyr spirit. All he has at his side is a single weapon. A crossbow. One we don't believe he's had much practice with either.

It is here we wait, patiently, to see what is going to happen next.

\* \* \*

"Yes. I'm fucked."

Mark sighed, annoyed that before he could even get started, he had fallen into the web of these rejects from an Anne Rice novel. Mark took the moment to take it in, four of them and one of him. Even with a single vampyr, armed with only the antique crossbow in his hands, the odds were not necessarily in his favour.

"That's a little negative," Satana, the leader who's name he'd barely begun to understand, commented. Her voice was playful, mocking, juxtaposed with her attire and ancient eyes. She hid behind her human visage, though anyone could tell there was nothing human about her. Her very existence was a mockery.

"You prefer royally buggered?" he returned. As long as she was willing to talk, the longer he had to think of something, anything, to even the odds. "Unless you're here to sell me coffin-ware? A time-share in hell?"

"No, I'm here to kidnap you, I'm afraid," she admitted. "I would have hoped for the Guide himself, but I guess he's outsourced his work to the Help."

"Before I put up a small, yet slightly effective escape attempt – slash – struggle, may I ask why you're taking me hostage?" he enquired, gently moving the tip of his crossbow in what he hoped was a more advantageous angle. If she knew what he was doing she gave no sign, remaining where she was.

"I have my reasons," she answered.

Mark nodded, mulling it over, before pulling back with his finger on the trigger. The bolt flew true from the crossbow, striking the lackey to the left of her directly in the face. The look of surprise was almost comical as he fell to the ground, combusting into a pillar of flame as he went, leaving behind the metal buttons of his jacket and the head of the bolt to clatter to the ground. Even so, with the odds ever so slightly more in his favour, he knew it was still hopeless.

She hadn't moved, just sighed, as though annoyed and weary at the same time.

"What'd you do that for?" she asked him, "It takes ages to make another one of those."

"I have my reasons," he retorted.

The 'battle' when it came was over quicker than he could have imagined. All it took was a wave of one surprisingly manicured hand, and her minions rushed at him. He did not fear for his life immediately, after all she had said kidnap rather than murder – but he also knew whatever she would have planned would not be good.

He was clotheslined, a foul-smelling arm connected with his head, but it wasn't until his skull connected with the ground beneath him that he began to sink down into the darkness.

When he would come back out, he did not know.

*'til the End of the World*

*Episode 2 – Stand By Me – Part 2*

*Starring:*

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

## **Act I**

The cavern continued to hum with unseen power as Claire considered their next steps. The stone before them, an obelisk that was both of this world and not of the cavern in which it was found, was saturated with it. Ricky's hand, outstretched, was seconds away from touching the slick black material, the movements and grooves a written language of which she knew none. Characters, letters, from an unknown alphabet. She sensed something then, rising in her, a distrust, a fear.

"Okay, Ricky, I think it's time to back away from that thing," she suggested quietly. The air around them was still, but her voice still felt like it was dimmed, like it should have echoed around the chamber in which they stood. She didn't know why, but the urge was sudden and urgent that he not touch it.

"What do you mean?" he asked her, his voice bright, but he still did not turn around or look at her.

"You're staring at that thing like a teen girl at a Gary Barlow concert," she responded.

Whether it was the misogynistic comparison to a teen girl, or reference to Gary Barlow, something did seem to pass in that moment, and he finally turned to look at her, his eyes clear. She didn't know what she expected to see – a glow, a look, something to justify her fear. But all she saw was the same sad, weary boy she approached outside of a burning convenience store. A young man haunted too young.

"I can take my eyes away, just so you know," he told her, a little too defensively.

"Good, now that's settled, what the hell is it?"

"A big stone?" he shrugged. With the immediate moment passed it's power seemed to have abated somewhat. The buzzing that seemed to whirl around her head when they first gazed upon it seemed to dim somewhat into the background, even their voices were clearer in the dust-laden air. She felt safer in moving a little closer, pulling level with him near the glossy stone.

"Very funny," she chided him, "What do you think it does?"

"Rock like things," he answered.

"I don't recognise this language," she muttered, more to herself. During her travels she had come across some ancient supernatural languages – many of which would seem more at home in a Tolkien book. This didn't seem similar to any of them, but at the same time in it's strangeness was exactly what she would have expected, in it's slashing folding cursive.

"The band in the middle is definitely Latin," he answered. She looked down from the side facing her, realising he was indeed correct. At least, the language of the thin band running about a quarter of the way up the ten foot obelisk was indeed using the roman alphabet. Which would have to date it back only a couple of thousand years at most. Whether it was Latin, she wasn't sure.

"How can you tell?" she asked him.

“Mark tried to teach me,” he explained.

“What does it say?” she pressed further, but he shrugged.

“You don’t want me to try and translate.”

“Well, I don’t see the brains of your operation around, so take a crack at it,” she pushed.

Reluctantly, he did, moving around the four faces and following the inscription from it’s presumed starting point. As she followed with him, a little behind, she began to realise the writing and alphabet of the main section of the obelisk differed on each of the four faces. When he finished, he stood, frowning.

“As I thought.”

“What?”

“Either it’s a recipe for a new kind of cheese product, or we’re going to need Mark,” he answered. She frowned at him, so he added defensively, “I told you, I’m no good at this crap.”

“Fine,” she sighed, “We should get back to the library.”

“You’re giving me orders now?”

“Okay, Guide, what do you think we should do?”

“Okay, yeah, the Library,” he sheepishly admitted, “But under protest.”

She rolled her eyes, hiding her smile as she headed for the ladder to climb back up into the now empty bullpen. She had to remind herself that he was still just a boy, and that fact filled her with equal parts sadness and terror. If the stories were right, the fate of the world would one day be in his hands. And he was just a boy.

With a burden no one should hold.

Behind her, he was giving one last lingering look at the obelisk before him. The power she sensed had abated but was not completely gone. She heard him sigh, muttering to himself words she echoed,

“Mark, I hope you’re home.”

\* \* \*

Monstrous shapes moved above him as his conscious fought to cling back from the depths. He realised, with his growing clarity that they were broken arched windows, incredible in their height. The broken windows of a great church, jagged pieces of stained glass standing dulled with exposure to the elements and time. This was not a holy place, not a functioning place of God. Instead, darker things had nested.

Figures about him moved as he began to register two spots of pain. One, the back of his skull, was likely from when he found himself knocked unconscious against the ground. The other, his wrist, was likely when they were wrenching him down. It felt cold, floppy, moving unnaturally even as he floated across the ground, held by the hands of shadows. As they lifted, raised him to the height of the altar, it banged against the edge and with the sharp burst of pain came momentarily a greater clarity. The vampyrs had him, he was in an abandoned church – likely on the south side – and his wrist was very likely broken.

He felt cold smooth stone beneath him, before Satana’s face swam before his eyes. She was holding him, not with some psychic gaze, but with her hands, bringing his eyes and hers into alignment.

“Calm down, child,” she scalded him. “We’re going to help you.”

"What do you want with me?" he half spat groggily at her. She was unperturbed.

"We need you, boy," she snapped, as about her shadowy minions moved. "In something of working order. So, you're going to lie still...and we are going to fix the problem."

The problem, his wrist, screamed in righteous anger – more so as hands pale with endless night held him by the shoulder down against the cold stone. He tried to wriggle, tried to move away from them, indignant in his defiance. He had no reason to think Satana was lying, only that if her purpose was truly not to harm him, then by not harming him, greater evil would unfold. He would resist, he would fight.

She grabbed the disjointed wrist and yanked hard. The agony he felt before was but a slight against the sudden rush of white hot pain that bore through him. He screamed, his voice echoing around the cavernous unhallowed ground, the half-broken statues indifferent to his suffering. But as it began to ebb, he realised it felt like a more normal angle. Burning hot, inflamed, screaming at him even as his vocal chords competed, but perhaps somewhere closer to a natural. He barely saw her minion appear beside her, holding a bowl of something steaming.

"Your wrist is damaged," she said matter-of-factly, "You will hardly be of use."

"What are you going to do?" he asked, the steam from the bowl she'd been handed hitting his nostrils and bringing the acrid scent of burning rubber. It smelt of dead things and graveyards, violated at midnight.

"Why, child, help you, of course," she mocked, her voice a sing song of ancient horror, her eyes mocking him further in a grotesque pantomime of maternal instinct.

He felt her tug once more at his wrist, only this time she was dragging up the sleeve on his forearm to expose his distended and purple wrist. With her other hand she dipped into the bowl and brought up a goop of green and putrid liquid that smelt worse the closer it got to him. He held back a

gag, feeling the bile rise up in the back of his throat, as she spread the liquid across his wound. He didn't feel her touch, simply saw the slather and felt the immediate coolness of the liquid.

"This is going to hurt," she promised him, the faintest of grins touching the corners of her eyes.

The liquid on his wrist began to smoke, white and acrid smoke.

His screams rang out once more, any angels once hidden in the eaves would have fled from the sound.

\* \* \*

"Okay, so whatever information Mark has, I know he'll keep it in his top drawer," Ricky said, more for himself, as they made their way into the library. The clock might have struck midnight, he couldn't tell, but the rain had eased anyway. The back door to the School, which Mark always kept unlocked, allowed them entry – the only light the soft lamplight from his office. "If it's current, anyway."

Claire followed with him. She had been quiet since they had left the police station and walked their way back to the High School. Everything in Calendar was within walking distance, but the slight journey up the slopes of the hill to where it sat had left her a little bit breathless. He, however, found his heart rate had barely elevated. Was this another product of being this 'Guide'? Questions for another time.

As they'd stepped into the darkened hallways of the school, she looked around strangely, as though something was on her mind. She looked around his age, maybe a year or two older. And yet,

she acted as though she were much older, as though perhaps it had been a long time since she'd last stood inside of a school. Perhaps that was all there was to it.

"You always break into his desk when he's not around?" she asked, only half-joking. He shrugged.

"He's not here, I say we get a head start on research," he answered, they could see from where they were in the main body of the Library that he was not sat at his desk. He reached over the counter, feeling under the lip for the spare desk drawer key Mark kept on a little hook. "Besides, this way I get to find out if he's really hiding porn in his desk drawer, or if it's just incantations like I worry about."

She smiled a little at that, perhaps her entire sense of humour was not buried under her mysterious brooding informant routine, there may be hope after all. He headed into the office, leaving the door ajar behind him as he worked at the desk. As Claire joined him, she frowned a little, confused when she saw what lay upon the couch.

"You know there's a girl in the office, right?" she clarified with him, "I mean, you see her too?"

He glanced. Though she had rolled around a little in her sleep, and her snores had reduced to the soft and silent kind, Amy remained more or less in the position they had left her in. Which was a blessing at least, although undoubtedly, she'd be waking with a hangover before too long, likely to be less fun for her.

"Oh, that's Amy," he explained, "She found the thing that cleared the poison from my system but given the circumstances I won't bother introducing you."

She picked up the bottle of vodka from the floor, frowning as she turned it over in her hands.

"She drink all this by herself?"

“No, me mostly,” he admitted.

“Huh, you Guides must have good genes,” she muttered.

Success followed their excursion into the office, large reems of paper and thick tomes were pulled from his desk drawer like it was some kind of librarian’s clown car. When he finished extracting the thick material Mark had once referred to as velum (or something) he piled it up and moved back past Claire into the main library. There the long conference table in the middle was equipped with multiple lamps he could flick on and spread the papers out.

“Are you honestly suggesting we dig through that crap?” she asked, joining him to see there was indeed a pile amounting. And from this distance she could see the ancient cursive was tiny and in fading ink. “It could be his phone bills for all we know. Or worse, medieval porn. What do Librarian’s like?”

“Would you rather wait for him?” he threw back. She glanced at him, seeming to consider for a moment. “Look, I tried his mobile, right after leaving the station. Said he was out of the area. Which given he’s in some interdimensional pocket or whatever the hell he called it, is an understatement. These rituals take forever, but whatever that thing is that the vamps were guarding, might not. Wanna wait?”

She nodded, reluctantly sitting down at the opposite side of the table and sliding several of the papers across to her. He took the opposite seat to her, taking the top book from the pile and praying it was in English. Behind them, softly and quietly back in the office, Amy Donaldson continued to dream.

What neither of them noticed, perhaps because of the low light and the pervasive gloom of the school library, perhaps because of the already dark mahogany wood of the long counter desk, was a series of marks. Had they seen them in the daylight, or by brighter light they might have

recognised them as scuff marks. High up, as though from someone being yanked off their feet nearby.

Had they have seen that, they may have seen signs of the scuffle. As it was, chance didn't have that in mind. So instead, they took their pages and started to read, unaware of the world coming beyond the next dawn.

\* \* \*

When the creaky but surprisingly sturdy door to the former priest's office opened, it did so to a room where an unconscious girl slept. Sara Carpenter lay peacefully in the centre of the barren room, littered only with the dust and detritus of time, along with old furniture deemed too run down or too bulky to steal. A desk, a bureau. A statue of the virgin Mary upon which grotesque things had been spray painted. There in the makeshift cell, she was brought a companion.

The boy, Mark, had passed out unconscious. He too was brought into the small makeshift prison, one of the few rooms containing boarded up windows and a still lockable door. The 'cell', an ironic name given it's former purpose, had done well – and now it would house two not-quite sleeping forms. The creatures who brought him in did so with ease and unceremoniously dumped him beside the girl.

*The girl*, she thought to herself, knowing that's how they'd addressed her in the few interactions she'd overheard. These creatures, ugly little bastards as they were, had spoken of her a few times when they thought she was unconscious, as they clearly thought now. They referred to her as the girl, it turned out they had not wanted her but had instead expected to find the Guide. Now they brought the boy. Imaginative little shits.

When the door was closed and once more firmly locked – of course that would be the only thing in this damn church that wasn't rusted or busted to shit – she opened her eyes and saw who 'the boy' who had joined her was. Perhaps it should have been no surprise to open her eyes and see that her companion was their very own librarian.

"Mark, are you okay?" she asked, checking him over once for obvious injuries. He looked a little worse for the wear, there was a lump forming on the back of his head and his wrist, which was an angry purple looked swollen. However, something had been applied to it, a thick and foul smelling paste which if she wasn't mistaken was horrific enough in it's presentation to be potential medicinal. Other than that, and possible internal injuries she could not see, he seemed okay. She shook him a little, like she'd seen on that first aid training course in Year 9. He remained unconscious.

She sighed, sitting back on her feet for a moment, to contemplate their next steps. He seemed different in the early morning moonlight, it flitted through the boards barring the windows save for all but the slimmest of cracks. She took a moment to realise like this he could almost be sleeping, and in sleep he seemed to loose the old soul quality she'd sensed. Okay, so she'd told Amy it was a stuffy uppity tweed-diaper vibe, but same thing. There in the moonlight, he could have been every bit the boy of seventeen he truly was.

"Where are we, Mark?" she whispered, knowing only that it was an abandoned church – and presuming she'd not been driven out of town that meant the south side. Perhaps she was asking a question beyond their physical location. Then the next question came to mind, the one which had been really burning, "What are you and Ricky into?"

She looked around the room, nervousness creeping in now someone else was there to eventually share her emotions. She should feel safer, safety in numbers in all that. But somehow knowing Mark was involved, that he may have links to Ricky, that all this may be what was eating away at her best friend's happiness, it only made everything a million times worse.

"Is this what he was protecting me from?" she whispered, but Mark was not really there enough to hear her.

She stood, deciding an action, however small, may help propel her towards some settlement of her anxiety. First, she checked the bureau to find it completely empty save for droppings of some rodent that she hoped was long gone. Perhaps the desk? When she opened the drawers, she simply found a pack of ancient gum, advertised with a woman's hair style akin to Sarah Connor in the *Terminator*. While there was no expiry date she figured she wouldn't try it and instead chucked it onto the floor along with the decrepit rusty stapler.

She sighed in frustration and moved to the windows, where the lack of streetlight coming from outside likewise suggested they were on the South Side. Only the industrial areas of the south side were lit properly, everything else was left to the natural starlight. Tonight, the moon, full, bore down through the cracks in the boards. She tried one tentatively, seeing if time had weakened it's grip on the walls. There was no such luck, it held tight – and she could see nothing in the room to give her any leverage – if anything could even fit between the thin cracks. She assessed with a finger, which poked out into the cool night air, and that was it.

There was nothing more she could think of, at least until Mark awoke and she could interrogate him for info. Nothing more, without drawing the attention of those things who'd taken her. So, she turned and sat down next to him, praying he wouldn't sleep the night, or sleep until their captors returned. Back against the desk, she brought her knees up to her chest, rested her chin and tried to hold back tears.

When he woke up, she would be angry, not scared.

Not weak.

\* \* \*

"Does he always speak as dull as he writes?" Claire muttered to herself, leafing through her fifteenth set of notes in handwriting (or scribble) so tiny they could barely be recognised as the roman alphabet. Ricky frowned at her, but had to admit, working his way through ancient writings in arcane language without a strict English translation was beginning to grate on him too.

"He usually uses the smaller words for my benefit," he joked, closing the heavy book he was now only at this point pretending to read and placing it back onto the pile. He sighed, "Where is he?"

"You care about him, don't you?" Claire pointed out.

His instinct was to retort with a line about friends, but something stopped him. Her manner, having shifted ever so slightly since it was just the two of them, told him that to retort in the way he was about to would be cruel. He sensed in the way she moved, the way she scanned each room and each street they walked with her eyes that she was on high alert for danger all the time. He sensed back story. He sensed something beneath the hunter's instinct. And she was, he judged, barely older than he was.

He sensed his future. Burdened with knowledge of the darkness, but potentially without friends. He saw it sat in black across from him and wondered just how much of the prior mysterious informant routine was theatre, and how much was shield. And behind that shield, there would be pain.

"When I started having the dreams, when all this *shit* started happening, he was there for me," he answered honestly. "He's been there ever since. I guess, I just don't know how to do this without him."

"Maybe you won't have to," she softly responded, "He'll be back soon."

"I also don't know how to do *this* without him," he reiterated, indicating to the piles of 'read' papers and books which had yielded them nothing but eye strain and mild headaches so far. "So far he's the brains and I just hit things."

"Perhaps we're missing something," she helpfully suggested.

"I may not be Dom Perignon, but I do have some skills of observation," he bit back.

"Dom Perignon?"

"Is that not a smart detective guy? Sounded like a smart guy. Like Agatha Christie."

"It's a champagne."

"Oh. I think I need a coffee."

What neither of the hunters had noticed, with their sharp senses and reflexes, was during their conversation a small head poked out of the office. Neither of them had observed the distinct lack of snores, as Amy came around to consciousness, mouth dry and with a mild headache and crept slowly to the door. In the shadows far from them, she crept slowly and quietly on socked feet, holding her shoes in hand towards the library doors. And, despite their oiled hinges, the slight squeak did not alert either of them to the fact that they slowly swung shut once more.

And, by the time Ricky turned to the counter, and grabbed a couple of Mark's mugs from beneath, he completely missed the fact the office was no longer occupied. He turned back to Claire, two World's Best Librarian mugs with faded lettering in hand.

"Black, two sugars, thanks."

"Of course it is."

\* \* \*

Sara had managed to dose a little by the time that the light of the approaching dawn began to lighten the room. Enough that she felt a touch woozy with sleep when something began to moan and groan next to her. Half-caught in a dream she couldn't remember, her mind told her danger, told her that a monster from the deep was clawing it's way out of it's grave beneath her. She yelped, jumping back into full consciousness as the groaning came with a shuffle.

"Did they chain me up with a terrier?"

The world around her crashed into focus, bringing with it the memories of the night before. She was in some kind of abandoned building, a church judging by the religious icons around the place. Some monsters with red eyes had snatched her from the school library, and the sodding librarian was lying on the ground having been brought in unconscious in the wee hours. Her feet felt tingly and numb from sitting with her knees tucked under her chin and her bum was doing the macarena.

Said librarian, who had just compared her to a dog, was beginning to come round as well – only his seemed to be swimming out of unconsciousness rather than waking from an overtly terrifying dream. Something in his sarcastic comment angered her even more, and so she nudged him not-too-gently with the tip of her trainer.

"Are you dead?" she asked him.

"Do I want to dignify that with an answer?" he mused.

He propped himself first on his elbows, looking at the world around him and blinking up at her. His first thought was not terror or confusion, it was to be sarcastic. He stroked the back of his neck, rubbing the muscles there as she frowned at him.

"Had yourself a nice sleep, have you?" she snapped at him sarcastically.

"Quite invigorating, actually," he agreed, getting himself up into a seated position. "I haven't slept the whole night since Bush was re-elected."

That was it, she couldn't help herself but slap him on his arm. Finally, he looked at her, blinking away sleep from the corners of his eyes. The light was enough now that they could see each other's faces clearly and hers was something he would likely call indignant.

"Here I am worrying my arse off that those crack dealers have given you a nice little coma or something, and you're dozing like a drunken movie star!" she chided him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her. Did he even know who she was? She didn't exactly frequent the Library often. Perhaps he'd glimpsed her in the cafeteria, she did chew nicely.

"Taking a scenic tour of Murder Ville, you?" she answered, dripping in sarcasm now the urgency of his condition was settled.

"Making use of my season ticket."

Unable to help herself, she shuffled over to him and pointed a finger in his face, wagging it threatening and realising not too subconsciously that she was reminiscent of her mother in a way that would horrify her in a few years' time.

"What's going on?" she demanded, "You tell me now, or I poke out an eyeball."

"Would you just specify if that was one of my eyeballs you were talking about?" he clarified.

"Don't get cute with me."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

He managed to get his legs beneath him, but seemed too wobbly to stand, so instead shuffled his bum so his back was against the wall. Once braced, he stretched his legs out in front of him and began to probe the back of his head with his fingers, followed by his remarkably less purple wrist.

“Who did this to us?” she fired at him, “Why did they do this to us? Is it drugs? Are you and Ricky doing drugs?”

“Could be our award winning personalities,” he mumbled. He winced as his fingers poked at the lump on the back of his head. “She could have at least sorted out the head too. I guess I won’t become a hat person.”

She glared at him, again scarily channelling her mother’s look at Christmas-times when her stepfather had slipped Sara a prosecco at the dinner table and she got a little sassy. He sighed, resigned.

“Fine,” he relented, “Demons, vampyrs and the forces of darkness are real. The rather ancient vampyr, Satana, is holding us prisoner – presumably to get to Ricky who at this moment in time is hopefully hunting her down. We don’t know what they’re up to, but somehow, I don’t think they’re here to bring about rainbows and puppies.”

His little speech done, he resumed the systematic checking of his bodily condition, while she blinked at him twice.

“Thank you so much for taking the piss.”

“Wasn’t taking the piss.”

“Please, vampyrs are real?”

“Yes, they bite people. People die. Often, they run around in packs, and it just so happens Satana is leader of this pack.”

“If this is a pitch for a new BBC Tv show, you could come up with a better name for a vampyr.”

“” Well, I’ll be glad to let her know, though she might just rip my head off.”

Her thoughts whirled, feeling suddenly like the butt of some massive cosmic joke. Mark was taking the mick, he absolutely had to be. This was not the kind of thing that happened in real life. Was it *actually* drugs? Like was he on LSD or acid or poppers or whatever it was people took? Shrooms? She'd seen that movie and it was absolutely terrible, her cousin had thrown up just from the bad acting.

"Okay," she questioned, shakily, "So if this is really real why hasn't she ripped your head off already"

"Considering who I'm stuck with, I think it was an oversight," he responded, sarcastic to the end.

"And demons are real too?"

"Did I say demons?" His eyes went wide, "I meant Care Bears."

He managed to scramble to his feet, steadier now. She joined him at his level, feeling the protest of her legs but pushing through the pain due to adrenaline and a surging sense of frustration.

"Do they happen to puke green slime and respond to exorcism rituals?" she retorted.

"No," he answered, again in that even and completely reasonable tone that told her she was being the unreasonable one, "And some of them. Others are more like animals. Big, stupid and...well, not too different from some humans really."

"Let me just wait for Dean Winchester to sweep me into his arms and do me in the back of his Impala," she snapped back.

"You'll find anything past Buffy goes over my head," he shrugged, turning away from her and beginning the same ritual of examining their surroundings she'd completed throughout the night. Given he would likely repeat it anyway, irrespective of the fact she already knew it was helpless, she did not forewarn him of the outcome.

"And what the hell does 'forces of darkness' even mean, anyway?" she continued to challenge.

"Anything evil, not otherwise classified as demon or vampyr," he responded matter-of-factly, assessing the strength of the boards over the window spaces, exactly as she had done. "The other major category. Malevolent spirits, werewolves..." He glanced her, "...annoying blondes."

She couldn't help herself, she took two steps forward and kicked him in the shin. His eyes went wide with annoyance as he did the hop of someone who'd just been kicked in the shin.

"Oh, that's mature."

"I'm about five stages past mature right now," she snapped at him, "So tell me what's really going on, or I'm hair pulling."

They faced nose to nose. Though she was ever slightly shorter than him her head tilted a few angles up, but in presence they were matched evenly.

"Do your worst," he shrugged.

She grabbed the edge of his eyebrow and pulled just enough hair to hurt. He yelped, similar to the chihuahua sound she'd made upon his waking and slapped one hand over the spot.

"What the hell was that?"

"A warning."

\* \* \*

Luke sighed, shuffling the backpack slung casually over one shoulder as he contemplated whether the greyness of the day should qualify them for having a day off of school. Like they had

snow days, and that one time they'd evacuated due to a gas leak or something. Could they not have like a 'dull day'? Then again, given the name, on a day when all you thought was grey, English Lit seemed like the perfect place for a nap. Still, Sam summed it up nicely, as they walked hand in hand up the slick wet steps of the school that morning,

"It's just not right coming to this place after a party," she mused, "It's like a storm after the calm."

"At least we don't need a wind breaker," he offered, before remembering what he had second period and adding, "Outside of Geography, anyway."

Before the couple could consider anything more, the strangest of figures made it's way across to them. On the surface it *looked* like Amy Donaldson, his maths tutor and he hoped a burgeoning new friend, but it moved and dressed quite differently. She wore her uniform perfect as always, her tie nestled gently against her top button, her science club badge pinned to her lapel. But across her eyes was a pair of the larger aviator sunglasses he'd ever seen in his life. Beneath her skin was unusually pale, as though she'd spent the night outside. It was Sam who put it so succinctly,

"My God, you mixed fashion with nerd and a school jumper, are you insane?"

"Little bit," Amy agreed, not taking the comment to heart. To be fair, though, anything Sam said in the girl's direction was usually like water off a duck's back. Amy had incredible confidence in the power of her nerd status and Sam's fashionista barbarism had never scratched the surface. "Have either of you seen Sara?"

"We only just got in ourselves," he explained, apologetically – and not just from being sorry to be there.

"She was meant to meet me outside my house this morning, she never showed," Amy explained rapidly, "I just...I have a bad feeling about this. I'm worried. We always walk to school together, and she always answers her phone."

She seemed to be rambling by that point, she was clearly worked up. Still didn't explain the sunglasses though.

"She flaked, Amy," Sam told her curtly, "Sometimes people do that, especially teenage girls. I'd get used to it."

"Sara wouldn't do that," Amy defended. Luke knew Sam was projecting a little, but he was a smart enough boy not to point that out in the moment. "Not without a good reason."

"Yes, she would," Sam answered her back, "Besides, if she wanted you to know or cared about you at all, she'd let you know, one way or the other."

Sam gave him a quick kiss on the lips, before starting to head off to first period. Something, however, gave her pause and she leant closer to Amy.

"You stink."

At that, she walked off, leaving Amy to wrinkle her nose in surprise and attempt to smell her presumably clean uniform.

"Her level of insult has regressed a bit," she muttered to herself.

"She was being literal," Luke told her. "I mean, it's nothing a breath mint won't cure, but you definitely smell like my aunt after the races. Smirnoff?"

Her sheepish little shuffle gave her away in an instant and he had to say he was somewhat impressed at her getting down with her bad self.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Poker, not your game," he suggested.

"Look, drinking habits aside – which I absolutely do not have, I mean, like Smirnoff, what even is that, is it like a latte?" she rambled, "Anyway, I mean I'm worried about Sara, something doesn't feel right. Will you let me know if you see her? Or like hear from her or anything?"

"I'll do my best," he assured her, "But, just so you know sometimes the more you look over someone's shoulder, the more it might not go so well. So, try to chill, yeah?"

"Thanks."

She began to step away from him towards the double doors, fishing in her school backpack for the aforementioned mint. So distracted was she, he realised the danger coming before she had a chance.

"You might want to cover your ears," he called out to her.

She turned to him, confused and scrunching her face. A split second after the school bell, directly above the front door and closest to her proximity, rang in a deafening display of authoritarian rule. The poor girl shrieked, holding her hands to her ears as she ducked to escape from the sound. Luke couldn't help but smile to himself, having learnt at one of the college kid's pool parties over the summer just what a few shots did to you the day afterwards.

"Ah, the youth," he sighed to himself, feeling remarkably old and wise for all his sixteen years.

\* \* \*

"Welcome to Orange answer-phone, please leave a message after the beep," the polite robot on the other end of the line told him. At least his phone wasn't dead, it was just...okay, he couldn't really sell it to himself as a win.

"Mark, if you get this, get your arse back here now," he demanded from the mobile phone either he was speaking into. He softened as he admitted, "We have no idea what we're doing here, and we need you. P.S. You'd better not be dead."

With that he hung up once more, unable to help the moment of frustration and fear. He stood on the steps of the front of the school, first period already well underway without him there. But with everything going on, today was not a day for classes. He sighed, his breath clouding the cool fog of the September morning.

He turned to the entrance, ready to head back inside where the signal was worse (he suspected deliberately so). There, stood like Cerberus at the gates of hell, stood Drake. Arms folded, power-suit right out of the eighties, and arms folded. Why a headteacher needed high heels that could puncture a hole in a tractor tyre, he'd never know. But it worked for her and maybe it was true. Maybe the devil really did wear Gucci, or whatever it was.

"Hello, Mr Kent."

"So...we meet again," he joked, "I see you left your winged monkeys behind this time."

"We need to talk," she told him, ignoring his sarcasm completely.

"I'm not in the mood."

He knew that normal kids his age would be terrified to speak to their Head Teacher in such a manner, especially given that it was already half-way through first period, and he likely was supposed to be in a lesson. He had a sneaking suspicion it was Maths, but he'd not looked at his timetable since school started three weeks ago. But not only was this Drake, the most unprofessional headteacher he'd seen since that Demon one from Tv, but he'd also dealt with far worse in back alleys than an uppity teacher.

He walked past her and back into the building. Irritatingly, she fell into step beside him.

"I don't care what mood you're in, Mr Kent, we need to talk," she snapped.

"Talk to yourself."

"Mark's school work might not fall under my jurisdiction," she began, referring to the somewhat mythical head of sixth form that Ricky had never seen in person. "But yours does. You're failing everything, only showing up to half your classes, and most of the teachers I speak to can't remember your name. They ask if I'm taking the piss and mean Clark Kent."

"Thinking about implementing name badges?" he suggested.

"Given what I call you lot in the governor's meetings, probably not."

"What I do is none of your business," he answered, trying to walk fast through the empty corridors. She kept pace.

"When it comes to school, what you don't do is my business," she reminded him.

He stopped, turning to her and looking up at her. With heels she was ever so slightly taller, in presence she was ever so slightly more cock-sure. She was unlike any other adult he knew, and any other professional on the payroll. She'd hired a seventeen year old librarian so she didn't have to pay post-eighteen minimum wage. She was not dragging him away to lesson, or threatening detention. Instead, she was giving him banter. Was this another adult tactic?

"What do you want from me?" he asked her.

"I want an actual student," she answered, "Not a criminal-in-waiting."

"I can guarantee you I'm not a criminal," he assured.

"You know that would mean a lot more if I could trust you."

"I'll make an effort," he told her honestly.

"Mr Kent, I'm sorry for what happened to your parents, but slack only goes so far," she pointed out. He clenched, refusing to rise to the bait, to the emotion of it. He didn't have the time. "If you don't make the effort, I'll make a call to your brother."

"I guess we'll have to wait and see," he shrugged.

This time when he walked off and headed back to the Library, she did not follow. He moved quietly through the double doors to find Claire still sat there, continuing to read through Mark's notes even though now the school was in full swing. They were lucky nobody frequented the library, her presence on campus would not raise eyebrows. It wasn't as if it was the cafeteria, the only room in the building anyone cared about.

Before he could ask her if she'd found anything, his phone buzzed in his pocket, him answering with a hopeful, "Mark?"

The short conversation was not with Mark, and yet somehow that wasn't the worst part of it. The frantic questions, the trying-to-keep it together tone. The fear. When he hung up, Claire looked at him, sensing the stillness of him. The attempt to keep composure.

"What's wrong?"

"That was Sara's mum," he explained, not bothering to explain who Sara was. He didn't even think to, she was just...Sara. "Mark's not the only one missing."

"Sara didn't come home last night..."

**Act II**

“Who’s Sara?”

Honestly, he had no idea how to answer the question. Sara was...Sara. She was his best friend since their mothers were side by side in the delivery room fifteen years ago, bonding over their shared love of epidurals. She was the one constant in his life, an immoveable object. And now she was missing.

“She’s a friend,” he answered, distilling fifteen years of history for Claire’s benefit, trying to remove the shake that came from hearing her mother’s suppressed fear down the phone. “Satana, it’s got to be her.”

“Why would she take your friend?” Claire asked the obvious question for him.

“Her mother said she last saw her going to try and find me,” he answered, “The last place we talked was here. Maybe they came looking for me and found her instead.” He considered it now properly for the first time, lowering his head, “Which means she’s been taken because of me.”

“And it’s not possible she’s out doing teenage girl things?” Claire asked, her voice a shade of condescending meant to disguise empathy. He recognised it, having heard the same tone a year ago, in all the condolences. She added with possible bitterness, “I mean, not like I’m an expert or anything.”

“So, the same day some old vampyr shows up in town my best friend goes missing and Mark stops answering his phone?” he challenged, “Two things, I don’t believe in, coincidences and leprechauns.” He frowned for a moment as a thought occurred to him, “Wait, should I believe in leprechauns?”

“What do I look like, a Supernatural Yellow Pages?” she responded, defensively.

He felt an anger well up, furious in its impotence.

"We don't have time for a cryptic chick routine," he snapped, harsher than he intended. "We can do the dance, build up some sexual tension until you turn out to be a vampyr or werewolf or whatever other cliché you're hiding. But right now, Sara and Mark are my priority, which means anything you know that you've been saving for a rainy day – whether leprechauns or not – spill."

She looked at him for a long moment, him worried that he'd perhaps pushed a little too far. But it seemed like she was made of sterner stuff, she simply sat forward and shuffled errantly through some of the pages.

"Most of what I know of Satana comes from these pages," she offered. "And that's not much."

"Let's work it through," he softened his tone as he sat back down opposite her at the table.

"So, she's old," Claire began, "Been around for well over a thousand years, in the lore. Some say she's the first, but really all of the old ones say that – it's likely just mystical PR spin. 'My blood is purer than your blood' kind of bollocks."

"What else?"

"The pages are bloody," she continued. "All the stories say she's a blood-thirsty see you next Tuesday and kills brutally not just to feed but for sport. The uprising a few hundred years ago? The one that nearly wiped out a good chunk of them? She was elbow deep in that crap, and viscera. So, I guess she'd kill your friend without a single moment's hesitation."

"What else?"

"Okay, so she's tried to take things over before, right?" she worked out, "And she likes ritual to it. It could be more proof she's actually a big bad or it could be something more. A kind of crazed fanaticism, believing in vampyr purity and the destruction of all humankind. Which means whatever

she's in town to do, whatever her endgame and that stone means, it'll be tied into the whole end of days kind of vibe. Or she could just be motivated by personal power. The reward for helping the big wigs, powers that be, can be pretty great." She frowned, "From a bad guy's perspective, anyway."

"In context?"

"In context, if she's been excavating that stone, it means something big," she continued, "She thinks it's either something spiritual or something powerful, and given your Hayley Joel Osmond vibe around it, it's probably the latter or both. She won't leave it unguarded, but she knows we know about it now – if any of the vamps survived our attack. So, she'll keep Sara, and Mark if she has him, elsewhere, but close."

He looked at her for a long moment, but she already knew. Despite everything they'd just run through, they were no closer.

It wasn't enough.

\* \* \*

Mark tried to peer through the slats towards the growing daylight beyond but could see no movement on the streets. He was not surprised, the church was likely one of the three on the South Side – and none of them were near the industrial areas where they had a chance of catching some passersby. Did vampyrs need to sleep during the day? Or just keep out of the sunshine? He couldn't remember what the lore explicitly said, which meant he was already getting to the edge of exhaustion.

"Being kidnapped is a lot less glamorous than in the movies."

Unfortunately, his companion in capture was similarly exhausted and had turned to a kind of bored observational attempt at humour that only grated. Without turning to her (she sat behind him on the desk, the slight knock of her trainers against the wood told him she was swinging her legs again despite their little tiff about it an hour earlier). His eyebrow still hurt.

"Well, I'll try to drum up Colin Farrel for you," he dripped with sarcasm.

"Nah, too grungy," she dismissed, "Now Jude Law, ooft."

He had no opinion either way, so he settled for rubbing the bridge of his nose, hoping that the tension headache developing would either go away or kill him quickly. The sound of the door creaking open behind them, the turning of the lock, drew him back into the room. Sara evidently heard the same thing, she stopped banging her damn trainers for a start.

The vampyr which entered was unfamiliar to him – he had managed to count at least six different faces so far. He wondered just how many she managed to have in her pack, how many more she would have hiding out elsewhere. And how many would be too much for Ricky, were they ever lucky enough for him to find them both.

"So, I suppose you're going to tell me this is a vampyr?" Sara commented, sceptically. It was true, in slight morning light, and without his demonic visage and red snake-like eyes, he just looked like a douche. Or as Sara continued, "He just looks like a scruffy bastard." She added to the vampyr directly, "No offense."

Mark sensed the shifty look in his eyes, the way the vamp's tongue ran across his lower lip. There was a hunger, perhaps a desperation. Perhaps all was not well in demonic paradise as Satana made it seem.

"What do you want?" Mark challenged him, moving instinctually to get himself between the vamp and Sara. The vamp did not respond with words, instead one cold hand backhanded him across the face, right over the broken office chair. He fell down in a tangle, his face smarting and his

thoughts momentarily whirling. He heard Sara jump down off the desk as the creature began to stalk towards her.

"Not allowed to kill you," he muttered, Mark sensing the bitterness underneath. "But she can't be angry at a few drops..."

He heard the scuffle, heard them falling to the ground, the creature on top pinning Sara to the dirty dusty floor. Mark twisted where he lay, attempting to untangle his legs from the immovable ones of the chair, feeling helplessly unfit and awkward. By the time he managed to get to his knees, he heard the almighty roar of pain and saw the creature leaning back. A rusty stapler was stuck in one reddened eyeball, blood and other unholy fluids dripping from the wound. Sara scrambled to get out from under it, as Mark grabbed the same chair he'd been tangled in and stumbled forward to bring it down on the creature's skull with all his strength.

It was enough to knock the thing unconscious, as he tried to regain his breath and locked eyes with Sara, who thankfully appeared unhurt and unbitten.

"That...is a vampyr," he offered.

She looked at him, and for the first time the truth dawned in them. He saw the light click on, the exact second it went from an easily deniable lie to an undeniable truth. He pitied her then, it was a bell that could never be unrung, and a loss of innocence most people went their whole lives without losing. Her look turned steely as she returned to him, took the chair from his hands and repeatedly slammed it down onto the creature's skull until it burst into a pillar of flame and ash.

"No, that *was* a vampyr," she corrected him.

When the door opened for a second time, neither of them jumped, but Sara did drop the chair to clatter on the floor. Satana herself strode into the room, looking bleary eyed as she regarded them both.

"Do you realise how late it is for us?" she demanded, "And you're resuming the screaming."

"If you'd just like to remind the rest of your goons that playing with the prisoners isn't allowed, we could all relax a little more," Mark snapped back at her. She glanced down at the rapidly cooling remains of her former henchman, already mingling with the dust covering the thick wooden floorboards.

"Some of us do struggle with our vices," she muttered, "The deadly sins would be pleased."

"You know you guys turning to ash must really save on the funeral costs," Sara joked from behind him, her voice recovering from a tremor. "Guess it must help avoid all that church-going fun."

"You think this is mystical?" Satana chuckled, a dry and creaking sound. "This is all just biology, girl. We're as part of this ecosystem as you are, not some Bella Lugosi moustache twirling villains. We are simply the next step up the food chain."

"And spontaneous vampyr combustion is what?" Sara challenged, "Improved biodegradability?"

Satana's look clouded as she regarded her fallen companion. It was not sorrow, as such, more a kind of hollow look. One perhaps reserved for those who'd lived longer than any human had the right to.

"We are human, and we transform," she said softly, yet coldly, "When we die, a chemical is released in our brains. Enzymes which keep our bodies going, increase in reactivity. It is as if for one brief second, our bodies experience the absolute painful beauty of raw, inescapable life. In the few seconds before the extra heat causes internal combustion, we're ironically more alive than we've ever been."

Her eyes turned back to them, cold and distant, and cruel.

“And humans? When we watch you die, it is nothing so profound. I have lost count of the number of lives I’ve watched fade into your afterlife...and every single one of them was deeply, deeply afraid.”

Her smile was a predator grinning through a thunderstorm. Then she was gone, leaving them there with only silence and the dusty remains of death.

\* \* \*

Oh, the bell, the most beautiful of sounds. Signalling sweet release from lesson, and the call to arms that was personal time. Each one a slightly different sound, leading to a different sensation. The one Luke enjoyed that midday was the sweet dulcet tones of the bell before dinner. Meaning he could leave Maths behind and bathe in the Russian roulette game that was the school cafeteria. And today, judging by the menu board, there was more than one loaded chamber.

At least things in school which were not lesson related were never dull. Wait, was that a double negative? Never mind, he’d not not ask in English Lang if he remembered.

“Luke!” a familiar voice came to him, as he struggled to read the texts on his new Nokia. It had been his folk’s sixteenth birthday present for him, and he was still struggling to get beyond Snake and use it for its normal functions. He did manage to look up and avoid running into one of the sixth form rugby guys, as Amy fell into step beside him – looking ever so much spritelier than he’d seen her in the morning.

Well, she’d taken the sunglasses off at least.

“I need your help,” she explained, without further preamble.

"If it's walking and texting at the same time, I'm still having trouble myself," he admitted, nearly dropping the thing while trying to scroll to Sam's number. "We need a training course. Of course, Drake would never go for it."

"It's serious."

At that, knowing she was not the type for exaggeration, he stopped walking and gave her his full attention. She did look a little brighter, but her eyes were now filled with a nervous energy.

"What's the problem?"

"It's about Sara," she explained, "Her mum just called me – she didn't come home last night. And if she didn't show up to Sam's party either...I think something's happened to her."

He considered for a moment, letting things click into place. To be honest, it was weird that she'd not shown up to Sam's party. I mean, a Thursday sweet sixteenth was never going to be Milan Fashion Week, but the two of them had been friends for a long time. And Sara, while scatty on occasion, was not exactly one to be a stone cold b-i-t-c-h. Or, to be fair, the type to run away or go on wild teenage benders or whatever else other people thought 'the youth' capable of.

"What can we do about it?" he shrugged, concerned but also not seeing their role, "Don't you have to wait like twenty four hours to report someone missing?"

"Eight if they're under eighteen," Amy answered, "Her mum's already reported her missing."

"Then what's left to do?" he wondered, "Shouldn't we let the police handle it?"

It was then he caught the undercurrent to her look. She was nervously considering something, the way she bit her lip gave the game away. He found himself not only concerned but now intrigued. He was new to their friendship, slowly progressing as it was from forced tutorship, but even he knew if Amy was considering something that made her nervous...it was worth paying attention to.

"I think I can find her," she finally admitted. "Before the police can. It's...you know...like not exactly above board. But I'm going to need your help."

He couldn't help but grin, she had him at 'not exactly above board'.

\* \* \*

The woods surrounding Calendar were extensive, only the peak of the Old Man of Calendar peaking above them. It was there, amongst the porous limestone structures there were tucked away caves. Some were natural, some were explored for occasional rocks or slate or all other sorts of materials and minerals. They were extensive – and other than the main Shingle Cave open to the public, many of them were unexplored.

They went deep, came out in multiple places, and given that this was Calendar very likely contained all sorts of unsavouries. Unfortunately, for Ricky and Claire, that also meant that tracking down where Mark had gone from his vague directions was not going to be easy.

At least the woods were green and lush, however. Fed by the storm and the September rains, the air was heavy with earth and fresh. The leaves of various trees dripped on them as they passed along the old hiking trail towards their best estimation of a cave.

They had exhausted whatever information Mark had left in his drawer, the most pertinent, and Ricky knew few of his contacts to be able to delve further. He had not returned and the day was waning further on. He got the sense from Claire that she, like he, was a person of action – and so they made the decision to abandon the books and go after him.

He could only hope the decision had not come too late. He just couldn't deal with another death on his hands.

The thoughts clouded over his mind like a cloud blotting out the sun, bringing with a shiver and memories he tried to bury.

"What do you know about the Guide?" he asked her, finding the lapse in conversation disturbing him. The sounds of nature were nice and all that, but it was beginning to get to him. The quietness, the stillness, the things moving from the brush. "Or was all that just enigmatic informant *Angel* crap?"

"Well, you know how that one turned out," she winked at him. For a second, he stopped, but the moment had already passed before he could react to it. To be fair, he hadn't seen much past the first season. Sara would be the expert.

To think of her caused his heart to pang.

"Honestly, I don't know much," she offered, "I don't know if this deflates your ego, but you're not a household name. I just met a wise woman. Told me meeting the Guide was somewhere in my destiny. Then, I find a fifteen year old fighting vamps near where my...near where I was going...and well, I put two and two together."

He caught it. She turned away from him, moving further towards the cave entrance he could already begin to see poking through the brush. But she couldn't hide the fact she'd slipped up, started to reveal more about herself. More about what she was here for. But then just like that, her walls came up and he was left only to wonder.

Maybe hunting vamps together didn't bond you forever, or whatever.

The entrance loomed in front of them, they would have to stoop to enter. He paused to allow her to catch her breath.

"Hold on a sec. These caves go on for miles, how do we know which was to this...like nexus point or whatever he called it, is?"

"Well Mark managed it at night and without your super powers," she answered with a shrug, "Perhaps you can use your Guide-version of Spider-sense and like...feel your way to it."

"So *Dead Zone* my way to this thing?"

"I haven't watched Tv in years."

"Then how did you know it was a Tv series?"

They stared each other down for a moment, before he turned away from her and headed into the entrance. At the very first fork in the road, he turned left and led them further into the dark with only the help of the torch she'd decided to bring (smartly).

"You guessed that, didn't you?" she challenged, echoing from behind him.

"Eeny meeny miney mo," he agreed.

\* \* \*

"Of all places why are we here?"

Amy led Luke through the double doors and into the Library – pleased to find the place empty. She already knew Mark wasn't in, his office light wasn't on. Even in the middle of the day, he always left his desk lamp on. And there was no sign of Ricky or the other girl, neither of whom had caught her sneaking out. Sure, there was other stuff going on – she wasn't an idiot – but she wasn't about to get herself get any further drawn into it.

Not while she had an annoying blonde – and her best friend – behind.

She walked over to the counter, then around. A moment of unease passed through her, the nervous little feeling that comes with breaking a rule. Though she would hope Mark wouldn't mind

her being behind the counter, she still felt like she was breaking some kind of social contract. She was entering his space, and though there was a touch of butterflies, there was also a little guilt.

She placed her laptop down and withdrew an ethernet cable from her bag. Luke regarded the space around them as though a completely new world.

"I need an internet source which is mostly separate from the central servers," she explained, working her magic and connecting her laptop to the ancient device she was fairly certain Mark never switched on behind the desk. She saw his hand-written log book nearby. "The Library and Drake's office are the only suitable ones, and Drake's in her office at the moment."

"How do you know that?"

"She's...uh...investigating the theft of something..." she squeaked, colour flushing into her cheeks. Before he could probe further, she continued to explain while she set about working. "Anyway, Sara's mum bought her a phone for her birthday last year – one of those new Blackberry ones that has a GPS in it. Basically, I can use the telemetry of the global positioning satellite and use it to locate where her mobile phone is remotely. If it's still on her, we'll find her with it. If not..."

"At least it'll give us a direction," he agreed, keeping up with the technobabble, "Maybe even a timeline. But what if her phone's broken?"

"As long as the chip itself isn't damaged, I'll still be able to triangulate it."

Luke paused for a moment, frowning. She knew what he was about to ask, so kept her face on her computer screen.

"Okay, I'm not an expert or anything, but you're talking about hacking here, right?" he asked her, "Like, you don't have access to her phone normally, right? So, you have to like hack and break laws and stuff?"

"Maybe."

“Amy...”

“This is to find Sara, alright?” she challenged him. “If she’s hurt...or lost...I mean, you know what the police are like in this town. She might not have a lot of time. I’m doing this, but I understand if you don’t want to.”

“Hey, I only mean are you sure we can do this without getting caught?” he clarified. She wanted to smile but felt it would seem rude in the moment. He consistently surprised her, showing him layers beneath that kind jock exterior he portrayed.

“That’s where you come in,” she answered, pulling out a USB stick she’d planned earlier. She allowed a small but hopeful smile to cross her lips, and he responded with a warm one of his own, as he took it from her.

“So while I’m...okay, I need a cuter word than ‘hacking’ ...into the GPS programme, I need something to cover what I’m doing,” she explained, “It’ll cover up what I’m doing on the server, and then wipe out any trace of it afterwards so it can’t be traced.”

“Okay, I think I got that,” he agreed, “And I would go with ‘shimmying’ instead of hacking.”

“I’ve designed a computer virus,” she continued.

“Are you sure you’re not really a government agent who just found herself in the wrong training school?”

“You go into the IT rooms, pretend you’re doing homework or whatever,” she continued, with a smile. “Log on using the remote code I’ve written down on this piece of paper, not your usual school account. That way they can’t trace any ‘shimmying’ to you or me.”

“The username is ‘party pants?’” he frowned.

“Then you simply place this USB stick into the port on the front of the computer,” she continued, ignoring him. “It’ll automatically upload the virus, which will put the server on the fritz. I’ll

then be able to get on, shimmy like there's no tomorrow, find Sara's location and afterwards, I can remotely put in the execution command, and the virus terminates itself and destroys everything on the servers."

"Can I get my homework off it before you do?" he pleaded. "I spent hours on that poster for RE."

"Might look a bit suspicious."

"Ah, well," he shrugged, getting over it with the resilience of the youth. "Not the end of the world."

With a final smile he set off on his mission, while she hopped back onto her laptop and began to 'shimmy' as if Sara's life depended on it. Which she just hoped to God it didn't.

\* \* \*

Blood dripped into the floor of the cavern as the flash of fire in his eyes disappeared, his blood. The endless voices and crying sounds in the cavern they'd stumbled into had asked him a simple question, one he could barely hear but one he felt. Before he'd even been able to answer, Claire had drawn a knife from nowhere and slashed it across the palm of his hand, pressing his newly opened flesh to the cave wall.

What is a hero?

And the answer was blood.

The fire and the fury abated as quickly as it had come, even before Claire began to wrap a clean cloth around his hand and stem the bleeding. He wanted to challenge, wanted to snap at her, but something was holding him back, keeping the anger at bay.

The sound of trickling water drew his eyes, across the plain expanse of the frankly disappointingly small room. Hall of the Guide? It barely looked like a room, rather than some kind of *Lord of the Rings* mines shit. But on the other side, where the water flowed, he felt something strange drawing him. This was not the magnetic pull of the stone beneath the police station. That felt like a powerful malignancy. This...this was safe.

"What are you feeling?" Claire asked from behind him, not having moved as she cleaned off her knife and slipped it back into its hiding place.

"Peace," he answered softly, taking steps slow towards the waters flowing. He reached one hand out, expecting the frigid cold of a mountain spring. Instead, the water felt lukewarm, gliding silkily over his outstretched finger tips. Even the fresh pain in his palm was beginning to abate.

"Sanctuary."

Thoughts tumbled through him as the water touched. It was not the landscape of his dreams, or the vividness of a vision. It was like simply knowing a thing, without ever really remembering when you first heard it. Like the names of your parents, or the word for the colour blue.

"This isn't just for me," he continued, the same trance-like tone to his voice. He could sense Claire tense, but she didn't need to worry. "It's for all the Guides."

"Guides?" she tilted her head, "I thought there was only one. Definite article and all that."

"There's others..." he corrected, again not sure how he knew for sure. "...or at least there have been Others. They came here, for Sanctuary, for Guidance."

"And Mark?"

"He was here."

As he pulled his hand from the waters, the trance like quality to his mind lifted and he was left with the knowledge already imparted. There was a sense of impatience, a wish to return to the warmth, but he knew they needed to move forward. He also did not need any kind of supernatural power to tell him about Mark – he indicated down to Mark’s backpack left to one side.

“So, he made it this far in,” Claire mused, moving across the expanse to where it sat. A thought occurred as she looked down at it, “Do you think *they* could have gotten this far in?”

“You mean vampyrs?”

“I mean, is this place a complete sanctuary?” she thought out loud, “Mark is not here doing his ritual, but his pack is here. Satana could have taken him, perhaps they just needed someone pure to get them through the front door.”

He moved across to Mark’s pack, kneeling down beside it, glad to see at least there was no blood on the outside. A faint scent came from it, one that reeked of some of the pungent herbs Mark kept in his cabinet. A shadow moved across him, as he began to pull back the edge of the pack.

“Ricky,” he heard urgency in her voice, concern.

She grabbed him by the shoulder, the very one which no longer burned with poison but that still was a knife one. He stumbled backwards, the strap of the pack coming with him in a quick jerk that caused it to fall onto it’s side. A stream of smoke, putrid green in colour leaked from the inside. The pungency of scent intensified, screaming in his nostrils.

“What the hell is that?” he gagged. The pull on his arm became far more intensive, as she began to half-drag him towards the exit.

“Witchfyre,” she explained. He had no idea what the hell witchfyre was, but by the rapidly expanding cloud and look in her eyes, her next words were no surprise, “We need to run! Now!”

She took the lead as he followed behind her, the doorway to the room melding back into the caverns beyond. As soon as she passed through them, the sense of safety and peace went away, as though he was stepping through the waterfall. Behind him, the sound of an almighty explosion ripped through the cavern. He felt pushed, warm, angry hands shoving him forwards, so he landed hard against the slick rock of the ground in front of him.

Rock, smoke and dust filled his vision as the two of them scrambled to their feet, racing to get out of the cloying darkness – feeling the weight of the earth above them. They emerged into daylight, the dust and soot clinging to them, as the day mocked them with its brightness.

“What the hell was that?” he yelled again, although whether just from the ringing in his ears he wasn’t sure.

“Witchfyre,” she repeated the term, “Nasty stuff, but surprisingly easy to make when you combine the right household magick items.” She patted her sleeves as she spoke, the dust cloud growing and hanging around her, “Guess that’s Satana’s way of giving you the middle finger.”

Anger surged in him, frustration and a night’s lost sleep. He felt foolish, childish even, as he screamed out in a wordless cry and kicked the nearest thick log flying a few metres.

“I want that bitch in the ground,” he snapped, not even looking for a response as he headed back for the trail.

“Pfft, teenagers,” he heard Claire mutter behind him.

Satana would see.

\* \* \*

"It is done," he announced upon his return to the Library, in far too good a mood for someone who now had to redo his RE homework. He didn't even have a dog to blame it on.

'Shimmying' in had been remarkably easy given Amy's advanced techno skills. He had simply headed into fifth period ICT, where Mr Jenkins had given him a wave towards the back, asking him to just make sure he did his coursework and did not browse for cars again. He decided not to tell Mr Jenkins that he'd been given a new laptop for his birthday and therefore could browse cars at any time he wanted to. He needed that information for last period on a Friday. If Amy's little disrupty virus had stopped doing, it's nonsense by then.

He didn't know what he expected when he'd done it. The screen to flicker? Hell, that happened anyway after the budget cuts – the program was probably still like Windows '95 or something given Miss Drake's stingy coin purse. Instead, the little dialogue box popped up saying 'Jinkys!' and the 'Programme Executed'. He slipped the USB back into his pocket, pretended he had forgotten to go to English and headed out of the room. The only sign something was wrong was when Julie asked why some of her coursework had suddenly switched to Mandarin.

By the time he'd made it back to the Library and the door began to swing close behind him, the chaos had spread a little further.

"They're going to kill us all!" a panicked Year 9 cried as they ran past.

"Exam stress?" he mused out loud.

"Or when their homework disappeared took it as a sign SkyNet has put it's plan into motion," Amy's voice floated over to him. "Some people are just gloomy, y'know?"

He scanned the Library with his eyes but couldn't see her. As he moved over to the counter, he found her there, sat cross legged with an ethernet cable dragging over to her laptop. Her concentration was entirely on her screen, but what she was doing he had no idea.

“How are we doing?” he enquired.

“It’s going to take some time,” she assured him, her eyes never moving from racing across her screen. “If you have some homework to do....”

“Burn it and play Super Mario?” he asked hopefully. She broke her eyes from the screen to glare at him momentarily.

“What am I tutoring you for?” she asked him sternly.

He couldn’t help himself from making a face, as much as he took her point. And so, while pulling his English Lit booklets out of his backpack, he joined her behind the counter and tried to keep his grumbling to a minimum. They settled into a quiet rhythm, her tapping away on the keyboard, while he tried to discuss why Lenny shot Carl. Or was it Carl shot Lenny? Or Mrs Haversham?

After a little while, the doors opened once more, although thankfully no sounds of the breakdown of society came through. He caught a hint of her perfume before she peered across the counter at the two of them. He felt his heart skip a beat, even at the end of the school day, after Lord knows how many sweaty classrooms, she looked fresh as a daisy. She raised an eyebrow at the two of them, sat side by side behind the counter.

“Please don’t tell me...” she sighed, cocking her head to one side.

“He’s doing homework,” Amy assured her, “I’m doing computer work.”

Sam knew as much, him having texted her before that he and Amy were doing tutor-y stuff, but she still made a show of sighing dramatically.

“I said don’t tell me,” she returned, “Some days I feel an affair would be preferable to his social circle free fall.”

“Hey!”

She leaned a little further forward to see him grasping his Lit booklet between his legs and he couldn't help but notice himself staring at her.

"What are you staring at?" she asked him, catching his attention fully finally.

"Only your heavenly lips," he answered, sweetly. She rolled her eyes.

"Is this what it means to be in a couple?" Amy questioned, "Count me out."

"Oh, Amy, you were counted out of the gene pool years ago," Sam sighed at her. He snapped her a harshly stern eyebrow, and to her credit she raised her hands in apology. "Fine, sorry, I'm just not in a good mood."

"What's wrong?"

"All the computers went down, right when I was trying to do my Geography coursework," she answered, "On...like...volcanos or something. Look, just because I wasn't paying attention, doesn't mean it wasn't important. Now I have to do it all over again because the server decides it's going all *Rise of the Machines* on me...and yes...I hate you made me watch that film...and..."

She paused her ranting. He'd tried very, very hard not to share a guilty look with Amy, who also happened to struggle with the very same thing.

"You two did something didn't you?"

"Us? Of course not!" he defended weakly.

"We would never do something like that," Amy agreed.

"Amy, do me a favour, I can't treat *you* like an idiot, so don't treat me like one," Sam asked of her. "You have the smarts to do something like this, so why are you ruining my free time by making me do my coursework all over again?"

"We're trying to find Sara," Amy caved.

"By crippling the school's computer system?" she asked sceptically, before adding dryly, "How sensible."

"Amy's using some sort of GPS tracking...thing," he tried to explain, "Don't ask me, or her, to explain it. For different reasons. Wanna help?"

In reality he would just be glad for another excuse to ignore his homework and maybe sneak a snog from his girlfriend.

"Do I have to do anything?"

"Sit next to me while Brains McGuffin over here does her thing."

She sighed, for perhaps the thousandth time that day. He didn't mind, her entire aloof demeanour was just that. He knew the girl beneath it, the woman she was becoming, and despite the way she presented herself, he knew she would have helped regardless. Perhaps that was why he told her where he was hanging out.

"Okay, I'm going to help find her," she muttered, "But *only* so I can have a go at her for skipping out on my party, understood?"

It was Amy who answered, distractedly from where she'd already gone back to work,

"Understood and ignored."

\* \* \*

Music floated from the old church organ, as keys moved, touched for the first time in decades. The sound, rusted and old at first, began to grow as the system began to clear itself of time.

Good quality artisanry lasted longer than the men who built it, and as her warm fingers brushed against them, they eked out a tune that was ancient but sweet.

The burnished sky drew soft strokes across the interior of the church, as the daylight gave way to night. They crept slowly as she played, the tune older than she. Was it some old Gaelic tune? She could not remember, for time had a way of eluding even those who lived much of it. Memory was not so infinite as the Freudians liked to think.

Somewhere in the town, the Guide would be. She knew he would not have died from the silly little witchfyre trap. And if he had, being the Guide was clearly not something in his destiny. But he would be bruised, hurting, perhaps spiralling. Such a young child to be given such an amazing gift. Of course, the powers above and below liked them young. A bit like Beethoven, who's notes she slipped into with ease.

She had actually been to one of his concerts, back in the day. Across a thousand years of time, you get around to many of the greats. Wiping a drop of Ferdinand's blood off your petticoat, wandering the streets during a Chinese rebellion, throwing bricks during a riot in New York...it all rolled into one. Moments of human frailty, and human beauty, and ultimately – human cruelty. They all blended into one until you came to see only the truth.

All things end.

Nearby, the boy she needed, and the girl her idiot recruits had snatched by accident, were held. She could sense their fear, palpable through their heartbeats, the scent of terror moving through the air like thick honey to her enhanced senses. She never stopped enjoying those moments. Or...should that be, she would remember them fondly?

Upon them, was change. The day turned into night, sunlight through the cracks in the broken barred windows like sand through fingers. The musical notes creating vibrations in the air, dust

settling back once more and vibrations losing energy until they died in the still twilight air. All things that were born, would die.

Except she. Except they.

The Old Ones.

Silence broken in the church only by the soft steps of her lieutenant, his breath held baited, his own fear like a thick cinnamon scent in her nose. They respected her, they feared her, and even they did not know the full truth of what was about to happen. She smiled, turning to him, as the last of the sunlight disappeared from the sky outside.

"It's time."

For what?

For the end.

**Act III**

“They’re going to kill us, aren’t they?”

Sara spoke from the desk where she sat, having thankfully giving the banging of her trainers a knock on the head. Mark stood by the window, trying to see anything even in the failing light. The stars were out that night, the moon full and pregnant in the sky. The bone coloured streets were quiet, already, but at least it meant he could see inside the room.

“There’s likely something else they need us for,” he reasoned, feeling confident since they had not been killed yet. “Then, yes, probably.”

“This is what you do?” she asked quietly.

“Well, we Librarians don’t get out much,” he joked, dryly, “We have to do something to keep us amused.”

“Mark.”

Something in her voice made him turn, regarding her face. It was not merely the moonlight making her look ashen. A lot of her bravado, her mask, had slipped and for a moment he was sitting in the room with a fellow teenager. A fifteen year old girl, who’s eyes had been opened to the world he’d long known existed. His heart dropped a little, guilt worming it’s way in for his indifference.

He moved across to her, sitting beside her on the desk.

“You want to know how it all started?” he asked her, “How things got the way they are?”

“I assume it’s a story you survive?” she joked, weakly. She brushed a tear that had rolled down one cheek, leaving a little trail behind. Given all the dust in the air they were probably both filthy.

"Part of me didn't," he admitted. "When you find out about all of this, when you have your epiphany about what's going on out there in the darkness, it destroys a part of you that you didn't know you even had. It takes away some of your innocence."

"You're saying that's all this feeling is?"

"I'm saying you shouldn't fight your fear of it," he admitted, "Accept it."

"That doesn't change the fact that this is a life or death situation, and you're telling me you and Ricky face it every day," she countered, "How am I supposed to accept that?"

"What else would you have me do?" he asked her, keeping hard the challenge and bitterness from entering his tone. "What would you have *us* do?"

"I'm not saying you shouldn't fight."

"We're protecting people, Sara," he reminded her, "We're hunting down the evil. Not everyone has to do the same thing. Each of us makes a choice when they find out the truth, whether to fight or whether to live a normal life. And that's not a decision any of us can judge, one way or the other."

"But you could die," she snapped at him, "This is not some damn game or Tv show or something. You could actually end up six feet under, pushing up daisies and paying the pied piper in pickled peppers or whatever it is. And what that happens, you selfishly leave everyone behind to mourn you. Do either of you ever think about that?"

"I can't speak for Ricky, but yes...I do..." he answered honestly, feeling a thickness rise in the back of his throat. A part of him fought back against it, against the reminder his family and the people he would leave behind. "I think sometimes what my parents would think of me, if they knew what I did. The people I've helped to help, so far. And I hope they'd be proud."

She smiled, weakly. At least, he told himself, their conversation had provided some brief distraction from the darkness. Unfortunately, he had learned over time that the demonic never gave any relief. Clanking metal and screeching ancient hinges grabbed their attention, as Satana strode in with her minions.

They both slide from the desk and to their feet, Mark noting once more the slight twinge that remained in his wrist. The foul-smell had gone, but whatever she had done did not entirely do the job.

“Well, boys and girls, it’s showtime,” she greeted, with an expansive grin. She was dressed in dark black, her hair and eyes glistened with an unholy light. Though her minions were in full demonic visage, their eyes red and snake-like hovering behind her, she needed no such theatrics. Everything about what was to happen was plain on her face.

“What do you want with us?” Sara asked from beside and a little behind him.

“Us?” Satana mocked, “Whoever said it was the both of you?”

“Huh?”

“Once they realised, they didn’t have the Guide and his lapdog, rather the lapdog and his friend...they adjusted their plans,” Mark summarised for her. “They wanted the Guide dead or incapacitated and they needed me for something else.” He stared at the ancient evil, “Am I correct?”

“Give the boy a prize,” Satana agreed, the amusement at the game. “Well, certainly your brain we wanted you for.” She looked him up and down, reaper’s eyes as she added, “Though, if you were up for it, might be something else.”

“Ew,” Sara made the most disgusted face she could manage, “Take him away before you do that.”

“Vampirism, you dirty minded cow.”

"I think I'll pass on the blood sharing," he answered, never taking his eyes off the predator.

"Never know what you can catch."

"Your loss," she shrugged. "Either way, I have a job for you. Come with us."

"Over your dead body," he suggested. Again, he knew his options were very limited, but he didn't plan to make it easy. She chuckled, exuding absolute control, as she stepped closer to him. Her eyes met his, incredibly bloodshot.

"This is not a negotiation," she reminded him, coldly, "You come with us now, your bitch here will be left at the church. Your friend or perhaps the police, may eventually find her, she may live. You don't...I rip her throat out right now and drag you kicking and screaming to our destination anyway."

"How do I know you'll keep your word?" he asked.

"She will die in the fires of rebirth anyway," she answered, "Her life means nothing to me. But perhaps it means something to you. So, boy, this is the part where you make your choice."

He met Sara's eyes, pleading and scared and hopeless. Then nodded, ever so slightly. It was enough. It was consent. She grabbed him by the arm and dragged him from the room. Behind them, as he, Satana and her procession of vampyrs left the church – and Sara – for what felt like good. He could hear Sara's protests, screaming his name and banging against the door.

He marched toward the unknown, fearing not what would happen to him, but what he would be forced to do.

\* \* \*

Time had taken on a kind of stretched quality as Sam found herself dozing against her boyfriend's shoulder. The relaxing scent of him, a bit like soap and that Cool Water cologne his mum

had gotten him for his birthday, mingled together with the piney scent of wood polish – and the kind of musty smell that only came from old books. She knew it instinctively, even though she had probably spent the most time in the school Library ever there that afternoon.

She stretched, groggy from allowing herself to daze, while small movements indicating Luke was writing something in his booklet. Even as she allowed her eyes to flutter open, she realised his take on *Of Mice and Men* was inherently flawed. Mrs Haversham wasn't even in the book. And she definitely didn't sleep with Lenny.

"Am I dead yet?" she groaned, the gentle rhythms of Amy's clickety clacking on the keyboard grounding her once more in their mission.

"I'm almost there," the geek girl responded with all the clinical detachment of someone not paying attention. Which she probably wasn't, the girl was like a dog with a bone.

"You said that back when the federation had just been formed," Luke joked beside her.

"Don't talk geek, hun," she chided him, as she moved off his shoulder and did a quick drool check, before stretching. Blood flowed back into her shoulder, although her arse was giving her a bit more grief against the polished wooden floor. She hated herself, but having been forced to watch a few episodes also added, "Besides that's not for another hundred and fifty years or so, technically."

He smiled at her, in that goofy lopsided way and she couldn't help but give him a quick kiss on the cheek. Her lipstick smeared and she realised she would need to reapply before they did anything else.

"Seriously Amy, by the time we find Sara, she'll have died of old age," Luke commented.  
"Probably raised a family of little Saras and repopulated Brighton with actual humans."

"Where do you think she is?" Sam challenged him, confused. Amy continued regardless.

"Brighton," he reiterated. "Makes as much sense as anywhere else."

"So not within the town limits?" she returned.

"Could have taken a car."

"Right, who could have?"

"Either Sara, or whoever has kidnapped her. Could have then driven her to Brighton."

"Guys..." Amy tried to interrupt from beside them. Neither of them had noticed the absence of the clickety clackety or processed what that meant, so drawn were they into their little back and forth.

"Right, and why would they drive her to Brighton?"

"Maybe for their illegal female Jello wrestling ring."

"Seriously, guys..."

"Oh, and what's illegal about Jello wrestling?"

"Nothing, really, except she has been kidnapped for it."

"We can go!" she yelled.

"Oh, thank fuck for that."

Sam was the first to get to her feet despite the protests in various parts of her body. It was only as she could see above the countertop that she realised how dark it had gotten outside and a quick check of her watch showed she had ended up spending way too much time inside a school, even for a school day. The others followed suit.

"Where are we going?" she asked, slipping on her blazer and hoping it hadn't started raining again.

"She's on the South Side," Amy answered, "I can get us there."

“What would she be doing on the South Side?” Luke was the one to voice the question that lingered between them. As her mind continued to clear round from her dozing, she sensed the mood begin to shift. Amy looked at them both, her eyes grave, her bottom lip a little red from where she’d been nervously biting.

“Not moving.”

They wasted no more time.

\* \* \*

The streets were still and silent, though the air was still cold, as he found himself sitting on one side of a shadowy alleyway, peering out beyond. The vantage point was good, well hidden and pretty central to the South Side. Though there were many little alleyways, ginnels and other cracks between old abandoned buildings, most of the thoroughfares through these desolate remnants of the part of the town long forgotten crossed through this central square.

His breath puffed out in front of him, promising the possibility of more coldness, more rain to come. Beside him, there was only the soft breath of his companion, who thankfully until now had remained remarkably quiet. He’d needed time to think, time to recover. He hated the way his anger boiled over in the woods, the frustration. Yes, he wanted revenge, he wanted his friend back – but he also knew how dangerous his anger could become.

Well...after some cooling off, he realised it, anyway.

“This seems counter-productive,” Claire pointed out, from her spot at the opposite side to the entrance. They were both far enough back into the shadows, but enough to see out across pretty much the entirety of the square.

"How long have you been doing this?" he asked her, softly.

"Couple of years," she admitted, with a shrug.

"Not been killed yet?" he added.

She frowned at him, he turned his eyes away from the street long enough to catch her 'duh' look.

"Then how have you not learned sometimes it's better to sit back and let the evil come to you?" he joked. She responded with a middle finger, as a small smile passed between them.

"Waiting is a fools game," she told him.

"The best offense is a good defence," he responded, though he didn't know if it made sense.

"Sitting on your arse causes bed-sores," she retorted.

"Don't think I know that one."

"My mother was a doctor."

He heard the sharp intake of breath, even as slight as it was. The slight flare of the nostrils, the sudden shift in her shoulders. He caught it, he wondered if he should push a little, even just a touch, to find out more.

"Was?" he asked, "She leave the service?"

Her eyes told him everything he needed to know. The angry and gloomy and sorrowful look all at once. The moment in which you remembered their face – both the one that tucked you in at night as a child, and the one of pallid colour and lifeless eyes. The moment in which you remembered the day of the service and saying goodbye, and the pure hot rage that followed.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, genuine to the core. "I lost mine too. Is that why you do this? Is that why you fight?"

"That's one thing you should never ask a hunter," she warned him off, her eyes fixed at the central square. Her demeanour shifted once again, as something began to move out in the moonlight. He turned to see a figure, stalking quietly, dressed in dark clothes – like liquid shadow. Only once he'd locked on, could he hear the soft scuffle of footsteps – but this person was quiet. Very quiet, "Could just be a drug dealer."

Even as she said it, the person swung their head around, as though in the direction of the whisper. They pressed back into the shadows, but it was reacting to something else. A stay cat, scuttling along the side of a half-broken wall nearby. They could see, in the darkness and in the black shape of a head, was the tell-tale soft glow of red eyes.

"Subtle," she whispered.

"Can't blame 'em," Ricky shrugged, "No one lives on this side of the river except the occasional homeless guy – and they usually aren't the most believable."

"Unless someone like us hears their story," she countered, drawing her knife from that little secret place somewhere in her coat. "Sloppy work."

As the creature continued it's way through the night, Ricky held his hand out, gently lowering the blade.

"Follow first," he reminded her, "And when we've found them..."

"Kill."

\* \* \*

What Mark stood before, baffled him. Even forgiving the fact he had been walked through an abandoned police station, itself a liminal space time forgot, what he saw in the destroyed remains of

the bullpen was nothing short of chilling. Desks smashed aside, the ground erupted open beneath it, a thick wide shaft and a ladder leading down. At the bottom...this.

If he only knew what 'this' was.

The obelisk, for that was likely the best word for it, stretched above him – perhaps ten feet tall in total. Black, obsidian-like volcanic rock, but pocked and marked with time's passing. It was ancient, that much was clear, and the hum that filled the cavern – a sense of power, shifting and passing through all things. As he stared it down, Satana and her minions spread out throughout the cavernous space, lighting torches in a circle around this central focus point.

That this...thing...was what they were here for was clear. His role in it, seemed far more confusing. Slowly it dawned on him – the marks were not all due to age – some were deliberate. Like a 3D magic eye poster, relaxing his vision led him to see this was script. Languages unknown, for sure, but most definitely language.

"Oh, a nice rock formation," he commented, dryly, hoping the undercurrent of an academic's curiosity which was peaked remained hidden.

"This is more than that, boy," she corrected him.

"Clearly, otherwise I don't know what I'm here for," he snapped back.

She waved a hand and he felt strong hands push him forward, closer to the stone. Closer it was even worse, the thrum of energy he was feeling in the backs of his eyes grew in its malignancy. He tried to slip his eyes away, but found them drawn back, curious.

"This obelisk is not what it seems," Satana continued. She seemed unmoved by the thing, moving around it slowly, one hand and soft pale fingertips slipping across its surface as though stroking a beloved pet. "Inscribed upon it is the language of the four factions who united here, once

upon a time." She stopped, indicating towards the band in the middle, "Read the inscription around the centre."

He did as instructed, seeing that a slightly protruding band of the same material a few feet from the base was indeed in a different language to the other four. And to his surprise, was actually a little more graspable.

"It's Latin."

"I assume you can read Latin?" she challenged him.

"Wouldn't be a very good source of supernatural information if I couldn't, would I?" he dripped sarcasm back in her direction.

"Then say the words."

He walked around it, circling the obelisk on all four sides until he'd read the description in full. It was a bit of an older Latin, perhaps a proto-root language of the Latinus tribe. Certainly, no *Life of Brian*, that was for sure. Once he'd taken it all in, he ran it through the translator in his brain and came out with,

"It reads 'here stands a monument to the alliance of four. May the forces of darkness bow before the power we hold,'" he transcribed, frowning as a thought occurred to him, "So? Some kind of demonic version of the curse of the mummy's tomb?"

"This stone was placed here many years ago," she continued, ignoring his banter completely. She indicated to the bottom, "You see the four panels on the bottom? We believe them to be a sort of combination lock. Which when the sequence is entered correctly...will reveal a source of power far greater than anything we could hope to imagine."

"You want to use this power?" More of a statement than a question, she was evil after all.

"For the usual reasons," she agreed, "The destruction of humankind, return of the old ways and the Old Ones. Hell on Earth, blah, blah, blah."

"You really are a believer, aren't you?" he commented, but there was one other unanswered question, "So what do you want me for? You obviously know more about this than I do."

She smirked, coldly, and dragged him back from the stone with ease. A snap of her fingers at one of her cronies, and a nervous looking young male vampyr was stood beside her.

"Read the inscription," she demanded. He hesitated, her look turning vicious as she snapped, "Do it."

The pitiful creature didn't get much past 'here stands' before the screaming began. His eyes, red or normal it didn't matter, began to melt inside his skull – smoking pools of foul stinking liquid within seconds. Satana showed mercy for the first time in his experience of her, allowing her men to rip his head from his body and allow death – and spontaneous combustion – to end the pain.

"You really care about your followers," he muttered bitterly.

"As you can see, anyone who attempts to read the inscription who is 'unclean' – their words not mine – ends up with their eyes burnt out of their sockets," she explained, as if the demonstration needed further clarification. "Now since this is not a good motivator for the reading of the inscription and the unlocking of this buried power...I need someone who's – in their words – 'clean'. You seem to fit the bill, brains and thankfully, bathing."

"As much as I hate to be a cliché," he began, "But why would I give you information to help you end the world?"

"Because otherwise, I will snap all of your fingers one by one, as one of my men goes back to murder your friend," she explained, calmly, "After which I will open your veins, drink your blood exquisitely slowly, and then turn you into one of us. You will remain in chains, as the hunger

overtakes you, until all you can think of is blood – and expose you to every single person you have ever met, loved or cared about one by one. Newborns can be so messy.”

He stared at her for a long moment.

“Ever thought about being a motivational speaker.”

She thrust a thick, leatherbound volume into his hand as a response – and so he got to work.

Slowly.

\* \* \*

The abandoned church was quiet. Half-smashed stained glass windows, causing shards to litter the floor. Bits of detritus and decay from half-broken pews – from Lord knows who or what had moved through there throughout the decades of abandonment – made every step a carefully curated one. The creature that they had followed had slipped in through the door, and now they had lost their visual on him.

Ricky’s senses remained heightened. No lights shone or flickered through the windows as they’d crept closer across the empty street. There was no signs or sounds of movement, so they’d chanced slipping their way inside. Now, he listened out for every creak and every rustle. Things moved in the dark, rats likely, scurrying things. Soft bits of litter blown in the wind. But no steps. No breath. He wasn’t even sure if vampyrs breathed, actually.

If this was the site they had taken Mark to, then all that it now seemed was a house of Death. God had long since packed his bags and buggered off.

His eyes swept across the grand main hall, the altar dripped with candles that looked far too shiny, as if only recently blown out. The smell of acrid smoke hung in the air. He could only hope

whatever ritual they had been planning had not been the full shebang – because it looked like it was already over.

Claire moved instinctively to the right, as he moved to the left and the two of them made their way through the darkest recesses of the side, rather than the main aisle. Nothing human, or vampyr, moved in the shadows. But there was sound, ever so slight. Footsteps, creeks, perhaps pacing. Claire had heard it to, coming from the back of the building, her head cocked, listening, before her eyes sought his.

He saw the door at the back, off to the side. Some kind of priest's chamber or office? The door looked solid, closed. He crept across to it, sensing a presence on the other side. Claire stood a little way behind him, as he slowly tried to turn the handle. Locked.

They shared a look, he counted down from three with his fingers and upon reaching zero kicked with all his might against the door. He rushed in first, Claire following close behind. It was an office, barely used anymore, crap strewn everywhere.

An almighty scream, human and...familiar, erupted from behind him. Next thing he found himself seeing stars, his skull screaming likewise from something furiously brought down onto it. He fell forward, stumbling.

"Stay the fuck away!" that familiar voice shrieked at him. He'd definitely not heard her like that before.

"Whoa," he heard Claire say, as she jumped out of the way of their attacker's slightly less powerful second swing. Through his pounding head, he tried to swim back into enough consciousness to shout.

"Sara, it's me!"

Luckily the assault came to a quick stop, as Sara stood down and allowed the remnants of the old wooden desk drawer fall to the ground next to him. He managed to stumble back to his feet, turning to see it was indeed his best friend, her look confused and slipping into sudden realisation – and immediate regret. She winced,

“Shit, I just hit you with a drawer, didn’t I?” she realised out loud.

“So much for the damsel in distress,” Claire commented unhelpfully from nearby.

Sara grinned. He glared at her, as she and Claire shared a little smirk.

“I know, kinda bad-ass, right?”

“You hit me over the head,” he reiterated, still somewhat struggling to believe it.

“Yes, we’ve established that,” Sara agreed, “But now just one more thing...” She reached out, pinching him on the arm hard enough for him to yelp. “Risking your bloody life against the forces of darkness and you don’t even tell me?! You big...arse face.”

“I was protecting you,” he defended weakly, feeling himself remarkably unprepared for the turn of events.

“That argument would hold weight if my lady bits actually did come with lesser intelligence, and strength,” she snapped, “But I could have totally kept my cool if you’d just told me, instead of running around and making me worry my arse off about you. Oh, and then you go off and let me get kidnapped along with Mark and find myself fighting for my life against...”

Her rant came to an abrupt halt as her eyes became saucers.

“That!”

Before he or Claire could respond to the sudden threat, Sara was in motion. She reached into her back pocket, withdrawing what looked like a stapler of all things, and launched the heavy object directly towards them. They didn’t have enough time to move, but her aim was true – it flew

between the two of them and struck the sneaking vampyr behind them in the face. The creature yelped out in pain, falling back as much out of surprise than any actual force.

Though he still felt a little dazed, Claire was on it. She knelt, drawing her knife and completing Sara's work with a quick swing of her wrist, stepping back in one smooth motion, as flames erupted and returned the vampyr back to ash.

"We could have pumped him for information," he pointed out.

"Oh, am I not good enough information?" Sara challenged him. He glared at her again, but she gave as good as she took. She was not in the mood, obviously. Blessed relief filled him, but he would do anything but let her know that. Not yet. "Anyway, you hairy tit, we have to save Mark from the evil vampyr lady."

"Slow down," he begged her, "You've seen Mark."

"Probably for the last time in a single piece if we don't save him," she answered quickly, "Satana took him, said she'd kill me if he didn't co-operate. I think they wanted to kill you at the Hall of the Guide and maybe kidnap Mark. Instead, they kidnapped me from the Library thinking I was the Librarian – I know – bloody daft, right? Anyway, yeah, they got me and then they must have got him there."

He stared at her, completely incredulous. It had obviously been a very long day.

"What has Mark been telling you?"

"In his defence, certain lies don't cut it when evil's staring you in the face," Claire offered.

"I have one girl power, I don't need two," he snapped.

"Woman power," the two of them corrected him, before Sara continued, "Anyway, whatever they want Mark for it's probably to do with his big brain." She wrinkled her nose, "Anything else is just not something I want to think about."

"The stone," Claire pointed out. They both looked at her, Sara confused and realisation washing over him, "The stone of five languages – remind me how many Mark speaks again?"

"Like fifty," Ricky shrugged.

"They want him to translate the Stone, that's the endgame, I guarantee it," Claire concluded.

"What for?" he wondered out loud, "Archaeological discovery?"

"Does it really matter?"

He agreed it did not matter, realising their course was set. He turned to his friend, his scared and bewildered and quite frankly amazing friend, and smiled.

"Sara, I am so glad you're not dead, and we are going to have to have a like massive conversation at some point, but I need you to go home now," he told her. "Me and Claire have to go and save Mark."

"Nope."

"We really do."

"I don't doubt it," she agreed. "But I'm coming with you."

"Sara, we don't have time..."

"Today, I have learnt that vampyrs are real...and also how to spell it," she explained, "I have been kidnapped, terrorised and faced down not one but two of those blood sucking buggers. I have killed one vampyr and you just gave me a little hand with the second. And Mark helped. So, put your little boy ego aside, we don't have time for the Spider-Man speech, protecting the ones you love and all that nonsense. I am going, I will repay my favour to Mark...and then I will have the biggest bastard bubble bath ever. Got it?"

She didn't want for an answer. The girl in front of him was almost unrecognisable and yet shone with the heart he loved all the same. She grabbed the jagged remains of one side of the drawer she'd just used to brain him and headed for the door – Claire looking bemused and slipping him a small smile before following. Sara's voice floated back to him from through the broken door,

"Uh...where's this stone thing you mentioned?"

\* \* \*

A church? Amy frowned down at her little GPS device onto which she'd transferred the location she'd retrieved from Sara's phone. Well, not hers, it was her father's she'd nicked from when he did his Munroe bagging. The co-ordinates were very close and had led them into a decrepit old church on the South Side. Her feet crunched across scattered leaves and other bits of crap strewn around the room, as Luke and Sam followed behind her.

She had to admit, even as much as Sam grated on her sometimes with her whole 'mean girl' attitude, she was still grateful to have her there. And despite the sexism inherent in the thought, she was also very glad to have Luke – who thanks to his rugby playing was all like boy-strong and stuff. Not that she wouldn't give a mugger a damn good thrashing but hitting them with her scooby trainers wasn't going to do much.

"She's in here somewhere," she muttered – mainly to herself, and mainly simply to have something to say. The silence was oppressive.

"No, her *phone* is in here somewhere," Sam corrected her, ever the pragmatist, "Either of you two worried what the homeless guy we're about to walk in on may be doing with a teenage girl's phone?"

“Dreaming about pretty in pink?” Luke offered.

“I was being rude,” Sam explained, “Obviously this has skipped over your brain.”

“Really hasn’t,” he made a face.

Amy frowned around the empty room. She had a faint memory play out in the back of her mind. The place was one of the last ones to be abandoned. The resident Anglican priest – Father Chris – had staunchly believed that the ongoing degradation and abandonment of the South Side in the thirties would turn around. Unfortunately, a bomb dropped during the blitz ended that fantasy, and the church was abandoned somewhere in the forties.

To be fair, it looked like since then it hadn’t exactly been empty. There was evidence of recent occupation – including the candles on the altar and some sleeping bags off to one side. But no one was home and no Sara at all.

“You know, I haven’t been to church since I was a little girl,” she heard Sam muse as she wandered through some of the less broken pews. She’d come across a bible, battered and worn, the pages crumbling as she nudged it with one perfect – likely name brand – shoe.

“Did the walls keep bleeding?” Amy blurted out, earning herself another glare.

“No, my stepmother decided church was a poor use of a Sunday,” she answered, acerbity touching her tone.

“What was better?” Luke asked.

“I think Sloth,” she mused, “That’s always her favourite deadly sin. I think Pride and utter cow were a close second.” She sighed, sitting down on one of the pews. “Of all the god-forsaken places in the world, why did she come here?”

“Well, the arse end of nowhere is as good a place as any to run away to,” Luke shrugged, examining a particularly odd skeletal remain of something tiny.

"Even the police are afraid to come here," Sam reminded him. A thought occurred to her, "We are going to find her alive, right?"

"Of course we are," Amy found herself unable to keep from snapping. It made her feel annoyed, thrown off, her concentration drawn away from the task at hand.

"Look, I'm just saying," Sam answered with a shrug, "Perhaps she didn't come here willingly, in which case...there's only a handful of reasons I can think of..."

"Sam, please...shut up."

Anger flaring in her cheeks, as much of her fear that Sam might be right as anything else, Amy turned on her heels and headed further into the church. Towards the back, away from the negativity spiralling and threatening to throw off her concentration, she saw a door ajar. Checking her GPS, it seemed she was a step closer, she was moving towards the little dot. Maybe metres away, now.

"Uh, Amy..." Luke called after her. She heard the two of them moving but didn't slow her pace. Visions, summoned by Sam's gloomy tone, of finding her best friend's corpse flashed across her brain. A back room, dark and decrepit, would be the perfect place. Her phone clutched in her hand as she tried to dial 999. She had to push the thought away with almost literal effort.

"Okay, she should be right around here..." she muttered, as she arrived in the doorway. She frowned as the two dots on her GPS screen bleeped in almost perfect harmony.

"Uh, Amy..." Luke said again, this time from directly behind her, as he and Sam crowded around the entrance.

"Of course, if there's any distortion..."

“Amy...” Sam interrupted, this time taking a gentle hold of her head and raising her eyes to the room beyond. She braced herself, her thoughts racing with what she would do. And then suddenly fell into free fall.

“She’s not here,” Luke clarified.

It was exactly that. The room beyond, shuttered and shattered old furniture, lots of old bits and bobs of nothing. A stapler on the ground, thick piles of dust. But what there was not, despite her hopes and fears, a teenage blonde girl.

“Oh...” she sighed, disheartened. The only trace she could see, smashed on the ground, was a broken Blackberry. She didn’t know whether to be happy or sad, knowing that she would have to settle for a little of both. Her friend’s body was not in some horrible old church, her phone had been taken or stolen. But if that was the case, then where was her friend?

Sam summed it up in different terms,

“Even when I try to be concerned for her welfare, she wastes my sodding time.”

\* \* \*

“Boy...I’m getting bored here,” he was warned from across the room. Satana’s voice had lost none of its menace but plenty of its patience. She was not a creature of waiting. Surprising for something who’d seen so many sunrises.

“You know this is a fascinating book,” he responded from where he knelt, next to the eastern panel at the base of the obelisk. “I’m fairly certain the main character is going to die at the end, but I don’t know if it’s before or after she’s told Mr Darcy she loves him.”

He had to admit a not insignificant amount of pleasure as he glanced back up to see this ancient, vampyric force glaring at him. It looked remarkably similar to the way Miss Drake glared whenever he told her to shove her budget. It was eerie.

"I'm joking," he assured her, "there's actually some useful translations in here. Apparently, each of the four faces links to a different heritage. Quite literally the four corners of the Earth. I'd love to know more about those races..."

He barely saw the knife flick past his head but heard it strike the obelisk. It sparked, flat but clear fresh sparks that made him blink, as the knife itself ricochetted and landed somewhere off to his right.

"We are not here for archaeological posterity," she snapped, "We are here for power. So, tell me...do I have to rip your tongue out for your eyes to do the work?"

Shaken, he tried not to show his fear, and instead pointed to the bottom of the obelisk, evenly.

"Fine, you see the four panels on the bottom?"

"The lock?" she frowned, moving closer.

"Right, well they not only have a symbol on each of the four faces, but a small amount of text in Latin," he explained, "The text corresponds to a sort of story."

"Fascinating," she dripped sarcastically.

"That forms the key to opening this thing," he explained, "You need to put the story into the right order in order to make it open."

"And again, I say fascinating."

She was putting up the façade now once more, her curiosity beginning to peak. He could sense her excitement, the way her eyes began to focus more upon the obelisk than on him. His stomach turned with the fluttering of bats wings.

"It's a creation myth," he continued, "About the world. First there was chaos, then darkness and chaos, then light came into the world from somewhere else...and then man was created as balance. I don't know which tradition but it's a fairly archetypal format."

She moved even closer, straining to see what he was seeing. He wondered if she could read it, and it was only in speaking it out loud that the defence mechanism was activated. If so, she might be on to him. But her eyes showed no flicker of it, no sense of his coming betrayal. And so, he thought, he prayed, that he had a chance.

Even if he didn't necessarily believe in a God, he prayed.

"Can you tell their order?"

"Yes."

"Put it in."

He threw down the book, not in a strop, but with resignation.

"I'm not going to do it," he said. "Not without some kind of guarantee. That you will leave my friends alone."

"You have my word."

"You let one of your own people burn their eyeballs out to make a point," he reminded her, "Something tells me your word isn't the bonding promise you think it is."

"Look, I've already threatened you once," she in turn reminded him, "Can we just get on with it? You're a smart boy, you realise you have little choice here."

He had played his part enough, enough resistance. He nodded, reluctantly and knelt back down to the panels. He pushed the first one, it moved ever so slightly in. He almost expected a little click, but there was only the sense of movement. As he moved from side to side, going in clockwise fashion around the obsidian base, he could sense the tension in the air. The palpable sense that Satana was waiting for, her minions leaning ever so slightly forward.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked her. So desperate was she, so clearly in need of whatever came next, she didn't even stop to think.

"Do it..." she hissed.

He pressed in the final panel, knelt down beneath the level of the band. The flash of light was instantaneous, a pulse of power so strong it burst forth like a powerful wind. Even from where he sat, he was thrown onto his back. Satana screamed in fury as she slammed into the cavern wall. The lights, torches, were flung around the room. One slammed into the chest of a vampyr to his left, ripping a hole through it's torso and setting it alight. Fire, chaos and madness ensued.

When the initial wave had subsided, chaos reigned. Fire burned, vampyrs scrambled, and through it all the deadliest of them all – Satana – regained her footing. Finally, she brought out her demonic visage, her eyes turning into a dark and deadly red, the colour of old blood – thick black veins running through them. She stormed towards him, furious.

"I'm gonna peel your fucking skin off..."

She stopped in her tracks, as Mark scrambled backwards in the dirt of the cavern floor. Something heavy had struck her in the head, a small trickle of viscous blood trickled down her scalp. She turned, eyes blazing, and as he followed her gaze, he thought it was he with the concussion. At the edge of the excavation hole, right next to the ladder, Ricky and Claire, stood Sara holding a couple of grimy paperweights in her hand. One of them, now stained with blood, lay in the dirt nearby.

"Hey bitch, I'm back!" she cried triumphantly. Satana snarled, and the fight began.

Her vampyrs did not need her command, they sensed new blood and went for it. One raced at Claire from behind them, leading her to step aside and clothesline the idiot. It lost footing, falling down and landing hard on one of the still lit and still standing torches. It screamed as it found itself pinned to the floor, though its pain was short-lived. Ricky followed up by jumping from the edge of the hole, bringing down a familiar curved blade handle into the skull of the impaled vamp. Others emerged from the surrounding shadows, and Ricky went to work.

Claire slid down the ladder, throwing herself into the fray beside him. This was the first time he'd seen her work, her movements though slower than Ricky were swift and fluid. She moved as someone trained in fighting and used to the battle, brutal and quick. Sara was nowhere to be seen, as Mark scrambled to find himself a weapon for defence.

Given it was an excavation in this point in recent history he was surprised by how little there was to work with – did she make them dig with their hands? He wouldn't put it past the stone cold monster. Then, there amongst the chaos, he saw a shovel, rusted but still useful. He half-scrambled, half-crawled his way through the fracas, at one point kicked by a passing vamp who fell over him. The shovel felt good in his hands.

As he span, he surveyed the room. He still didn't have a bead on Sara, though Claire was nearby. Metres away Ricky was grappling with a particularly tasteless vamp with a Lost Boys T-Shirt. A liquid shadow slunk behind him but before Mark could cry out, Satana had manifested herself into being and grabbed Ricky by the head. She threw him into the wall with a thick sound.

Using the shield to get to his feet Mark cried out in fury and rushed for his friend, who though dazed was not bleeding – or even falling down yet. Satana grabbed him around the throat, while Mark raised the shovel high. Not done, she backhanded Mark across the face, the sharp blow raking nails across his cheek. Blood dripped as he fell backwards to the ground, the shovel flying from his grasp. In the fray, she dropped Ricky, gasping for breath against the nearest stalagmite.

Death flowed over him, like a settling fog. Satana, full of rage loomed over him, her entire attention devoted to his murder. She grasped him by the throat, her iron grip burning hot. He was lifted into the air, gasping, struggling, unable to do much but try in vain to pry apart her fingers. Her strength was epic, ancient, immovable.

"I'm going to enjoy this," she snarled, her eyes meeting his in the shape of his death.

"Me too."

The shovel he'd dropped, now in the hands of a five foot four blonde girl, struck Satana across the back of the skull with a thick clang. All strength went and he landed hard on the ground, painfully gasping for breath. Satana landed next to him, blood dripping from the blow to her skull. She glared at him, preparing to return to battle, but Sara was already too quick for her. Drawing the shovel up, the blade perpendicular to the vampyr queen's body, she drove it down with a thick resounding smack directly through her back and into her spine. She shrieked in fury, as Mark tried to gasp.

"The...head..." he gasped at her.

She frowned, then realisation hit her. She yanked the shovel back out of the broken queen and raised it high once more.

"This is for your hospitality!" she cried and drove the blade of the shovel down into the soft flesh of the back of her neck – separating her head from her body.

The shovel clattered to one side as Sara stepped back. The response was far more intense than any vampyr he'd seen thus far. She did not slowly burn, flicker with flame and turn to ash. The fire flashed with such intensity, he felt the side of his face sear with it, causing him to scramble away. The cavern was lit in bright burning light for several seconds as the shrieks of the thing which had once upon a time been vampyr leader Satana fought against it's unholy death.

And then it was done. The slick shapes of her minions, terrified no doubt by the death of their leader, slunk away into the caves leading from their cavern, disappearing back into whatever holes they would eventually have to chase them down into.

Ricky helped him to his feet and grabbed him in a hug, a surprisingly tender moment that ended with the self-consciousness of youth. Claire returned, wiping her blade once more, as the three of them turned to regard Sara. She stood, blowing an errant hair from out of her sweat and dust covered face, breathing heavily and brandishing the shovel in the adrenaline of the moment. She was every bit a warrior he'd ever seen.

She slowly raised several fingers to them, as she reminded them,

"Count 'em, that's three."

Claire smiled, a surprising sight even in the handful of times he'd seen her, "It's over."

"This time," he croaked, "There'll always be another evil."

"And...?" Sara challenged, tossing the shovel weapon casually to one side. "Why do you think the world needs us?"

He could not help but share a look with Ricky, who himself was struggling not to satisfy her with a grin. She knew, of course she knew.

"You know you boys needed me all along."

Heaven help them, and the world, but he reckoned they probably did.

**Act IV**

Dawn light crept along his street as Ricky made his way towards the terraced house he called home. It wasn't the place he grew up, it was all they could afford now. Their old home stood empty, the memory and ghosts too much to bear. It was home. And that morning, after the night before, a night when he didn't know whether he would see the dawn – or for that matter whether the world would either, it was so incredibly home. Something he ached for.

His throat throbbed from where he'd been grabbed, although already that was beginning to fade. His shoulder, the wound no longer screaming with the burn of infected, still twinged with each slight movement. His body was on the edge of exhaustion from the energy expended and the lack of sleep. Whatever incredible gifts or powers came with this still mysterious mantle 'Guide' – super speeded healing was not one of them.

He would break like any other human. And yet, he knew deep in his bones, he just couldn't.

The house was quiet as he slipped in through the front door, hoping in his head he would have at least an hour before his brother, Rob, would get home off the night shift. An hour to sleep. An hour to recharge. And then school would begin.

"Just getting in?"

Rob sat, still in his night watch uniform, save for the jacket hung on the back of the faded armchair in the living room. He set his coffee aside, still steaming, his expression an infuriatingly unrevealing neutral.

"Perhaps," Ricky sighed, "But I don't think I'm ready to have this conversation right now. Can I have a shower first?"

His brother didn't answer, instead he looked deep in thought. Ricky stood there, awkwardly, feeling the exhaustion in his bones and a deep desire to be anywhere else in the world. Well, anywhere with pillows.

"I remember, Ricky, what it's like to be your age," his older brother finally said. "It wasn't that long ago it was me putting mum and dad through a lot of hell."

"Is this the part where you say you understand?" he asked, sarcastically, "That you relate to the youth?"

He slipped off his coat, attempting to keep his face perfectly straight and neutral despite the screaming in his shoulder. He hung it on the rack, as Rob looked up at him once more.

"They're gone, Ricky," he reminded him quietly.

"I don't need the reminder."

"I like to think that they're still watching over us, Ricky," Rob continued, "That they still have their hopes and dreams for us. You can make them proud like I never could." One hand errantly picked at the logo of the security company sown into his jacket, "Like I can't."

Ricky felt the sting of tears in the backs of his eyes. The kind that came from tiredness and sadness and pain and everything rolled into one. The kind of tears he never wanted to share with anyone, let alone his brother – who despite their current relationship he loved with every fibre of his being.

"That's all I want you to do," Rob continued, "To make them proud. It's the only thing I ask of you."

"It's not fair to ask that of me," he answered, "It's not fair to put their hopes onto me or blame me because you can't."

"I never said it was fair."

"And it isn't right," he continued, feeling himself on the brink. A bitterness he hated crept into his tone, "They're dead, they're gone. There's no spirit watching over us. There's no heaven and angels. Only...this."

He gestured around them, not even sure what he meant by 'this' except 'this' was all around them. He turned, point made, and headed for the stairs, his face a storm of false indifference.

"Ricky..." Rob said softly behind him. He paused on the first step, putting more of his weight on the railing than he hoped showed. "One day we're gonna need to talk. About where you've been, what you've been doing. Please don't make it the day the police come knocking on our door."

He nodded, but said nothing, as he headed straight for his bedroom. Door closed behind him, he leaned, he let it all fall. And silently, he let the tears fall. The ones he would not, could not, let anyone else see.

\* \* \*

As Mark stepped across the threshold of his Aunt and Uncle's house, the Matthews were already both up and about. The sound of BBC Radio Four floated from the kitchen across the old radio, as in the front room his Uncle, John, sat in his favourite armchair, reading from a thick old book. Well, he couldn't say he didn't share a few traits with the man, but he had rather enough had his fill of books that previous night.

Flicking up the collar of his coat to hopefully hide the slight bruising from Satana's attack, and some of Sara's makeup hastily applied to the scratches on his face – badly, he might add, he attempted to walk straight for the back room.

"You're getting in late," Uncle John commented neutrally, from beside the empty fireplace.

"I was at the Library," he answered, "Cataloguing the new inventory."

"You put a lot of effort into that place." Again, a statement of fact without inflection or challenge, thus Mark found himself responding in kind.

"It's something I care about."

"Do you ever think there's more to life?" Uncle John asked him, one bony finger slipping between his pages to ironically not loose his place, "Something outside of the books?"

"Sometimes," Mark agreed, "But you gotta do what you gotta do, right?"

He banked on the slight dip into slang might aggravate the man, but it appeared as though his Uncle was in a positive mood. He could only deduce that meant his Aunt had remained silent and mentally ran through what that could mean. Or, more accurately, tried to. His brain had been filled to the brim for one lifetime.

"Kids," his uncle dismissed, "You may wish to get yourself some breakfast before school."

Mark smiled politely, nodded and continued on his way through the hallway and into the kitchen. Behind him, his uncle returned back to his book, completely without a sense of irony for their brief encounter.

Inside their modest, medium sized kitchen, Aunt Beth remained where he had left her before – though undoubtedly, she'd moved in between. This morning it was breakfast dishes, she rinsed the remains of eggs and beans from one plate, as he stepped past her to the toaster on the side. Her only acknowledgement was a brief turn in his direction, the chain of her reading glasses tinkling as she did so, before she turned back to the task at hand.

"Did you get sorted what you needed to?" she asked him, casually. He slipped two pieces of bread into the toaster and turned back, leaning against the counter. From where he stood, and experience, he knew that the radio would cover their conversation. Or so he believed.

"He's safe."

"We're all going to have to sit down and talk soon," she continued, her voice bright but very quiet. "Hopefully, you won't do anything too rash in the meantime?"

"I'll do what I think is right," he answered, honestly.

She turned her head to shoot him a stern look as she responded, darkly,

"And we shall do the same."

That done, he walked away, back towards the door and out to the school instead. Behind him, the toaster popped. He left it for them to deal with, he'd had more than his fill of family that morning.

He had some of those right things left to do.

\* \* \*

After the stormy grey skies of the past few days, the sun was already shining bright. The morning was the kind of light late summer-early autumn day where the weather never really knew what it was doing. Perhaps it would go into the high teens, temperature wise, the morning was already warm, as were the hallways and corridors of the school as Sara wandered down them, lost in her thoughts.

She was surprised to have been allowed to return to school that morning, after finally making her way home. There had been tears, crying and did she mention the tears? Despite the story she'd told, the lie that was easier to sell with the bumps and bruises, her mother would not let her sleep. She'd questioned, she'd demanded to take her to the hospital, she'd pleaded her to speak with the police, and Sara had done everything she could to deflect.

Their final conversation that morning had been one of frustration, but at least she was not being stalked down the corridors of the school by her mother.

"Sara," she heard her name. As she looked up, she saw Luke and Sam coming in the opposite direction. Luke's voice was muted surprise, "Bloody hell, you're alive."

"Unfortunately," Sam muttered from beside him. Her arms were already crossed, an expression of disinterested venom on her face. To be honest, given the past few days, Sara did not blame her. But she still could not let her friend slide.

"Something to say Sam?" she asked.

"Well, they could have at least taken a finger," her supposed friend pointed out, "Or poked out an eye. Something for their trouble."

Sara stared her down, unsure whether to shout at her friend, plead with her or apologise. Her head was mashed with emotions that she was still struggling to process.

"You promised you'd come to my party, next thing you're pissing about," Sam continued, "You know I wasted a whole hell of a lot of my personal time just to find your stupid phone."

"All I can say is, I'm sorry," she answered quietly, "It wasn't my fault, that I can guarantee you."

"Look, Sara, I don't care," Sam snapped, "You let me down, and I'm pissed off – and honestly there's nothing more to it than that."

With that, and a last look at her, Sam walked past her. There was not quite a shoulder barge but the coldness of it gently breezed past. Sara bit back tears, a response, anything. She wondered if it was the creeping numbness she felt, the guilt of not being able to tell her everything. Luke, however, had remained and gave her a concerned look.

"You alright?"

“I’ll be fine.”

“What happened?”

She sighed, not feeling like going over it again. Especially since the tale she’d told her mother, told everyone, was a lie.

“That’s a long, long story.”

“You’re okay now, though?”

No. She was not okay. She was not sure of a lot of things and she was absolutely shattered. But rather than sit at home and feel her mother’s frustration, judgement and smothering fear, she preferred to catch up on her sleep at school instead. She was also terrified, of the decision she’d made, the things she’d chosen to get herself involved in. The world view that piece by piece was raising more questions than answers. She was overwhelmed.

And she could tell him none of that.

“I’ll survive,” she nodded, before glancing in the direction her friend – or perhaps former friend now – had departed, “Can you put in a good word with Sam?”

“In the next forty-eight hours, no,” he responded with an apologetic smile, “But she should cool down in about three days...at least enough to mention your name.”

She found a small and genuine smile cross her face, as he patted her gently on the shoulder and headed off to join his girlfriend. She stood for a moment, completely oblivious to the bell until it was almost done and finally pulled herself together.

After all, the world didn’t end and she had history coursework to do.

\* \* \*

No one knew how close the world came to ending the night before. And so, students milled, cars passed by with commuters on their way to work. The sun shone because of them. All of them, and Claire watched from the outside.

It seemed as though the day would be unseasonably warm, the sun growing in intensity in the sky as it moved towards midmorning. She sat on one of the benches, the faded dedication plaque behind her suggesting someone who likely had been forgotten. But someone once knew them, once knew their deeds.

She had seen Ricky walk into the school, limping ever so slightly as he went. The kind of subtle hint she could pick up on because she knew the physical toll last night took on him – as it took on her as well. Others would never be able to guess. The boy with the middling grades – she guessed – and tragic backstory. The one with a bit of an attitude, the social outcast. He was a hero. A Guide. Someone with a supernatural destiny yet revealed.

He had saved the world.

A little later Mark had slipped in through the gates, later than the others thanks to the privilege of sixth form and his standing as school librarian. He held coffee in his hands, and a small brown bag stained with grease. He looked exhausted, his eyes drawn, as he headed round the back of the school and towards the back entrance – closer to his sanctuary. The boy no one noticed, quiet and bookish, and yet incredibly intelligent.

He, too, had saved the world.

Sara had been dropped off by her mother, judging by their shared complexion and hair. Mrs Carpenter had said things unheard from where Claire sat, but she could tell from tone and inflexion she wasn't happy about Sara returning so quickly to some sense of normalcy. She wished to wrap her in cotton wool and protect her, not knowing already the time for that had past. She was admired and

loved. The pretty popular girl, the one who got along with everybody from queen bees to geeky gals.

The warm and smiling blonde girl, who was surprisingly good with a shovel.

Believe or not, she had saved the world.

And her? Claire Kramer, the one with no home to go to. The one who had slipped out of the shadows, only intending to provide some information and leave. The one who just wanted to return to the mission at hand but found her hatred for vampyrs overcome her proper sensibilities. The one who was already beginning to like those three, more than she was willing to admit.

She too, had helped to save the world.

And no one would ever know. They were heroes, true. But no one would ever know that the reason they still picked their kids up from school, or burnt their toast, or cried in the shower – was because a trio of orphans and a crazy blonde had for one brief moment worked together to ensure they could.

She had always known, since her world had been shattered that night three years ago, that her time in the normal world was done. She had come to terms with the fact she was a shadow, hunting in her own way, on her own terms. She still was, she knew.

But something had begun the night before, as she found herself slipping into rhythms and actions she didn't think she'd ever feel again. The warmth of banter, the strength of a spark, the possible fledgling first steps to acceptance and friendship.

She could join them, no doubt they would meet in the Library once more. She could step through those doors, drop her guard and tell them everything. She could have friends again, be normal again.

She couldn't. But she wouldn't.

For now.

\* \* \*

Amy regarded the face of her friend before her. She looked so tired, her eyes had bags under them. The faint bit of makeup she'd applied might have covered up the colour of the bruises on her cheek, but they couldn't take away the slight swelling. She had never seen Sara look like that, at any time. But there was more, a look in her eyes. It made Amy's heart broke.

But of course, she didn't want to tell her that. She didn't want her friend to worry or draw attention to her pain. She was just glad to have her friend back, alive and okay and breathing – everything she'd worried she wasn't when she'd come across that shattered Blackberry in the darkened church. So, she chewed her tuna-fish sandwich on the picnic bench in the courtyard, as Sara did the same. With cheese and onion.

“How’s your mum?” she broached, thinking that was at least a safe enough segue into it.

“She was angry,” Sara answered, finishing her chewing and placing down the half-eaten half-sandwich. “But relieved. I think she’d gotten it into her head that I’d run away with Ricky to start a baby farm somewhere.”

“You were gone for two nights,” she reminded her, “You missed school and everything.”

“I realise to you that’s one of the seven deadly sins, but playing hookie is nothing new,” Sara answered, a tired but warm joke. Amy smiled at her, as she considered whether or not she wanted her yoghurt. It was strawberry. She held it out to Sara, who after a moment’s contemplation took it from her and swapped for her apple. The dance of the lunchbox swaps.

“I found your phone,” she said perkily, “It was a bit broken though.”

"How did you manage that?" Sara asked her, eyes narrowing. Amy felt her heart race, knowing she hadn't exactly had chance to explain everything yet. So, she deflected with a joke.

"I have super-powers, you know."

Sara smiled, and the moment passed.

"What happened, Sara?" she blurted out, immediately regretting it. Sara sighed, polishing off the last bits of strawberry yoghurt from her spoon as nearby a little bird eyed them greedily. She placed down the empty cup, and it flew away once more.

"I went to go see Ricky," her friend explained, "I was going to check the Library, but then I decide to go to his house instead. A group of lads showed up, hit me over the head. Next time I came to it was like, ages later and...please, before you ask, no they didn't do anything else. Mum has literally grilled me to death about that part like we're on that Law & Order show about the sex crimes."

"What about your phone?" she couldn't help but ask, knowing she'd intended not to, but feeling compelled to query anyway.

"My money and my phone were gone," Sara responded, "Probably thought they could sell it."

"But if they took your phone, why would they smash it?" she reasoned out loud. "Instead of selling it?"

"Amy, I don't know what goes through criminals' minds," Sara's voice took on a slightly exasperated tone. "Now I've been checked out, I'm fine, I'm not going to die anytime soon – and I cannot pick them out of a line up. So, between you and my mum, I'd just like to forget the whole thing."

"You're right," she agreed, feeling a worm of guilt for pushing so much. She knew it was just her inquisitive mind, trying to work through the problem. She just wished that none of it had ever happened – and not just because Sam would hold her missing coursework against her until the end of the world. "I'm sorry."

"That's alright," Sara reassured her, as she began to pack back up the remains of her lunch. Amy tried to catch her with a smile, with Sara tiredly returned. But something tickled the back of Amy's mind.

Sara wouldn't meet her eyes.

\* \* \*

Bells rang as the day ended, she had survived another one. The sun had risen and as the soft red-orange hues climbed their way up the walls and corridors of the old school building, it was heading for another setting. Sara made her way through the remaining milling students, the Library her only destination. The smooth oaken doors looked different to her now. Before, they were a doorway to a forgotten place – one where she dared not venture lest it incur some kind of academic punishment. But now? Now it was somewhere she wanted to go. Towards people she trusted.

To a place where she could place down the shield that hung over her.

As she slipped quietly inside, she found the librarian was not home. But as she made her way into the office she realised, she was not alone. He hadn't noticed her, engrossed in some chemistry homework by the looks of it. She regarded him then. Her best friend in the whole wide world. The boy she'd grown up with, spent so many days with – hell, had even been on family trips with. They'd laughed and played and cried and fought and ultimately...loved.

He looked so innocent in that moment, his face scrunched on a chemical equation. So normal and innocent, as though the weight of the world was not on his shoulders. She loved him more than, knowing that he never even hesitated for a second to step into this battle, destiny or not. She could only think to do the same.

"Staying at school after hours?" she joked softly from the doorway, announcing her presence. "Should have known you'd fall in love with the place."

He looked up, his face lighting up in a smile when he saw her. Her heart fluttered a little, then settled as she walked into the small office.

"Is it a good time now?" she asked him.

"As good a time as any."

He moved his books and booklets onto the small side-table beside him and indicated her join him on the two-seater. She did, wondering how to phrase what was on her mind.

"I know what you mean now," she said softly. It was a testament to their bond he didn't ask her what she was on about.

"You understand why I couldn't tell you?" he clarified, "Why I didn't want to drag you into this world?"

"I talked to Amy today," she explained, frowning and burning with the guilt of it already, "I told her what happened when I was 'attacked'. I told her the bold faced lie we talked about. Amy. One of my closest friends. And she *believed* me. She felt sorry for me, she tried to comfort me."

"It's not easy..." he tried to begin, but she interrupted him.

"Of course it's not easy. When I think about would happen when that girl that I care about more than most things...when I think about what would happen, what *might* happen to her, if I told her the truth...and she decided to help. When I think about that, I realise I can't do it, I can't be

honest with her. I have to lie my arse off to her, just to keep her safe. And if I do my job right, she'll never know why I'm not being honest with her. It could even cost us our friendship."

"You never know," he suggested, "You might be able to let her in on what happened to you, and she might not want to help."

She appreciated the lie, as clear as it was. He didn't know Amy particularly well, but he knew her enough to know she was not the kind.

"Anyone with half a brain and a half soul would help," she corrected him. "I have no doubt she would if she could." She steeled herself, "Just like I have no doubt that I have to because I know now."

They lapsed into a moment's quiet as the weight of what she'd just announced passed between them.

"It's dangerous," he reminded her, though there was little challenge in his voice.

"Everything's dangerous, Ricky," she corrected him. "If the world ended last night, I wouldn't have been saved even if I was sleeping at home in bed. So, I want in on the fight. Because you're going to be fighting it. I want to be there with you, *for you*, and for all the people the three of us are going to save. Amy included."

He smiled, deep and beautiful and innocent. This boy, slowly becoming a man, holding the weight of the world on his shoulders – just feeling the relief of someone else helping him hold it.

"It's going to take time," she continued. "It's going to be a tough battle. But no matter what they throw at us, no matter what...darkness we have to see – I think I can do it. I can get through it and deal with it, all of it. But only if you do one thing."

"What's that?"

She placed one hand affectionately on his cheek, a touch she didn't realise was subconsciously one her mother did all the time. It allowed her to look into his eyes and see the sincerity in them.

"Stand by me."

He smiled back, his hand warm and reassuring over hers, as he gave her the only response.

"'til the end of the world..."