

'til the End of the World

Year One

Story Three

Fallout

Opening

September 2005

Mark stood upon the threshold, the door closed before him a boundary to the darkness on the other side. His breath caught in his throat, his eyes were tired from the long day. He didn't want to have to do this. He had faced unspeakable evils in his modest seventeen years. Vampyrs, demons, Nazi necromancers. Friday last period. Truly dark times.

None of it compared to what was behind the door. The stench of evil hung in the air before it, the afternoon light fading fast beyond the nearby window. The orange light was slowly being leeched from the sky, deepening into the darker bruise of night.

He steeled himself, resolving deep down he would face it. He would summon every last strength of courage, that which had not yet abandoned him, and he would reward himself afterwards. Perhaps a new first edition. Perhaps just a camomile tea and a gentle massage of his temples. Some good deserved to still exist in this world.

With a swift knock, he did not wait for answer, as he swept open the door and crossed the threshold into darkness.

"I didn't even say come in," Miss Drake glared at him, her face glowing in the light of her computer screen.

"Well, you called," he answered, "I assumed hopefully it was life or death."

"I haven't even sent out the email yet," she pointed out, suspiciously, sitting back in her ergonomic office chair, the hinges so slick they didn't even squeak. Like the rest of the office, it was functional, incredibly functional. "How do you hear these things?"

"The voodoo doll in your drawer must have something to do with it," he returned. "While you're there, I could do with some needles in my lumbar region."

Mark, who had heard very clearly that Drake was muttering after him from one of the more friendly teachers (or perhaps one who simply disliked Drake as much as he), wandered slowly into her inner sanctum wondering how she had hid the satanic shrine so easily. In fact, there was very little evidence of her bland corporate evil in the minimalist approach she had taken. Not even an inspirational quote with a picture of a duck in a black frame.

"You've redecorated," he indicated to the newly appointed cabinet in the corner. It still had that 'new' look. Apparently, he heard through the grapevine, someone had broken into her office and stolen something from her cabinet. The fact that she still tried to pretend it was some personal nicknack rather than something from her liquor collection, was in some ways endearing.

Then again, this was Miss Drake.

"Forgiving the brimstone, it's rather you," he joked, before taking a seat opposite her desk. He noted the seat was set a little lower than her desk, forcing her visitors to have to stare up at her. The psychological games would never end, he supposed.

"Are you done barging in?" she jabbed.

"You were busy I take it?"

"Extremely."

"Minesweeper?"

She frowned, and refused to answer the question, though an errant click on her mouse was very telling. The darkening of the screen took further illumination out of the room, leaving them bathed in the soft fading light of the outside world – and the light pouring in from the reception beyond the door.

“Can we be serious for a moment?” she asked him, leaning slightly back in her chair. She caught his sarcastic reply before he could even form it, and raised a simple hand, “Pretend I didn’t say that. I’ve been talking...that is to say verbally sparring with our laughingly titled ‘head of college’...” The mere mention of the sixth form’s head – and Drake’s direct rival for the soul of the school – chilled the air. Her disdain and their rivalry were legendary amongst the student body. “She and I think it would be nice to get you out of that Library for a while.”

“I will chain myself to the doors,” he answered calmly.

“Of that I have no doubt,” she agreed, “Which is why I meant only for a day and only in an intellectual capacity. No doubt you’ve heard of the excavation happening at the moment on the South Side? I don’t know the specifics, but I think it has something to do with a big stone that may be a previously undiscovered Celtic or druidic sect or something.”

Mark smiled inwardly to himself. Ever since the discovery of the stone by a few police officers investigating the disappearance of another, the small but devout archaeological community of Calendar had been abuzz. The nearby university campus, a subsidiary of the University of South Central Lancashire, had sent one of its professors to do a small excavation – and the leading theory in the news was that the stone was indeed some remnant of the neolithic age. The Stonehenge of Lancashire, some were calling it.

He, having had a far more exciting encounter with the stone recently than most, was keeping up.

“I may have read an article or two,” he commented dryly.

“So, in the spirit of community support the school has agreed to send some students to help them out,” Drake explained, “You know, shovel dirt, make notes, get coffees. The usual. And since the last time we did a field trip we had a cinnamon-induced anaphylactic shock incident and a student stole a penguin, your name was the first to spring to mind as a representative of the sixth form.”

“I repeat the comment about the chain,” he reiterated.

“Not a request,” she assured him, “An order. You’re going. And Miss Donaldson will be going with you. I would say our best and brightest, but considering we still haven’t located the penguin, it’s not saying much.”

Mark, who both knew the danger of the stone which others were clearly oblivious to, as well as the difficulty that lay before him in keeping Amy from discovering anything unusual about it...sighed.

“Sounds about right.”

* * *

Shadows move around the cavern of eternal night, bright lit now by artificial day. Outside the hour grows towards the setting of the sun; and inside the day wanders towards it’s close. The shadows, the mortal specs of dust, are talking in new tongues, meaningless squarks barely able to be called a language.

This world has forgotten us. The world has forgotten and all is lost. The Old Ones sleep.

We are not anything so prosaic as sentient, we simply are. Powers oozes from us into the cavern, since we were ripped from our twilight by the invasion of the blood. An activation, a spark of flint on stone. The stars we remember no longer exist above. This world is cold. Cold and sterile.

“Okay, team,” one of the forms says. The creature, a female, acts herself as leader of the other ants. A queen. She walks past, ignorant to us. Ignorant to any world other than her own. Such a small and pitiful form. “It’s been a great day, but it’s time to pack it up. We’ll start again bright and early.”

She stinks of coming death. Less than one turning of the light. It would please us, if pleasure meant anything. If we meant anything.

We sense instead, the coming of another. The ape who’s clumsy plundering had awoken us, as the forms around disappear swiftly into the shadows like endless vermin.

Yes, soon. Very soon.

A flicker of flame in time, to us the endless.

The cavern grows dark as the artificial suns disappear. We are left to bathe alone in twilight. But not in darkness. As the air around us grows still, we shine. Sickly, ancient light. It soothes us, reminds us of old times. When the world was young, and through us nightmares touched the soil.

Maybe soon. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe yesterday.

We, after all, have all the time in the world.

'til the End of the World

Episode 3 – Fallout

Starring:

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

Act I

“It’s rude, that’s what it is.”

Sara sat, arms crossed. She was furious, put out. Impetuous. Just out of English Language and considering whether you could have low blood sugar after fifteen minutes of no snacks.

“Uh-huh.”

She glared. Her companion, so utterly boy-like picking lint off of his pressed school uniform blazer while she fumed nearby. They sat opposite one another at the Library table, both of them with blatantly ignored homework books in front of them to defer suspicion should any unlikely wanderer accidentally make their way into the Library and wonder what they were doing.

Of course, the chances of that were only Amy.

“I officially join the team and he’s late for the very first Monday meeting,” she continued.

They had been sat there for approximately five minutes, but given it was five minutes of her

incredibly precious lunchtime she was giving up to do their very first 'let's fight demons, so not Buffy rip off' meeting, it was five more minutes than she was willing to be stood up. "We're supposed to be planning battling the forces of darkness here!"

"You do realise very little planning is involved?" Ricky pointed out.

"Well, given our last adventure I was tipped off to that, yes," she agreed. She was, after all, still picking splinters of shovel out of her hands. And that didn't even begin to touch the grime under her nails from the priest's office. If her body was found tomorrow the catholic church would have a lot to answer for.

Well...more than normal.

"Hey, those plans were unusually well thought out," he defended, weakly.

"I'm guessing thanks to the mystery woman?"

She referred to Claire, who's name she did know, but who had never actually introduced herself directly. Their resident vampyr hunter / mysterious informant had disappeared back into whatever leather-coat wearing convention hub she sprang from following the departure of the vampyrs. She had kind of hoped she might stick around and find some excuse to hang around the library – she needed a little bit more oestrogen in the sausage party that was them two. Not that either Ricky or Mark broke the testosterone meter, but still.

"Okay, so I'll concede this isn't planning, it's more like 'what's happening today'," she agreed. "But we need that, if not for anything else than for morale. I'm a great morale booster." Ricky, who knew her bullshit for what it was, simply gave her some side eye, to which she defended, "I'm the life and soul of the party. We're one wet t-shirt competition away from spring break."

Ricky laughed at her, though she could tell he was simply bewildered. It was then doors parted and the much discussed Librarian, Mark, decided to stroll in like butter wouldn't melt. Okay, so he was distractedly carrying a box full of books and wearing an exasperated expression, but again, still.

"About bloody time," she greeted him.

“Yes, Sara’s about to do Girls Gone Wild,” Ricky added.

Mark stared blankly as he placed the box upon the counter, so she decided to clarify.

“Hypothetically,” she explained, “Hypothetically, a wet t-shirt competition – note I didn’t say I would be a participant merely a compare – would have special morale boosting powers. In certain dire situations. When we have access to the right equipment.”

“Given the direness of our previous situation, you remained remarkably dry,” Mark pointed out.

“Like your wit?” she teased. He responded with a roll of the eyes, but she was not done tormenting him a little. After all, he was late to the party. An occasion she was quite happy to name ‘Welcome to the Hellmouth Party’. “Okay, no cake? I seriously thought when you were late there would be cake, a little song...at the very least a ‘welcome to the team’ card.”

“You’re helping us to wage war against the demon world,” Mark pointed out, while beginning to fiddle with his new shipment of books in a very business like manner. “What kind of card would you want?”

“A recycled one, obviously,” she joked. “So...any demons afoot?”

“Does Drake count?” Mark wondered, she sensed he was only half joking.

“Not unless she telekinetically made the bin shake last night,” Ricky interjected, continuing with a shrug, “Yeah, that was the highlight of my evening patrol. Things have been quiet since Satana and the Vamps.” He frowned, “Great name for a band.”

“Too quiet...one may say.” Sara melodramatically raised an eyebrow and simultaneously squinted at the boys, who were definitely not taking the bait.

“You know, in celebration of your first day, what’s say we raise some ancient unstoppable evil and then kick it’s arse?” he suggested instead. She pondered for a moment.

“Would people die?”

“Most probably.”

“Then let’s call that Plan B.”

"I do have some news, however," Mark announced, coming from around the counter and joining them finally at the table. Whether because he couldn't concentrate on his cataloguing with them there, or whether he announcement was a weighty one, she couldn't tell. "It seems Drake wants to send me to help the team from the university, the ones excavating the Alliance Stone."

"She doesn't *know* it's the Alliance Stone, does she?" Ricky asked.

"I doubt it," Mark assured, "Because she's also decided Amy is to accompany me."

Sara grinned, a sense of evil – well, mild skulduggery – steeling over her.

"Ah, the school's two big brains," she commented, slyly nodding in Mark's direction, "Easy to see why she flung you two crazy kids together." Her knowing look obviously slid off like water off a dull's back.

"Do you not see the implication?" he challenged.

"I believe I just implied it."

"It means whatever I do, I have to keep her from figuring out what that stone is," he spelled out for her – although she hoped it was also for Ricky. "If anyone gets even the slightest hint it's something other than a big hunk of rock with some carvings in it..."

"Panic in the streets of Calendar?" Ricky supplied.

"Precisely."

"We could just tell her and get her to keep it quiet," she suggested.

"No!"

Okay, so she was joking, in a kind of half-joking way. She had been mulling over in her mind having to lie to her best friend in the whole wide world about her adventure the other week, and a not so insignificant part of her wanted to confess everything and have at least someone other than the knuckleheads to talk to about it.

"Ookay boys, once more with less feeling," she suggested, as both of them had made their feelings clear. "I was only suggesting..."

"She can't know," Ricky pointed out.

“We don’t have the right to bring her into that,” Mark agreed.

She sighed, thinking once more of her sweet, dough eyed smart little genius of a friend. Yes, her heart was so big that if Sara told her what went bump in the night, she would get herself all involved. And as much as she would be a tremendous asset to them – partially to bring a flavour of the twenty-first century to the school library that was probably last decorated in the 1970s. But if she did that, her friend would likely be brutally murdered – as they probably all would now they were involved.

“I know, I know,” she assured them. “Ignorance is bliss.”

But it bloody well sucked.

* * *

“So...my place tonight?” Luke asked her, drawing her out of her nice pleasant transition moment of no thoughts. They walked, hand in hand towards their next lessons – which were naturally on opposite ends of the school. Luke, ever the chivalrous gentleman, was escorting her to hers first following the first warning bell.

He would be late, but would be smiling, so she figured she would feel no guilt.

“Your parents pay the mortgage, Luke,” she pointed out to him, “so let’s call it your rent-free room.”

He smiled, grasping her hand a little tighter as he swung it a little as they walked. The goofy little grin that melted her heart and drove her wild at the same time. He was like a dog with a bone since they both turned sixteen, and his cheeky chappy routine always worked with her. But tonight, alas, she had plans.

“Fine, mine, my parent’s, whatever,” he casually tossed aside, “I was thinking you, me...some activity...it’s a lot like push ups, only it’s best not done alone.”

“You have a one track mind...” Sam gently chastised him.

“But you’re the track,” he pointed out, “I would have that was a compliment.”

“It is,” she agreed, “But I’ve already got plans tonight.”

They reached the English classrooms as the classes continued to swirl around them. Eager little Year 7s, disgustingly cocky Year 9s. The hopeless GCSE lot like them, marched like they’d learnt they’d missed the sale at John Lewis. Luke gently spun her to face him ever so slightly, as she smiled up into his face.

“You do?” he asked, his look clouding a little. Sam remembered she’d forgotten to tell him.

“Yeah, me and some of the girls are going to a movie,” she explained, before adding, “And then Clarus.”

Clarus, the local club, was one of those kind of ‘only places around’ kind of places. Really it was an old working man’s club which was in turn an old cricket ground, turned into a bit of a local nightclub-hangout type of thing. It did not have an age limit and despite having a supposed stamp system for under-18s to prevent anyone from drinking alcohol, was also well known to be regularly shut down by the police for bending that particular rule.

Still, she knew a weekday would seem strange.

“I thought Julie was visiting her aunt,” he frowned, “Who else is going?”

“The girls,” she brushed off, regretting having said anything in the first place. “Anyway, it’s a girls only night, so there’s no reason to worry.”

“You know I do,” he pouted. She felt her annoyance step up a notch.

“Look, the cute, jealous possess-y angle doesn’t fly with me, okay?” she found herself telling him, a little more harshly than she’d intended. “So just let me have my night with the girls and I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Bless him, he nodded and backed off. She even saw the flicker of guilt in his soft blue eyes that made her in turn twinge a little guiltily.

“You’re right, I’m sorry.”

“There’s my boy,” she smiled. The second bell rang as she stepped up to her toes and kissed him plainly on the lips. Soft, sweet and tender. A small impatient cough from Mrs Fiddlebaum interrupted the moment, so she withdrew and headed for the classroom.

“Hey, Sam...” he called. She glanced back at him from the doorway. He winked, “Save the last dance for me.”

Outwardly, she smiled and made a show of rolling her eyes with the cheese. He headed off to his class somewhere off in the science block, while she stepped into the room, to her desk and began to unpack her English Lit stuff from her bag.

Yeah, outside she passed off the cheese with a good natured eye roll. Inside, her heart fluttered at everything including the wink. Both because she felt such a strong and deep powerful pull of young love.

And the guilt from her lie.

* * *

“Hello?” Amy called out as she stepped once more into the Library. The afternoon light drifted through the high windows, bringing a soft warm glow to the room. It seemed completely abandoned, like the Library usually seemed. The doors swung softly and silently shut behind her as she waited for a response.

Around her, stacks of books were filled, waiting. Nothing moved among them, all was still. She smiled to herself, enjoying a moment of stillness and solitude. Beyond the doors that had closed behind her, people were rushing all over one another in the mad scramble to leave the school premises in the fastest way possible. The Library felt like an oasis of calm, a temple to knowledge. And if nothing else, she did love a good bit of knowledge.

“Oh, I’m sorry, did you say something?”

Mark poked his head out of the office and upon seeing he wasn't as alone as he'd presumed, came out to join her. She smiled at him, feeling the little creep of red in the edges of her cheeks and the warmth blossoming in her chest. The butterflies were back.

He was handsome, which she realised with horror is how her mother would probably say it. A little taller than her, with the kind of casual hair that said he really didn't spend lots of money trying to make it look tussled, it just was. Warm eyes that were at once calm and curious. And since he was a Year 13, he was able to wear his own clothes – and she found his semi-smart casual mixture of brown slacks and a nice tartan jumper to be endearing.

Oh God, all her thoughts were turning her into her mother.

She realised she'd been spending too long thinking and left him hanging for a response.

"Yeah, I said 'hi'," she said quickly.

"Well, hi back," he smiled.

Silence fell between them, she felt the awkwardness there waiting to be addressed. Well, she found herself thinking favour favoured the bold. Or something.

"So...we haven't talked since..." she began and trailed off, unable to complete the thought in a way that didn't sound weird.

"Since you were face first on my office couch?" he enquired, raising an eyebrow. She felt the red do more than creep, it full on spread. She had only just managed to begin to deal with the guilt of stealing from Drake's office, she was not going up the can of worms about drinking. And she was also not quite ready to poke into why Mark asked her to rid his friend of poison in the first place. She wasn't even sure she wanted to know.

"Can we, uh, not talk about that incident?" she asked of him. He nodded, ever the gentleman and headed behind the counter. He smiled, her realising as he did that it revealed a little bit of facial hair, just a smidgen, beginning to appear like a five o'clock shadow. It made him look even more adult, and suddenly she felt very much like a school girl.

"I seem to remember this Librarian-student interaction happening before," he joked.

"It's a classic," she agreed. Realising that she needed to actually say something of substance, rather than do this dance forever and give herself a chance to stumble into embarrassing territory again, she continued, "I just wanted to go over the details for tomorrow if you have a minute."

Before he could respond, the doors bolted open with the kind of heavy shove that only came from a terminal buster-inner.

"Mark, did you nick my book back again?" Sara asked. She wore a scowl like an ill fitting scarf and glared at Mark across the room as she did.

"Which one?" he batted back to her, "The one with the love spells to be used for attractive men, or the one with the half-naked engravings?"

"The one about Colin Farrel," Sara admitted, her face going a little sheepish.

"The celebrity magazines are over there," he pointed out, "Along with the other nonsense."

In their entire interaction, her friend had not seen her. In fact, so surprised was Amy to see Sara heading into the Library of her own volition that she was momentarily stunned into silence. When Sara saw her, she smiled, big and warm and with just the right level of need. She could see already something was beginning to dawn in her best friend's eyes, the grin like the Cheshire Cat and she, Amy, was a big ol' Alice.

"Amy, just the person I wanted to see!" Sara greeted her brightly.

"We have science homework in for tomorrow, don't we?" Amy deduced. Correctly.

"See, this is why we're perfect for one another," Sara assured her, "You are such a mind-reader."

As Amy rolled her eyes at her friend, who would no doubt be nicking her carefully done homework later to make inferior copies in her own awful handwriting, Sara mooched on over to join her at the counter – giving Mark dirts as she leaned against the polished wood.

"Amy and I were just talking," Mark pointed out to Sara, before addressing her once more, "I believe you were about to say something before Sara's mouth opened and the day's lavatorial began?"

“Yeah,” she swallowed thickly, as her heart crept up into her chest. She’d almost forgotten her suggestion, the very thing she’d come that for. But being reminded of it, brought up her inner awkwardness. She felt the apprehension in her voice, as she tried to breezily suggest, “I was just going to ask if you wanted to grab some hot beverage before we have to go to the dig site.”

Hot beverage? What the actual, Amy? She thought to herself.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that,” he assured her, completely oblivious. “I’ll bring a flask with enough for the both of us. See you tomorrow.”

With that, he walked back into his office, leaving the two friends standing side by side at the counter – as Amy learnt that the ‘hole in the floor swallowing her whole’ she’d ordered was once more held up in customs. Sara leaned in to her and whispered, with more stage than stealth about it,

“You’re in love with an idiot.”

“Gawped at any good books lately?” she hissed back at her.

“Touche, touchy.”

Her friend looped her arm through Amy’s and began to gently guide her back towards the doors.

“We’ll leave the bad, silly, oblivious man to his books for now,” Sara continued, “I have an idea this science homework could take us some time.”

“Oh...lavatorial, editorial,” the joke clicked on for Amy as she ceased listening already to her friend and replayed the entire encounter back in her mind. “I get it now.”

“... a looooooong time...”

* * *

Luke stared at the Pringles before him, his mind struggling to concentrate amongst the rainbow of flavours on the shelf. The little man on the logo smirked at him, as though it knew something he didn’t. Perhaps, it was where the next Pringle tub should go. He sighed, kneeling down

and realising he'd actually picked up the box of Sensations instead. When he glanced to the left, he saw that they were already stuffed to the brim, one pack about to fall off and onto the floor.

"Excuse me," a voice said from next to him. He turned to see a remarkably dodderly old woman, one he didn't recognise, holding two packets in her hands. One, a Walkers, the other a brand he'd never heard of. "Do you know which of these Smoky Bacon taste more like actual pork?"

He blinked twice, at first biting back a sarcastic response, his initial instinct making him fairly certain he was not meant to be asked questions like that. The rest of him wondering why she was talking to him in the first place. It was taking some getting used to, the very idea that he was now someone of...admittedly very low...stature. He realised it had been quite some time since she'd spoken, her eyes expectantly expecting him to answer.

"I'm Jewish," he lied.

Unimpressed, the ageing customer simply tossed both in her basket and turned on her heel with a harumph. Well, she could do her sodding consumer taste test on her own time.

It was then he looked down, realising there was a bit of fluff on his t-shirt, and the almost assaulting blue hue and name badge reminded him that he wasn't indeed stacking crisps for fun. He was in fact at his part time job at the local supermarket, and the customer asking him a question was probably going to become a routine experience. There was the one aspect of his part time job that he was finding it the most difficult to get used to. After all, as a teenager people tended to ignore you – pretty much most of the time. Now, adults of all ages and persuasions were asking him questions like he had the answers.

And often, he felt more lost than them.

He sighed, picking up the box of Sensations and heading back towards the stockroom, still feeling the faint doubling of reality as he walked through the door marked 'staff only' and realising that meant him. Once through and into the quiet store room, he placed the box off to one side and immediately slipped his phone from his pocket.

It wasn't too late at night, his shift was only until about 10pm. But it was definitely after Sam told him she would be out with the girls. It was unusual not to hear from her, and so he decided to take the first chance he could get to see if she'd sent a text.

As his phone beeped to life and his face was lit in the dim light by the small screen, he saw there were no calls, no texts, or anything. Thinking it might as well be his break anyway, he took a chance and dialled.

"Come on, come on..." he muttered more to himself. The phone rang and rang, and he found himself trying to look as inconspicuous as possible from some of the other employees wandering around. Granted, most were kids from school he knew and others about his age – so none of them were about to challenge him. But all it would take is one manager and he could kiss the extra nice little income goodbye.

"Welcome to Orange answerphone," the chirpy dick on the other end announced. Well, at least it wasn't completely switched off.

He sighed, feeling deflated, and slipped the phone back into his back pocket. He hoped she was okay, fighting his inner urge to dial or text again immediately. He really wanted to not be that guy, but there was just...something that kept pushing him towards it. Then again, he could sit and examine it and drive himself nuts...or he could distract him.

And so, the great pringle hunt of the night began.

* * *

Amy's eyes swam before her as the dim light of her desk lamp made her feel like she was straining. She could barely concentrate on her biology homework that night, she felt unusual. Not like sick unusual, more like...well like she couldn't concentrate. Good God, even her mind wasn't able to describe itself anymore, she was truly coming undone. She sighed and placed down her pen,

figuring if she spared her eyes for a few minutes perhaps, she'd find it a little easier to finish the reproductive cycle.

It was Mark, she knew it was. Once more she'd been in his presence and had an opportunity to act like a normal human being. And once more, not only did she completely fluff her lines like a she was in a bad school play – another of her true fears – but he'd been completely oblivious. Perhaps Sara was right, perhaps he was a complete idiot. But in all honesty, he was the nicest boy in the whole school. Sure, others were good looking – she wasn't a fool – but Luke was like a brother and well...there weren't many other boys she spoke to.

He was just smart, she thought that was what drew her more than anything else. He seemed to actually connect with the world around him, to be curious about it. It was a trait she didn't see amongst many of her peers. Sure, they were interested in what people were wearing and who was Frenching who. But none of them were really interested in the world. And she was. And Mark seemed like he was too.

Because the world was coming for them, whether they liked it or not. And she wanted to be fully prepared when it arrived.

In her moments of distraction, she failed to notice the slight knock and the creak of her door as her little sister, Katie, wandered into her room. Dressed in her nightie, the twelve year old terror of the Donaldson household, flopped casually and without consent onto Amy's bed. She spun in her chair from her desk and glared good naturedly at the intruder.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" she asked her. Katie pulled a face that said bed was the very last place she wanted to be.

"I'm not a baby, you know" her sister whined, sounded remarkably like a baby to her.

"You'd be a bit of a fat baby," she teased. Katie stuck out her tongue, already blue from some sugary treat she'd no doubt connected mum and dad into. There was more chance Amy was going to streak across the netball court in PE the next day, than there was Katie would be asleep before

eleven. Her parents would never learn, they babied her – and yet the cry of ‘I’m not a baby’ was becoming her pre-teen battle cry. She sighed again, theatrically, “What do you want?”

“I’m bored,” Katie explained, as if that was the only explanation in the world that mattered. She began to fiddle with the Scooby Doo alarm clock on her nightstand and Amy watched her carefully. The little gremlin, who she loved dearly of course, had a habit of breaking stuff and then claiming she didn’t.

“Unlike you, I have homework,” she scalded her, “please go away.”

“You’re not that much older than me you know,” Katie responded, sitting up on the bed and giving her her best serious tone. As if there was not a gulf of ocean between twelve and fifteen. Then came her new favourite phrase, “You aren’t the boss of me.”

“Three years is a long time,” Amy corrected her, “Big gap. Makes me the boss of you.”

Deciding to pull her only leverage away – that of Amy actually paying her attention, she swirled on her chair and turned back to her homework. Of course, Katie would not be dissuaded from causing more chaos, so she heard the creak of her bedsprings as her little sister shuffled off and came to peer over her shoulder.

“Are you writing rude things instead of homework?” Katie asked her, her voice hushed as though she was catching Amy in the actual.

“This is *biology* homework,” Amy corrected her, before realising that actually given the context, she didn’t really want to invite any follow up questions.

“What’s a cervix?” her little sister asked her. It was time, Amy blocked her from seeing the clinical diagram she was annotating and steered her firmly but gently towards the door. “And why does it look like a rabbit? Is that the thing they have at the doctor’s office?”

“You’ll understand when you’re older,” she told her, as she gently led her out onto the landing, and blocked her bedroom door with her body. Katie went to walk across the hall and back to her own room, while downstairs she heard the faint sounds of their parents watching *University Challenge*. Katie paused at her own threshold, a curiously mature frown on her face.

“Do people always keep telling you that?” she wondered, genuinely.

“Pretty much all the time,” she admitted.

They shared a smile, the kind that for one brief moment reminded Amy that after the storm that would be their overlapping adolescence, they may actually one day be good friends as well as sisters. Then, moment over, each headed back into their respective rooms.

Amy thought to herself for a moment longer, realising that pretty much all concentration was shot for the night, and so wandered to her desk and clicked off the lamp. Realising that soon she would need to go to bed, to get up extra early for their expedition, she resolved to return to working on her homework the next day. After all, it wasn't due in for another week.

She would instead try to take her mind off of the next day and try to avoid the butterflies when she thought about spending the whole day with Mark in an actual academic situation. She was well aware this was some childish, teenage crush and wondered again whether or not it ever got any easier.

Then again, maybe she really would understand when she was older.

* * *

The soft morning fog hung around the school as Mark made his way through the morning, his satchel pack all packed and his thermos flask jostling against his hip. He felt cautiously optimistic that the day may not turn out to be as bad as the gloomy greyness may imply. There was apprehension, but only a minor amount.

Or maybe he was just still relaxed in the stillness of the just post-dawn air, his favourite time of day. He made his way through the school gates, to see his companion had already arrived. At least...he guessed it was Amy Donaldson. The height was right, but the individual was so heavily swaddled in too much wet-weather gear that he judged based off of the tufts of caramel blonde hair poking out from the within the hood.

His simple jacket and jeans combination felt a little under-prepared – but they were after all headed indoors.

“A vision in polyester,” he greeted with a smile. She could hear him okay, she rustled as she turned to him and waved one Michelin man arm. He thought she perhaps tried to smile, but it was only a fleeting glimpse. He indicated to the bench nearby, “We have an hour before we’re meant to be there, fancy a cup?”

She nodded, and they made their way over to the school bench. Though it was damp in the air the bench was merely cold, there was no drizzle to wet the seat. Not that he figured Amy could even experience a single drop of rain given her attire. He settled himself down onto the seat and opened the flask. Steam swirled gently around the cup as he poured her a fresh batch into the lid that doubled as a cup.

“Is this regular?” she asked him, muffled ever so slightly by the coat.

“Of course,” he agreed.

“You God!” she cried. He was a little taken aback by her enthusiasm, but the more time he spent with her, the more he noticed her odd little quirks and thought nothing more of it. He handed her the cup and watched with bemusement as she tried to bring it to her lips, only for the flaps around the hood of her jacket – windbreakers he supposed – fought viciously with her mouth for access to the cup. She grew increasingly annoyed, her brow furrowing into a practical scowl, until a mysterious hand appeared from nowhere and plucked the cup from her grasp.

“Amy!” Sara chided her friend, “How could you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Amy defended suddenly, quickly and with the furtive look of someone who knew they were doing something wrong. “It’s cold!”

Sara, having arrived unexpectedly, and dressed in absolutely no way in preparation for cold weather, handed the cup lid back to Mark, who was once more taken aback. She instead handed Amy a second cup, this one with the green and white logo of their town’s newest coffee place, and smiled. Amy took a sniff and the grumble on her face was evidence as she muttered,

“Decaff.”

“You know what regular does to you,” Sara reminded him, “I’m saving your life and the life of those around you.”

She pulled a second cup from her bag, which was quickly becoming a handbag to Narnia, and at this Amy balked once more.

“Now you’re just being cruel,” she grumbled.

“It’s an organic fruit shake, you wouldn’t like it,” Sara rebuked, turning back to him and addressing him in a rather teacher-like manner, “If Amy comes to you for coffee in any way, shape or form you are to deny her it unless you are entirely sure it’s decaff. Call it ‘Amy for Beginners’.”

“Is there a reason for this?” he queried, whilst sipping on the coffee for himself. The taste was bitter, he after all liked it strong and black, but it was at least warm enough to keep some of the morning chill out of his bones.

“If you were there when Starbucks opened in town, you wouldn’t be asking that question,” she mentioned ominously. Behind her, Amy’s face continued to scowl as she drank the dreaded decaff. It steamed at least, despite the fact that Amy’s addiction was not being fed.

He decided to broach the subject which seemed rather obvious.

“Not that I don’t appreciate your riveting insights,” he began, “But what are you doing here?”

“I’m here to accompany you,” Sara told them both brightly, sitting down between them on the bench.

“As in...”

“I’m coming along to the dig and helping out,” she clarified. “With a smile on my face and my MP3 player in my ears.”

“But you don’t like archaeology without naked nymphs,” he pointed out.

“Hence the MP3 player.”

She grinned at him, as she wiggled her wired headphones for emphasis. Amy, engrossed in trying to pretend her coffee was caffeinated, was oblivious as Sara and Mark shared a look. One that said that he knew why she was there and she knew he knew why she was there, but neither of them was willing to admit that her being there was even more suspicious than her not being there. Or something simpler.

“Does Drake know about this?” he asked, resigned to the fact that he was in for a very different day than he’d imagined.

“At nine o’clock this morning she will,” Sara agreed, “Now come on, or we’ll be late.”

Looping one arm under either of theirs, she stood, bringing the trio to their feet and gently guiding them three-abreast back towards the school gates. He sighed, feeling once more swept away by the events around him. It wasn’t that he didn’t get her point, two sources of distraction for keeping Amy from the truth were better than one.

“Why do I feel like I’m walking into hell?” he muttered.

“Perhaps a sing-song?” Sara suggested, “That’ll brighten up the morning.”

“Yes. This is Hell.”

Act II

The fog had begun to lift just a little by the time their little trio – her, Mark and Amy – finally reached the police station. The abandoned one, not the current one. That one looked like a squat little conference building, hunkered down in the middle of the town's singular significant roundabout. It was next to the fire station, so there was often a nice big traffic jam every time there was a need for a little nee naw nee naw. This was without any of that corporate whimsy and looked somehow even worse for it in the day.

Sara guessed it was true, shadows hid a multitude of sins.

"Doesn't exactly look...furnished," her polyester-swaddled best friend muttered from next to her. She had to tilt her entire upper body to take in the entirety of it – even though by the time it got to the roof it was not exactly much left with the building. Sometimes windows were just brick holes. She made a mental note to remember that, she needed more descriptive similes in English Language.

"Worse than I remember," she agreed, completely ignoring Amy's frown as she quickly covered, "You know, from the history classes about this area."

She tried to maintain her neutrally bored expression – honed through many years of practice - to keep her friend from probing for any more questions. Inside she found herself dying a little at the slip up. She was meant to be there as the sodding cavalry after all, certain as she was that Mark would fumble his way to a supernatural explanation somehow. And yet, he was the one giving her a secret glare behind Amy's poofy hood.

Clearly, whatever Amy managed to read from her expression satisfied her – for that moment – and she decided to take the lead and waddle towards the door to look for a fully grown adult. Mark, meanwhile, moved closer to her and asked in a hushed whisper the question he'd clearly been dying to act since she swooped into the rescue,

"Why are you really here?"

“Ricky thought you could do with another agent to help you out,” she returned back from the corner of her mouth, keeping her voice as low as was possible. “You know, in this dangerous mission.”

“Translation?” he pressed further.

“I’m to assist you with keeping Amy and the rest of the nerds here from finding out the truth,” she reiterated, neglecting to mention that it hadn’t so much been Ricky’s idea as it was a kind of truth she’d forced upon him with the mind control powers of a teenage girl against a semi-distracted teenage boy. “So, they, alas unlike I, can live in ignorant bliss.” She fished into her purse, which since she did not intend to go back to school the remainder of that day was bereft of any of her usual school paraphernalia, and pulled out a small brush. “I even brought tools.”

Mark’s eye glanced towards her ‘tool’ and back to her face, where she saw with not a small amount of satisfaction another exasperated glare.

“That’s a makeup brush,” he pointed out.

Bloody hell, there were different kinds?

She tucked away her one and only contribution to the archaeological expedition, as Amy returned, bringing with her what Sara presumed was a full grown adult. I mean, it was hard to judge her like another full grown adult. Unlike the school teachers, this one did not wear cheap shirts, evil shoulder pads (Miss Drake) or the wearied look of having to deal with teenage horrors. She wore a pair of thick, dust covered jeans and a plaid shirt that made her seem more like a lumberjack.

She was also a beast of a woman, thick forearms and powerfully built. She reminded her of her Aunt Helen’s roommate. Charlie Dimmock, that was who she reminded her of. That mad woman on the tellie that spend her time with potted plants.

“I thought there were only meant to be two of you,” the supervisor frowned at them, suspiciously regarding Sara who was the least sensibly attired.

“Last minute rewrite,” Sara answered.

Whether through the grim resignation of having to deal with their local school's "outreach" programme or simply being some kind of go-with-the-flow-hippie (and honestly, given her choice of shoe it really could be either), Laura Croft (as she would soon introduce herself) simply nodded and indicated the three of them to follow on her heels.

"They told you anything at the school?" she asked the trio, as they headed up the steps towards the gaping maw of Sara's bad memories.

"Don't wear khaki shorts?" she tried to joke, feeling nervousness flutter up into the pit of her stomach. Memories, the kind she sometimes had in the middle of the night and in the middle of her dreams over the past couple of weeks, threatened to resurface. She reminded herself, as they passed through the gaping open doorway and into the belly of the beast once more, of her favourite one – the look on Satana's face before she combusted and somehow regained a little strength.

Oblivious to her apprehension, Laura simply smiled, dropped her a wink and promise,

"You're in for a treat."

* * *

Mark didn't know what Sara imagined the 'treat' would be, but perhaps the vision of khaki shorts on practically every single one of the human beings or undergraduate students they passed along the way was likely not it. Or maybe that was just judging by the faces she pulled, as they moved through the cool, dusty building and towards the bullpen.

His body felt coiled like a spring as they moved through the space, him trying to keep back a little to avoid from appearing like he knew where he was going. Laura Croft, professor of archaeology, was familiar to him although they had never met. Her name appeared frequently in the local history museum's newsletter, as she was indeed one of their key trustees. She had done some interesting work in the local area, particularly around Celtic, druidic and neolithic cultures. He'd read a paper or two.

His hands sweated as they clambered down the newly installed ladders, he had to take it steady. It was still the only way up and down to the cavern but at least the portable floodlights were a step up from flaming torches. It felt a little more like a dig site and a little less like the place he'd almost died in a week earlier.

"There we go, kids, the monolith," Laura introduced, unaware there would be little surprise for at least two of them.

He turned from the ladder to face it, feeling Sara's tension beside him. Amy, who had pulled down her hood a little, leading a copse of mousey brown hair to finally give a bit of humanity to the Michelin man appearance, gawped in awe. He had to admit, it still had that affect on him, with a healthy dose of fear.

Since the events in the chamber upon their last visit, they had heard and seen nothing. Ricky had done his patrols, had kept an eye on the place – although Mark strongly suspected without venturing in – and it was quiet of both vampyric or even vagrant activity. So far, it appeared whatever he had done to the stone, incorrectly putting in the combination which decimated Satana's forces, had come without consequences.

So far.

And for that morning? There in the artificial lights of the university team, it looked like any other ancient standing stone. The milling of students, some of them checking their watches already at that early hour of the morning, made the place seem a little more casual. A singular stone – not worthy of a henge – buried in a cavern beneath a middle of nowhere town like Calendar. Perhaps, like he and Sara, that too was deceptively normal.

"You have read *2001* way too many times," Sara commented. Okay, so maybe 'normal' was a bit strong.

"*You've* read *2001*?" he asked, pointedly. She narrowed her eyes in response, as Laura continued her introduction ignoring them completely.

“So far, we think it might be a meeting place for four tribes or cultures,” she explained, “The four faces contain different written glyphs that likely say the same thing – like the Rosetta stone.” He nodded in agreement, as he caught Amy doing, and almost telepathically heard Sara biting back a comment about the language learning CDs. “Kind of like a UN of ancient times.”

“Would that explain the Latin inscription around the centre?” he couldn’t help but ask, to an impressed look from their host.

“You have a good eye,” she congratulated him.

“Sometimes even two,” he dryly agreed.

“So far, we think it says ‘Here is the Alliance of Four. May dark forces be held at bay by our power,’” she read out to them, indicating to the band about a foot and a half off the ground.

“Here stands a monument to the Alliance of the Four. May the forces of darkness bow before the power we hold,” Mark corrected, almost without thinking. He caught the strange look from Amy, the sharp look from Sara and the impressed look from Laura. He had to admit even he felt a little arrogant as he shrugged and explained,

“I do Latin.”

Laura’s look turned, as many adults did at the point at which someone of his age began to display above average intelligence, into one of cautious excitement as she decided to challenge him. She pointed towards the top of the obelisk, where a small band was again engraved in Latin, running around the four faces continuously just below where it began to taper inwards to its point.

“And that?” she challenged him. He frowned, moving all the way around it – having admittedly not spotted the band on his first visit. After a moment, she looked at him teasingly, “Too tough for you?”

“No,” he answered back quickly, but the frown remained, “It reads ‘sight without vision, damned without hell, eternity without life...back off?’” He found his translation skills collapsing a little by the time he reached the end. He had to admit on the fly and without his books, especially given the particular dialect he was translating, he was not as smooth as he would have liked.

"It honestly says 'back off'?" Sara picked up.

"In a manner of speaking, but it's confusing," he answered her, "Damned without hell clearly refers to the forces of darkness ancient races were sure surrounded mankind." He mused to himself it was rather accurately, as well. "This would be nothing more than some kind of gigantic gargoyle. Eternity without life would seem to support that, perhaps reference to some demonic or elemental beings...but sight without vision?"

"They don't like blind people?" Sara added helpfully.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. As he lowered his gaze back from the obelisk and towards their adult companion, he noted that her impressed look remained, but so too did her eagerness. Like all people expert in their field, she liked to talk about it. Which worked out well because so did he.

"We figure it's a curse warning," Laura suggested, "But 'back off' is a modern term. So, what would it be doing on a monolith this ancient?"

"How old is it?" Amy asked, sounding, like he and unlike Sara, genuinely curious.

"We found Roman pottery around the site of the stone," Laura explained, "But our carbon dating analysis of the stone itself hasn't come back yet."

"I would also suggest you try taking scrapings from inside the words of the inscription around the top," he offered, knowing he was likely overstepping his boundaries. "Perhaps if it was added much later, it could date that engraving separate to the main stone itself."

To his surprise, rather than condescend or talk down to him, Laura nodded in her agreement.

"Already been done," she explained, "You seem to know quite a lot about archaeological techniques?"

"Well, I'm hoping to join an archaeology course in the autumn," he began, leading the two of them into a conversation that became a little bit sales pitch. So lost was he in the conversation, it was several minutes more before he remembered the sense of dread and unease he'd felt upon first returning to the chamber. In fact, he found himself wondering if perhaps all would be well after all.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Amy trying to take her jacket off, but her mittens disabling her ability to undo her zip. Sara stepped in to help her, as Amy pulled out from underneath the world's most gigantic laptop he'd ever seen. Or as Sara put it,

"Oh, thank God, you didn't all of a sudden get fat."

* * *

Ricky frowned at the piece of paper in his hands. He thought, when he conceived it at 4am the night before, that it looked like a coherent essay on the main themes of *Great Expectations*. Of course, now by the light of the morning, it seemed more like incoherent nonsense about some bonkers old biddy wearing a wedding dress. He couldn't even have fallen asleep to that reality Tv shit, they only had the main five channels.

And at that moment, as he came down the stairs with the essay disappearing into his chronically under stuffed school bag, he began to question whether the essay should have been about that one about the fella with a mouse and the guy who moisturised one hand like a pervert. He sighed, resigning himself to the hopeless of a detention he'd never end up attending anyway.

"Are you going to school?" Rob called him from the breakfast table, tucked away around the corner through the living room. Another sigh left his lips, as he popped his head around the corner and saw his brother, now in his bed clothes and chomping on his Cheerios. Despite working nights, he still ate breakfast at breakfast time and a full meal at tea time. Like a weirdo.

"If clog dancin's cancelled," he quipped.

"Don't be cheeky," his brother chided him. For a moment Ricky saw the shadow of their father in his face, and more than a hint in his tone. It made him a little annoyed, while also a little sad. Emotions, shit he didn't mention emotions in the essay. Was that important?

He pulled a face, realising after a moment that Rob may have assumed it was for him. But given he was being all overbearing, probably deserved it anyway.

“Hey, you’re going to be back right away from school tonight, right?” Rob reminded him, again channelling that inner adult that should have been buried under job-related stress like normal adults. “No dawdling with your friends?”

“I shall fight them off with sticks,” he agreed.

“It’s important,” Rob reminded him, seriously, “You know Lee’ll be here at five.”

Ricky couldn’t help the eye roll. Lee White was Rob’s best friend in the world, that part was fine. He actually liked the guy. Instead of sticking around after high school he’d jumped on his motorbike and went out to see the world, returning to town every so often to see his best mate and get heavily drunk. Then their parents died and well...it had been a few months since he’d last come around. The more he thought about, the more he resolved to soften a little.

“And the oodles of time it’ll take me to journey from school to home will clearly stop me from dawdling even a little bit,” he retorted. Okay, so it was only a little. His older brother shot him the dad look again, so he relented, “Okay, backing off. I’ll be here before five.”

“Earlier please,” Rob corrected him, “I’m taking the night off for this.”

“Then how’s there not a bigger grin on your face?”

“Because I like my job.”

This time their look was shared, only on Rob’s side it ended up with him bursting out into a refreshing bout of laughter. Ricky rolled his eyes, better naturedly this time, and started to head for the door once more, realising he’d probably be late for first period anyway.

“I hate old people,” he muttered, a stage mutter if there ever was one.

“I’m only 22!” Rob reminded him, defensively.

Ricky’s sarcastic throwback look said it all. Then he was gone into the morning, wondering whether a vampyr ate my homework might lead to a sympathy grade.

Fighting vampyrs, demons and the forces of darkness had to have some perks, surely?

* * *

One thing Sara had never thought in her admittedly short life, was that if she'd ever found out that magick and stuff was real, it would be somewhat boring. What she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, was that accompanying people as brainy as Mark and Amy, would be. Incredibly. And so, she scalded herself for ever thinking that mashing those two things together could produce a profound, deep sense of malaise.

Was that the right word?

The morning had gone so far alright, the lunch provided was remarkably top notch hot salt beef bagels from one of the graduate's mother's Jewish bakery. She was now full, but with that fullness also came a sense of dulling of one's senses. And the murmured voices, pockets of shadow and full belly, were combining to bring on a sense of monotonous tiredness.

"I'm working..." Mark muttered distractedly, as she peered over his shoulder at his tiny chicken-scratch handwriting.

"I could poke someone else with a trowel for attention," she offered, unaware that what she was holding was technically a fork.

"Much appreciated," he agreed.

Of course she was going to ignore him. All of her previous trepidation at heading down into the cavern with the stone in it was gone, and now as she looked up at it all she saw was a hunk of rock not doing much and being completely unmysterious. No explosions of light, no cults of vampyrs. The oddest thing they'd come across that morning was their site manager's taste in doc martens (black with a little pink sunflower embossed).

"Limestone is so chatty..." she quipped.

"Quartz," Mark corrected.

"Seriously?" she wondered. Her Aunt Helen loved a rose quartz or two. She'd often bring them with her at Christmas, where she'd dangle them over various body parts and tell her mother to

rub her bunions in a clockwise motion. She didn't know what it was supposed to do, but afterwards she was always in a better mood.

"Seriously," Mark agreed.

She paused again, sighing and leaning over once more. There was more chicken-scratch writing there, along with some symbols she swore were phallic in nature.

"Are you trying to translate?" she wondered.

"No, I'm foot racing the stone."

"And losing?" she queried, "You're not very athletic."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, telling her she was getting somewhere closer to his breaking point. She could get the vibes coming off him in waves. He rubbed his nose a lot for someone who didn't actually wear glasses. She leaned in closer and lowered her voice to her version of a whisper.

"Have you found anything...y'know...spooky?"

"Not yet," he whispered back, "But I'll be sure to let you know if I do."

With that he looked back down at his notebook, consulting some of his previous notes as he did. She couldn't help herself but pull a face, as she leaned back and felt the blood rush back to her head. It gave her a sensation at least.

With a stretch, she glanced once more around the room to spy her best friend, perched upon a flimsy looking table and chair with her gargantuan laptop, clicking away. Perfect, she had annoyed one of them, she could do a bit of distraction in the other direction.

"Is that laptop a permanent body attachment?" she questioned her friend, who unlike Mark did not regard her with a dismissive deadpan tone, but instead a pleasant smile.

"Like an artificial limb," Amy answered, returning back to her laptop but clearly a little bit more attentive than stuffy grump over by the stone.

"Found any big secrets yet?" she questioned, trying to glance at Amy's computer screen, but finding herself just as confused as with Mark's handwriting.

"Kind of," Amy admitted, "The stone is producing a weird electronic field."

"Oooh, it's a machine?" she asked, her ears perking up. She scooped her bum onto the seat alongside Amy and the two of them sat there awkwardly as Amy tried to explain her computer findings by pointing at the stuff on the screen. Bless her, she was trying.

"I think it's made out of some kind of magnetic rock," Amy explained, "It's creating a low-level electrical field."

"Where have I seen that before?" Sara asked her, pointing at the diagram she swore she'd seen in physics. Of course, she'd only been half-paying attention at the time. Mr Sykes, their physics teacher, was the kind of dreamy that in fiction was *Dawson's Creek* and in reality, was a lifetime on a register.

"Probably physics," Amy agreed, as if reading her mind, "You'll probably have seen it in a diagram of magnetic poles. This thing is like..." Her brow furrowed, "...one giant compass-mess-er-wither."

"Intriguing," Sara suggested, before standing and announcing loudly, "But ultimately boring. I'm going to see if Indiana-tight-jeans needs some brushing done."

"With your makeup brush?" her friend mocked.

"There are some things that years from now we'll never talk about..." she reminded her.

"Naturally, we will never talk about them," Amy agreed, "There might some day be an internet chat blog."

Resolving to torment Amy again before too long, Sara turned on her heel and headed off to another side tunnel. This thing had several side tunnels off of the main one, which they'd been expressly forbidden from wandering down. However, since none of them were paying her any attention compared to the walking Universal Translator and Science Girl, she decided to have herself a moment to herself.

Of course, had she been paying attention to where she was going, she would not have ended up walking around a corner and finding herself face to face with a shrieking, screaming skull.

Oh, no, wait, the screaming was her.

* * *

Luke was distracted, but also mildly bruised, as he and Justin made their way back into the changing rooms from the school field. They were splattered with mud, making their PE uniforms a delightful shade of brown compared to the black and white they normally were. Only his now on the elbow had a nice streak of red from a particularly bad tackle. Still, at least physical sensation took him out of his thoughts for a moment.

“Your girlfriend is the hottest girl in school, has never left your side and you still seem miserable,” Justin reminded him, as if they had continued a conversation they’d not actually been having. Well, hadn’t been having since before PE when Luke found himself pouring out some of his annoyance to his best mate. Apparently having his head go face first into the school field hadn’t been enough to knock the memory out of him.

He’d grown up with Justin, who was about as close to him as Sam was in terms of length of time he’d known him. Which is why his casual comments about the hotness of his girlfriend sat fine, he knew there was nothing between them.

“I didn’t say I was miserable,” he contradicted him. Lads around them were rushing forward, all of them more eager to hit the showers and get changed first. Well, some of them were, others were likely to simply get changed and place their school uniforms back on over muddy and sweaty bodies, which to be honest kind of grossed Luke out.

Then again, probably grossed out the teachers in their final two periods of the day more.

“It’s all over your face,” Justin explained, as they reached the place where they had hastily stuffed their school bags and PE bag in the changing rooms. The school had been ever so cheapskate as to not pay for lockers, meaning when they came in for PE, they simply shoved their belongings

under the benches in the rooms as they changed. Justin sat, looking as exhausted as Luke himself felt. "And I'm not just talking about the mud."

"It's not misery," Luke tried to correct him, taking off his spiked boots and beginning to pull out some of the clumps of grass and mud from the bottom before putting them back into his PE bag. "It's like..." He sighed, trying to find the words. Though Justin had like dated and kissed girls and stuff, he'd never exactly been the 'relationship' kind of guy. "...okay, you've known someone since the day you were born. Spent nearly every waking moment with them. You think you know them, everything about them. But then, you start to wonder..."

"This second person things is very odd," Justin commented, while simultaneously trying to dig mud from his right ear canal.

"You start to wonder if you *do* know everything about them," he continued, ignoring the comment. "I called her last night, she didn't answer. She never just *doesn't* answer. Sometimes her phone is off, someone she intentionally ignores me because I've pissed her off, but she never just ignores her phone, especially when it's me, not without a reason."

"And you assume you know every reason why a girl does something?" Justin asked him with a curious, if sarcastic frown, whilst simultaneously peeling off socks which were now more sodden earth than cotton. "Interesting notion."

Luke sighed, feeling his right shoulder pull a little as he undressed. He wondered if it would be bad enough for a pack, he'd definitely taken his emotions out with him onto the field.

"You think I'm just being paranoid?" more a statement than a question. His friend paused and took a moment to regard him seriously. It was one of the reasons he liked Justin. The big oaf was a goof sometimes, but he was a good sounding board, especially when he was spiralling.

"I'm thinking if she's doing the dirty with someone else, you'll find out sooner or later," he reassured him without much assurance. "Finding someone else's boxers in her room would be a giveaway."

"Finding *my* boxers in her room would be a miracle," Luke corrected him, "Her dad's more catholic than the pope, remember?"

"I wonder if Our Father knows what a..." Justin began, but caught his friend's sharp look, "'wild girl' he's raised." Luke's look withered. With one hand Justin gave, with the other his mouth could take away, "Okay, crossing a line, I get it. Look, there's probably nothing to the thoughts you're thinking, but if you're really worried, ask her."

"Do *you* have a preference for which of my testicles she removes?" he challenged, pointing. "I mean, personally I'm against either of them being taken away, but you're obviously so much more cavalier about my nuts."

As the two of them grabbed their towels and headed towards the shower block, Justin decided to drop the topic, thankfully. They crossed paths with the next class coming in and getting changed, he almost felt sorry for the fresh crisp look to their PE uniforms. A thought occurred to him, as he nearly bumped into Ricky, Sara's friend.

"Hey, Ricky, you were in Chemistry with Amy, right?" he asked, remembering he'd forgotten to check their tutoring session.

"Uh, normally," Ricky agreed, "But she's off with Mark on a school thing today."

"Ah, right, must have slipped her mind to tell me," he muttered. Before the guy headed off in the direction of the school field, he called after him, decided he owed the guy a warning, "Oh, Mr Rowe is in a mood today, might want to watch out."

He didn't know Ricky that well, they ran in different circles, and the guy had a reputation as a bit of a loner. But he could have sworn the moment he mentioned their aggressively child-hating PE teacher, a funny look crossed his face. A kind of playful, if a bit dark, smile.

Their year group definitely had all kinds.

* * *

Mark had to admit a bit of relief, after Sara's thundering scream reverberated through all the caverns – and likely deep into the cave system, startling a few bats along the way. After she had calmed down, been scalded for wandering down the cave into an area Laura and her team had cautioned off for a reason, she – in what she would forever insist was a mutual decision – had elected to return to school for the rest of the day.

It probably also didn't help that Sara had attempted to punch the skull, which had been precariously dangling from the mud at the side of the cavern as part of a complete, almost embedded skeleton.

"So, not exactly fresh?" Mark asked. He stood a little way back, behind the cordon line that Laura had re-positioned down that cave passage. She was beyond it, attempting to now move and categorise before any more damage could be done. She'd explained to them, in between Sara hyperventilating into a brown paper bag that stunk of salt beef, that they'd known about the skeletons for some time, but had agreed to return to documenting them after the school visit.

"They appear to be Romans," Laura explained. Thankfully, she continued to regard Mark in a positive light, separating him from the chaotic breath of youthful air that was their departed blonde. "As consistent with the artifacts we've so far found in the main chamber."

"How many?" he asked, curious.

"Five," she explained, indicating with her free hand down the passage further. "Most of them in-tact..." Her face frowned down at the cracked skull in the plastic bag she now held. Sara's date, "...and somewhat spread down this passage."

"Is it not odd to find skeletons just lying here like this?" he asked, unsure. She shook her head.

"Not too unusual," she answered, "This area has been somewhat cut off for quite some time, and if they died suddenly or violently, they might have remained grouped together."

"Comforting."

"It's of what that's beating me," she sighed.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Romans didn't exactly mean they were fresh victims of Satana and her group, which in some ways was a relief. But at the same time, any deaths in proximity to that thing back in the cavernous central chamber filled him with a sincere foreboding.

"You don't know how they died?" he reiterated. Her work done, the skull bagged and tagged and away from where other intruders could get to it, she stood once more, dusting off the fronts of her jeans fruitlessly. She stripped off her blue latex gloves one by one as she answered, the curious frown of the academic on her face,

"Well, there's no consistency," she explained. She pointed to the two he could see from where he was stood, "The two here nearest to the central cavern, they show clear scorch marks on their bones. Not quite witches burnt at the stake, but definite deep scorch marks."

"What about the others?" he queried.

"The others are a whole different story," she answered. She paused for a moment, hands on hips, considering. After a moment, she resolved her mind, lifted the tape and indicated him to follow her deeper into the passage. Walking carefully, he did so, as she shone her flashlight in front of them.

"These have no discernible marks on the bones," she continued, holding the light across the three jumbles of skeleton about a hundred yards beyond the first lot. "They don't even seem to have been foraged on by wild animals."

"Does this cave link with the system beneath the town?" he asked, peering further down into the cold and damp darkness beyond. He'd heard stories of how extensive the cave system was, it was theoretically very, very easy to get lost.

"Yes, but they've never been properly mapped," she agreed. "It's quite possible this group got lost in the caves and then was never able to find their way out again. Not before food and water ran low anyway."

"So, they starved to death?"

"Or dehydrated," she nodded, "It's possible. But we won't know more until we do more thorough analysis back at the university." He could sense her frustration, that of the academic with a

puzzle that just didn't make sense. A part of him felt sad, wished he could explain to her that the answers she sought, she probably didn't want. But even if she believed him, he could not exactly truth-is-out-there two people in two weeks. It was hardly good decorum. "Come on, it's probably time we head back anyway."

With that, and the questions still dangling before them, she led them back towards the main chamber – carefully skirting past the disturbed remains. When he arrived back at the obelisk, he was surprised to see the second most demonic creature he'd ever faced standing, arms folded and looking up at the stone.

"Never figured you for an archaeology buff," he greeted Miss Drake, who barely registered his presence.

"Could never stand all the dirt," she agreed, "I didn't even like playing in the sand as a kid."

"Too human?" He got himself a good glare for that one, "What do you want?"

"The destruction of all mankind, obviously," she offered, deadpan. She finally turned to look at him, looking as out of place with her high heels and pressed clean business suit, she was strangely the most anomalous thing in the entire scene before him. "But more than that...to ensure my students are properly representing the school."

"We've tried to avoid the bikini parties," he assured.

"Your students have been exemplary," Laura agreed, earnestly and with slightly less of his sarcasm. Her look clouded for a second as she remembered a slight blip, "Mostly. I'm surprised you haven't suggested this kind of co-operation before."

"They're not stepping out of line?" Miss Drake asked her, frowning as though the concept of well behaved students were a form of exotic particle physics.

"Not even slightly," Laura confirmed, her own puzzlement equal in measure.

"My world view is all askew..." she muttered to herself, as the headmistress took that as a cue to wander off.

"It's a positive learning environment," Mark offered as explanation to the dig leader, as Amy came bouncing over to them. Able to move far more easily now she'd thrown her huge duffley coat off to one side, she appeared to skip with grace. Perhaps it was the sudden loss of weight that she was now overcompensating, like she was bouncing on the moon.

"You'll never guess what!" she exclaimed, a grin on her face. Behind her, Mark saw Miss Drake examining some of the digger's tools with all the curiosity one might examine a small insect. He decided to leave her being weird and gave his attention back to Amy instead.

"Anything would be a breath of fresh air after our headmistress," he assured her.

"The magnetic field around the stone is in a state of flux," she explained. Mark and Laura shared the slightly befuddled look of shared historians. He was glad to see even full grown adults did not always necessarily speak Amy.

"Sorry, I know I should be holding a phaser when I say stuff like that," she giggled. "Anyway, uh, it means there's not a constant magnetic field being generated. It's intermittent. Which probably means something external is affecting the field of the stone, maybe even something like the rocks in the cave wall."

"Is that significant?" Laura asked her.

"It might give us some indication of why they built the stone here," Amy offered, "Sometimes the effect of magnetic fields on living systems can produce strange sensations or feelings, that I'm assuming could be interpreted in a significant way by the people who...y'know, came here."

"Right, like Stonehenge?" Mark pointed out, finding a part of him wanting to keep back from skirting too close to truths he didn't want either of them to know. Off their shared confused look he added, "There's some theories that the properties of the rocks and minerals in the stones at Stonehenge produce weird feelings in the people who go there. Some scholars have suggested it may be a holy site of sorts because it makes people feel a certain kind of way. The same principle as the healing waters at Lourdes."

Of course, he was never going to go into detail about what he'd read about the French miracle destination. That would open up a big can of worms about garden gnomes that he wasn't sure he was prepared for.

"Nice work," Laura congratulated the both of them. She cocked an eyebrow at their young scientist and asked, "You ever thought about life after school?"

"That exists?" she joked.

Mark felt it easy to join the smile passing between the three of them. Laura told them they had another hour and headed off to do some more work of her own. He and Amy shared a curiosity, he could tell. Both of them wanted to get back to work.

But before they did, him back to his books and she back to her laptop, he couldn't help but lingering a look at her a little longer. He liked the way she smiled, the way she was excited by her scientific discovery, her intelligence. He guessed he never quite realised, underneath all the polyester madness she'd arrived that morning in, was a person a little more like him than he realised.

And with that nice feeling, they went back to work.

* * *

Ricky was bored. Mark was still at the dig site, his lessons were over, and he had several minutes at least before he was officially aloofly late home for Rob and Lee's little lovefest. The whole afternoon, with no evil to fight, he'd literally found himself having to do homework. And pay attention in class. With the occasional daydream, but that was about it. So, he actually found himself wandering into the library at the end of the day.

He'd never quite understood Mark's fascination with their little bibliothèque, other than it was the place with all the books. For him, he could take it or leave it. It'd be much nicer if they could meet in a super secret base or something. Not school. But it was at least quiet, and the thick oaken

double doors kept the place quietly insulated from sight and sound of the madness that was everyone rushing home at the end of the day.

He wandered around the counter, realising in all their time hanging out he'd never actually been back there. It looked fairly well organised – that was Mark after all. A few moments later and he'd managed to knock some big ball of paperweight thing over and tried a go at using Mark's stamp. The little faded 'Property of Calendar High School' looked oddly formal.

"The ink doesn't wash off," Sara's voice came to him from some unknown place. He frowned, jumping and scanning the room. How she'd managed to get the drop on him was bad enough, but the fact she was kept dropped was even worse. Unless she'd somehow found a spell or something to become incorporeal.

"Where are you?" he called out, feeling a little Derek Acora.

He saw, rather than heard his answer, as a shake of the large central work table and the movement of chairs indicated a small blonde teenage girl was emerging.

"You loose your pen?" he asked, now noticing the piles of books – most of which were magazines – on the table. So much for supernatural observation skills – though he admittedly thought that was just wishful thinking.

"Eyeliner," she explained, "So hard to find a good brush."

"Oh, so you were looking for one?" he teased. She responded with a stuck out tongue and plonked herself back unceremoniously in front of her books. He decided to join her.

"You know, I thought there's be a little more action on my first week fighting evil," she sighed. "But other than an incredibly horrible skeleton who was less animated than I will recount in the retelling, there's a lot of just waiting around."

"Most of the action happens at night, anyway," Ricky agreed.

"Great, school in day, fighting by night," she muttered, "When do I sleep?"

"If you're like me, in the shower," he offered.

"Oh, that's why it takes you so long," she teased, raising an eyebrow.

“And what’s your excuse?”

“Hair.”

He couldn’t hold back his smirk, which earned him a slap on the arm.

“Rude boy!”

She sighed, the kind of ‘Sara’ sigh that she reserved for moments of weary resignation. The same one she gave when the science homework was finally kicking her arse, and she just wanted to be done for the day. Indeed, that was the case, as chemical equations disappeared into her backpack along with the issue of Take a Break.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” she challenged, looking at him as if she’d suddenly remembered something.

“I come to school here,” he reminded her, “It’s a thing I do.”

“Doesn’t Rob have an old friend coming over?”

“Maybe.”

“And didn’t you tell me he wanted you home right away after school?”

He decided to join her in packing up, which since he’d only managed to get a pen out when he sat down was quit easy, with a little shrug of his own.

“You know,” he began, considering it, “He may have said something to that effect.”

“And may I ask what you think you’re doing?”

“Dawdling,” he admitted, “With my mates.”

* * *

Mark realised, only by the slight rumble in his stomach, that the day was likely coming to a close. As if to reinforce that belief, their benefactor and supervisor, Laura, emerged from the cave passages where she’d been checking the others had gone home.

“Mark, it’s the end of the day...” she reminded him once more. The other graduates had apparently only been waiting for the go-ahead to head home and had eagerly left when it hit four pm and Laura had made the announcement. That left he by the stone, Amy off to one side on her laptop, equally engrossed, and Laura to make the rounds shutting down their equipment.

“I’ve just got a few more sentences to copy down, and then...I’ll get out of your hair,” he asked of her.

“You have fifteen minutes,” she told him, hands on hips showing she was patiently attempting not to go beyond the end of her tether.

“I’m not sure that’s enough time,” he couldn’t help but answer.

“It’s all you’ve got,” she reiterated, “When I lock down for the night, I need to make sure there’s no one else left behind. Safety and all that.”

“Will we be able to come back?” he asked.

“It was simply a day arrangement,” she reminded him, “Although your work will be noted, with thanks – and if you like I’ll have a chat with your headmistress tomorrow. But for now...gather your things and I’ll escort you both out in a quarter hour, understood?”

Reluctantly he nodded, the inner scholar in him saddened at the prospect he wouldn’t get to finish. Granted, he knew they could always come back after everything was closed off – somehow, he doubted the ‘security’ the local university would really be able to provide, but somehow that felt wrong. He’d come to like and respect Ms Croft.

She headed off, with the kind of wry smile that adults get when they’re nostalgic for their own youth. He worried she’d made some comments along the lines of ‘I was just like you when I was your age’ and decided to back off from pushing further. Sometimes it wasn’t worth it.

He resolved to note down as fast as he could the remaining script from the side he was working on, carefully following the cursive script and symbols in ways that would hopefully help him in his research back at the Library – but he found himself suddenly confronted by a whirlwind of young woman.

"Where is it?" Amy asked him. Her cheeks with ruddy with the kind of flushed look of someone about to have a tantrum. She scowled, in a way that seemed too unnatural for her normally warm and smiling face.

"There are so many things in the world, Amy," he tried to diffuse her mood with an immediate light tone, "Too many to count. What are you referring to?"

"My work, I know you took it!" she accused. He found himself quite taken aback, he'd barely moved from his place in front of the obelisk.

"Your work?" he asked, concerned.

"Don't play dumb," she warned him, even going so far as to point a finger towards him. He saw in that instance the woman she could become in time, were she to go down to the angry school-ma'am path in life. "You, me and Miss Dern have been the only people here for the past hour. Now, I've gone to copy all my files over to my backup USB, and most of it from before then has gone. All deleted from my computer and the recycling bin. So, what's going on?"

He had to admit, he was more than taken aback. Her logic made sense, it really had only been them for the past hour. But the underlying notion that he would have the blind bit of knowledge about what to do with her computer was inherently flawed. And perhaps, she was particularly flustered because on some level she must have known that.

He decided to stand, and tried to reassure her,

"I honestly don't know, Amy, I'm not hiding anything," he explained, hearing his own lie sound odd in his mouth. "Whatever's happened to your files, it was nothing to do with me." He paused, a thought occurring to him, "You said yourself these caves are magnetic, how do you know they didn't have some kind of effect on your computer?"

"It's shielded," she debunked. "Besides, none of the other computers have been acting up in any way shape or form?"

As she spoke he noted with some concern that a few strands of her hair were beginning to float up from the side of her face, as if plucked up by some invisible spectre. He felt a hum in his fillings and frowned over her shoulder.

“Would that be acting up?” he asked.

She turned to follow his gaze and the two of them watched as the hum grew to an audible noise, and the screens of two laptops behind them – ones Laura would have been taking with her when they all left – were flashing on and off.

“What’s happening?” Amy asked him, he heard the panic rising in her voice.

“If it’s not in print, I don’t understand it,” he assured her.

Before they could make any kind of move, and as the pit of Mark’s stomach dropped down deeper than he expected, the laptop screen nearest to them burst and shattered as sparks flew. Mark felt his own hair stand on end, the static in the air making them look like they were touching one of those orbs in the science department.

Behind them came a blood curdling scream, causing Amy to shoot him a terrified and worried look.

“Laura!”

The two of them took off together down the cave passage, down where Ms Croft had wandered a few minutes earlier. He pulled ahead of her, trying to shield her from whatever she was about to see – although he had a feeling they were already past the point where he could keep anything from her.

She was slumped, her doc martens at an unnatural angle, as she sat back against the cave passage – several feet before the first skeletons she had shown him earlier in the day. He recognised the slump, the one which said unconscious, or worse – and tried to block Amy’s view with his body. It didn’t work.

“Miss Dern?” she called out. He reached her first, kneeling down besides her, noting with a grim feeling the lack of the rise and fall of her chest. Behind him, he tried to wave Amy back with one hand, while with his other he reached out for her shoulder.

As he touched her, she fell, exposing the right, horribly scarred side of her body. Burnt flesh, still smoking and sizzling and contorting replaced her plaid shirt on that side. One unblinking eye stared back at them both, as Mark took a moment to mourn the loss of a fellow academic. He knew immediately, from bitter experience, that they were now in danger – and they could not allow themselves any more time to give proper respect.

Something, horrible and likely supernatural, was happening – and that would have to come first.

He only allowed Amy a moment to scream at what she'd just witnessed. You would never forget your first, after all.

Act III

“What happened?” she asked, feeling her eyes were as wide as saucers and her breath attempting to break out of her body and into a full trot. She wanted to bring it back down, she wanted to calm herself, but the lolling head of the woman she’d only just met but already begun to admire, was challenging her wants.

Mark was making no sense. He was only like a year or two older than she was. He was a Librarian, alongside a smart nerd-type like herself. He was not some soldier, or some world weary detective. And yet, he had responded to the finding of the body not with a blood curdling scream, but with a sigh and a droop of his weary shoulders.

It did not compute.

“Whatever happened to the Roman soldiers,” he muttered, as though that explained anything. They didn’t *know* what happened to the Roman soldiers, they conjectured. “Laura...” That was the dead person he was casually about to talk about in past tense, despite the fact her legs were askew to the side of him. “...she believed some of the soldiers were killed by something like fire...something that scorched the bones and left behind a unique mark.”

It was an answer. A ridiculous and confusing answer, but an answer nonetheless. She whirled, pulling her phone out of her pocket and finding the signal was completely dead. No bars, nothing. Of course, they were underground – who knew how far by that point of the cave? She turned and began to walk. She had to walk, for if she went any faster, she would break out into a run that might never stop.

“What are you doing?” he asked her, Mark finally following her back along the cave.

“We need to call the police,” she told him, “Or like the ambulance or something.”

He didn’t say it, which she took as a good thing – because she might have actually tried to slap someone for the first time in her life. She knew, from the loll of her head, the burn of her skin and the dark emptiness of the woman’s eyes that she was already dead. She was not an idiot. But

they had to pronounce stuff like this. The police, the ambulance people, they knew what to do. They were adults.

She kept her eyes firmly planted on her phone as they moved, looking for the slight shift in the icon to indicate it had finally connected enough to the network that she'd be able to dial. There was nothing. They entered into the main cavern, and there was still nothing. Mark stood beside her, as she stopped – sure now that they were close to the entrance to the dig there'd be a little more signal.

Of course, she thought, the stone. It was giving off a magnetic field.

She frowned, the strands of her hair beginning to rise around her face like they were lifted by spirits.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“Something not good,” was Mark’s unhelpful reply. There it was the subtle hint in his voice of panic and concern. So, he wasn’t some kind of CSI man after all. Good to know. She looked up, as the static in the air grew a taste on her tongue.

Things were going from bad to worse. In front of her, before her very eyes, something began to emerge from the stone. The dead, inert, magnetically lively stone she'd been in the presence of all day, began to birth a strange glowing being. She had to say being, because although it began as a small sphere of electrical activity – like ball lightning – it began to morph and change shape into something that looked vaguely like a...okay, no this was nonsense.

“Is that a ghost?” she asked, feeling like she was a few scooby snacks short of okay.

“Something far more deadly,” Mark said gravely. She snapped her head towards him, registering his remarkably unsurprised and resigned tone, “We need to get to the ladder.”

No sooner had he said it, than the glowing being of energy began to move towards the ladder, almost in sync with Mark’s attempts. Of course, it not being bound by muscle and flesh, moved with a sudden grace to slam into their only way out of the room. The ladder exploded, white hot with the sudden electrical surge of whatever this thing was colliding with metal. The pieces

rained around them as she shielded her eyes and felt Mark's hands grabbing her arm and dragging her backwards the way they had just come.

Back towards the body.

She didn't even register in the back of her mind that the boy she liked had touched her, the warmth of his touch or the softness of his skin. She only registered that her shoulder suddenly hurt as he dragged her backwards for their lives.

Moments later, still far enough away from the body, he stopped, they did not appear to be being pursued. By the ghost. That thing that absolutely could not happen, because this was real life. The thing Mark was absolutely not surprised by, but incredibly wary of.

"What the hell was that thing?" she demanded out loud, wanting him to make sense of the world for her once more.

"Security," he answered grimly.

"Huh?"

Perhaps the dumbest thing she'd ever said, or at least the most succinct and unhelpful reply, drew a somewhat apologetic look from the young man she'd once tried to flirt with, while strands of her hair were caught up in Ficus leaves.

He sighed again, though still appeared to be catching his breath,

"It looks like we're going to have to talk."

* * *

So, it wasn't exactly five o'clock by the time that Ricky wandered back in through the front door, having deposited Sara at her front door exactly fifteen minutes earlier and meandered a little on the way. But it was at least closer to five o'clock than many other of the hours in the evening, and that would have to do. Of course, as he walked through the door and into the front room, he could see Rob wasn't best pleased.

"Where's the white cat?" he joked, trying to keep his tone light. Rob glared up at him, sat there in human clothes which didn't contain logos of the security company – and actual jeans for a change. What Ricky didn't see, was Lee.

"You're late," Rob reminded him, simply. Of course, his annoyance was diluted by the fact that Ricky was clearly not the only one.

"I was confused about the rule over dawdling," Ricky shrugged, throwing off his bag onto the sofa to yet another disapproving look. "It's very vague."

"You mean 'don't'?" Rob clarified.

"It's so much like 'do'," Ricky agreed, "Like two letters different."

"That's been my motto," a familiar but oddly different voice came from behind him. He turned, as did Rob's eyeline, over to the front door where the strangely misshapen form of Rob's best friend appeared.

Lee White was the same age as Rob, seven years older than Rick's tender fifteen. He carried himself with a cocky swagger, a reassuringly lopsided grin and a smatter of stubble that was somewhere between hipster and roadie. The misshapen hump was in fact a massive duffel bag, filled with lord knew what but that looks misshapen from years of battering and abuse. Scuffed at the corners, like the guy's boots and leather jacket.

He'd always liked Lee. So much less stuffy than his brother. He often wondered how the hell the two of them had ever become friends.

"And like you're on time," Ricky commented, sarcastically, deflecting from his own behaviour with practised ease.

"Actually, no, he's late too," Rob frowned. But, unlike his somewhat stuffy greeting to his younger brother, Rob took the time to stand up and embrace his friend – who's hearty bear hug in response nearly knocked the older brother off his feet. At the same time, Lee extended one hand, adorned with a couple of skull rings, and ruffled his hair just like he'd done when he was a kid.

Okay, so he was still fifteen, but like he was a young kid. Like twelve.

“Well, never be on time when you can show up late,” Lee smirked, stepping back and regarding the two of them.

“Another motto?” Ricky asked him.

“One of my favourites,” the man dropped him a wink, before tossing the huge duffel bag onto the sofa with the same casual *laisse faire* Ricky had managed. He didn’t care it would probably crush his school work and end up with his bag smelling of old cigarettes, hid his own little habits nicely. “So, what have the Kent boys been up to in my absence?” It’d been like a year, but he carried it with the air of an old gunslinger. He glanced at Rob, “You finally hooked up with Lucy Barnett?”

“That was in Year 9,” Rob reminded him. He pretended to be his usual serious self, but Ricky could see the corners of his mouth wanting to turn into a smile. Infectious was the best way to describe Lee’s good mood. “She moved to London six years ago.”

“Shame, I heard she had a MySpace profile now,” Lee sighed, making indications to Ricky in a stage non-whisper to indicate large protrusions from the chest. Rob glared at him,

“Would you avoid that in front of the kid?” Rob asked him. Ricky bristled at the term, but Lee managed to say what he was thinking already,

“He’s fifteen Rob, anything he doesn’t know...” he joked, before placing one arm around Ricky’s shoulders. “I would be glad to tell him.”

“I know all, thanks,” Ricky threw back, “No need for that talk.”

“About the birds and the bees?” Lee pressed, “And sometimes bees and bees, even sometimes birds and birds – my personal favourite.”

With that, he withdrew from them both and began to wander over to their kitchen. Magnetic, he pulled them round with him, both Ricky and Rob subconsciously shifting to follow his progress. He began to rifle through their cupboards.

“You still battering that old Ford up the motorway?” Rob asked him, in a blatant attempt to change the subject.

“Nah, got me something better,” Lee assured him, “But I do love it when you talk dirty.” He pulled his head back out of the cupboard and instead checked in their fridge, “Do you boys eat like a grandma now or something, where’s the beer?”

“There’s a six pack in the fridge,” Rob answered defensively.

“Cute,” Lee smiled, “But there is a reason I have been brought back into your lives, besides the simple phone call. You need to someone to help pull the emu out of your arse...”

“Hey!”

“Not called for...”

“We are going out to a pub,” he continued, pulling out of the cans and the ring pull anyway with a small hiss. Ricky’s nose was assaulted with the sudden yeasty smell, as Lee returned to the living room. “We are going to play pool and we...” He indicated back and forth to himself and Rob. “...are going to drink. You complain, and we put the emu back, capiche?”

Ricky and Rob found themselves rolling their eyes in unison, though had you asked either of them later they would have denied it. Lee moved past them, out into the street, through the door he’d left open and as they went to follow Ricky’s eyes caught on what Lee meant by no longer driving his battered old Ford.

“We are *not* going on that,” Rob told him when he saw.

It was a shame, Ricky had never been on a motorbike before.

“Fine, but you’re paying,” Lee answered with a grin, and began to walk off down the street.

* * *

“Those dumplings were amazing,” Sam said from next to him. Luke knew what was coming, like the little pit of feeling in the bottom of your stomach at the top of a rollercoaster. He could feel the words forming on his dad’s lips, even as he struggled to finish his last bite of tea so he could deliver them with a grin.

"I tell Helen that all the time," Julian Cross, Luke's tormenter-stroke-dad joked from the end of the table. He turned into a good natured chuckle at his own joke, while his mum, Helen, who had heard the same type of humour a thousand times shot him a look. Luke tried to hide the mixture of wince and urge to laugh that struck him like a force of nature.

"Thank you, Sam," his mum said pointedly ensuring his dad got the full force of the look, before she continued politely, "And low fat, without being vegetarian."

"Never tell her that though," his dad followed up.

The effect was instantaneous, Luke attempting to drink his coke from the glass found himself struggling not to choke, his mum let out a cry of 'Julian!' and surprisingly both his dad and Sam threw their heads back and laughed.

Dinner, which was now becoming something like a weekly ritual, with Sam coming over one night a week and him heading to theirs, was admittedly far more fun at home. She was getting used to his dad's crude sense of humour, as much as his mother was starting to realise perhaps Sam was not as 'other side of the tracks' as her being from the 'posh suburbs' (as his mum thought of them) suggested.

"Hey, it's an important issue," Sam agreed, smiling and nudging Luke next to her.

"Dumplings?" he asked, once he'd been able to swallow down the last bit of carrot and coke.

"No, eating healthy," Sam corrected, "You don't want to end up with a fat stomach, do you?"

"Ain't nothing wrong with a hearty lad," Julian suggested, though he himself wasn't exactly chunky. "He needs to put a bit of meat on his bones."

His dad, originally from Yorkshire, was at least old fashioned enough in that regard. Meat and two veg kind of meals, was partial to bangers and mash but would happily shovel down anything his mother gave him. He liked to play up the northern stereotype on occasion, which Luke was fairly certain he was doing with Sam. He knew it was his dad's way of easing her in gently to his more relaxed way of life.

"Sam's of the mind that love handles don't bring love," Luke pointed out.

“Hey, I met your mum through food,” Julian reminded him. Luke, of course, knew the story already – but Sam frowned in polite curiosity. She obviously had not. Well, there was always a first time, his dad liked to tell the story of meeting his mum about as much as he liked telling the Swedish chemist joke.

“He’s being literal,” his mum explained, having finished her separate slimming world meal (again, not that she was even remotely overweight, she just seemed to have bought into the hype). She explained, “It was his first attempt at waitering. Most of my meal ended up in my hair.”

“And you didn’t slap him?” Sam asked, laughing

“Actually, my fiancé at the time thumped him one,” she explained.

“He may have been a Nancy from Ealing, but he had a good right hook,” his dad agreed.

“There’s some back story here, isn’t there?” Sam asked, smiling.

He couldn’t help but admiring her then, politely sitting forward and showing genuine interest. He knew what people thought of her sometimes, aloof and elitist. Sure, she was popular. Sure, she was the ‘it’ girl and stuff, but she was also incredibly genuine. Maybe that’s why people didn’t just hover around her, maybe it’s why like he, they loved her.

“You’re not the first to regret asking that question,” Luke offered, well practiced in manners and beginning to pile cutlery and plates ready for clearing.

“My fiancé at the time was a right arse,” his mum continued, though as she did, he tuned it out a little, he’d heard it a million times. “He’d bicker, be jealous, right up until I walked in on him and his Spanish tutor. After taking scissors to all of his Moss Bros suits and leaving them on the front lawn, I decided to call up the waiter who’d hit on me after spilling soup down my dress. The cheeky git that later became my husband.”

“That’s him?” Sam confirmed, indicating over to where Julian was lost in his own whimsical memory of the good times. “I get the cheekiness.”

“What can I say, I don’t need to speak Spanish,” his dad grinned. He was sitting back in his chair, satisfied from another good meal and Luke could already tell was beginning to wonder what was for desert.

Luke continued to clear up the plates, piling them up and heading off into the kitchen as the good natured conversation continued behind him. He smiled to himself, beginning to run the hot water in the sink and squeezing in a little fairy liquid.

He loved nights like these, like little snippets of the future. It helped him to overcome his unease, the thoughts he’d spent most of the day annoying Justin with. He wished it would go away forever, and he’d be able to shake it off. But there, away from the warmth and light of the dining room, and in the relative gloom of the evening kitchen, he felt things beginning to crawl back into the back of his mind.

A scent of jasmine followed her, a perfume her stepmother had brought back from their holiday to Italy the summer before. She sidled up beside him, carrying the remaining plate and napkins.

“I told them we’d clear up,” she explained, slipping the plate into the water as he began to scrub and she picked up the tea towel.

“That’s nice of us,” he agreed. They spent a few moments in silence, as he washed the plates, the pans already soaking off to the side, and she dried. The question rose on his lips and he hoped it sounded as innocent as he wanted, “Did you have fun last night?”

She startled. That told him one thing, or maybe it told him nothing, but his brain latched on anyway.

“Fun, with the girls?” he prompted after a moment.

“Oh, yeah,” she agreed, “Lots of fun to be had.”

“I tried to call you,” he pressed further, moving onto the glasses.

“We were in a movie, remember?” she reminded him, “Gotta switch your phones off otherwise they throw you in jail or some shit.”

"What movie did you see?"

She placed down the plate she was holding, half-dried, and sighed. A short, sharp, annoyed sigh.

"Why do I feel like I'm in an interrogation here?" she asked him.

"I was just asking," was his only weak defence.

"No, you weren't just 'asking'," she summarised pretty quickly, "You were questioning. I told you where I was, and why my phone was off, and now you're continuing to pester." As she spoke her cadence, her voice, rose and she ended up folding her arms, slipping quickly into her annoyed phase. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do," he answered on automatic.

"No, I don't want a knee-jerk reaction 'yes'," she snapped, "I want the God's honest truth...do you trust me?"

"Sam..." he began, feeling words pitter patter on the edge of his tongue. It betrayed him, and despite the rising heat in his cheeks he answered in the only words he could, even if he didn't know if they were true, "...yes."

"Then act like it," she told him.

With that she spun on her heel, headed for the back door and out into the night. She didn't slam, she didn't scream, she just walked out and left him standing there, suds on his tingling hands and feeling both ashamed and defensive.

"Everything alright?" his mum asked a moment later, as she slipped into the kitchen.

"Yeah," he deflected, "Just...yeah, it's alright."

He turned back towards what he was doing, while without question his mother slipped into drying the remainder of the dishes.

Though normally he enjoyed the routine and the quiet, it gave him some time to think. And unfortunately, to feel ashamed.

* * *

"It's not chasing us," Mark observed, looking back down the caves towards the cavern. The being, if it was still present, was not following. Nor could he see the tell-tale sign of light around the corner suggesting it was lying in wait. Whatever it was, it had let them go. At least...in this direction. He frowned, a thought occurring to him.

"That doesn't mean we're safe," Amy said from next to him. He couldn't help it, he frowned at her. It was not that she was wrong, it's that her insight and the strange calm which had overcome her, was unfamiliar to him. Her breath still appeared shaky, but her eyes had taken off a different tone.

"No, but I think it might not be able to get to us here," he ventured.

She stared at him, not challenging, but expecting, waiting for some answers. He was not surprised, he suggested they talk after all. The only other possibility was to return to the cavern back in the direction of danger, and unfortunately, the remains of their dig site supervisor. For now, at least, so far back in the cavern, those things were out of sight, if not out of mind.

"I'm doing a lot on supposition here, but I think that being exists in an energy form," he explained, "There must be some kind of interference this far down that prevents it from coming down here. That's why some of the Roman soldiers seemed to survive whatever it was that scorched the others."

"Then how come they still died?" Amy challenged him.

"Starvation," he explained, "These caves go on for miles, there's no honest way of finding your way back out again without foreknowledge or a map." He frowned, furrowing his brow as thoughts came to him faster and faster, "Meaning, we would suffer the same fate."

"People should be able to find us," she countered, "You know, modern technology and all. My...parents are expecting me home tonight."

"But I'm guessing that's hours from now," Mark responded, "And we're not entirely sure we're immune, I'm only supposing from the available evidence."

Once again, Amy whipped out her mobile phone. But just like the previous time, she was obviously not satisfied by what she saw.

"I have to try to call out," she muttered, "I should be able to get the police or something."

"I wouldn't," he said quietly.

"What?" she asked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Just trust me," he asked of her, "Call Sara."

"Why?"

"I thought trust me covered that."

She frowned at him a moment longer, as inside he begged her not to press the issue further. He knew they needed a conversation, but there were far more pressing issues. He wasn't sure if he was ready for the emotional whiplash of another 'truth is out there' speech in as many weeks. Something in her must have trusted him, for she attempted to dial. There was nothing, he was not surprised.

"I think here it's the rocks," he thought out loud, before nodding back in the direction, "And back there's that magnetic field you found."

"What?"

"You said that this stone was exhibiting an electromagnetic field," he reminded her, "Magnetism can occur in other rocks as well, can't it?"

"Sure..."

"What if the rocks surrounding the central cavern are comprised of a certain type of electromagnetic material which repels this energy being and keeps it ring-fenced around the stone itself?" he supposed.

"You don't have a basis for any of this!" she protested, but he shook his head. Well, here went, in for a penny, in for a pound.

“Two weeks ago, me and Ricky found this place,” he explained, “Apparently, this stone was put into place by four powerful factions who weaved into it their combined power of untold proportions. We don’t even know why. But someone called Satana tried to get her hands on it, but couldn’t do it herself because, well, because it had defence mechanisms against vampyrs. Melted their eyeballs and all.”

“Vampyrs?” Amy repeated slowly, the word alien coming from her mouth.

“The four symbols on the bottom of the stone were the clue,” he continued, knowing if he stopped speaking now a flood of other questions would rush in and mean they’d never get it done. “They were some kind of combination lock, which when pressed in the correct order would presumably allow you access to the knowledge or the power that’s inside. But I pressed them in the wrong order on purpose, in order to buy us time to stop Satana.”

“The...vampyr...?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I think I’ve triggered some kind of security system,” he pressed, “An energy being left behind as some kind of a watchdog in case anyone puts in the wrong combination.”

“Yes...a...watchdog,” she parroted, again exquisitely slowly.

“Look, you saw as I did that the being is sentient,” he found himself on the verge of snapping at her. “The moment I mentioned getting to the ladder, it destroyed it. That shows some kind of rudimentary intent – so why is it not pursuing us? Because it can’t. Because the people who built this thing weaved in a safety mechanism.”

“We think they were the good guys, so presumably they don’t want to kill anyone they don’t have to. So, they surround the central cavern with magnetic rock which directly repelled the energy being’s field, trapping it within the barrier, so that it couldn’t continue and escape and harm innocent people.”

He stopped suddenly, feeling a little light headed and a quickening of his breath. He knew it was the edge of being overwhelmed. The tiredness of a long day. The adrenaline flooding through his

system from the finding of Laura's body and the sudden shock of finding himself plunged into danger once again. And with someone he admired.

To Amy's credit, her originally sceptical look had taken on a different hue. She no longer appeared sceptical, instead her look had softened, almost saddened.

"You believe this?" she asked him, quietly.

"You like science, right?" he countered with, "You believe in abstract principles derived through empirical experience. Believe what you see, that's all I'm asking."

"Then if the rock repels it, we'll be fine here," she suggested.

"But that's the problem – without knowing the direct way to get back to the surface we're wandering around blind," he reminded her. "We need to get back towards the cavern, that's our best way out of here – and the first place someone would look for us if they did do so."

Amy nodded, then stooped and picked up a couple of the rocks from the ground. She turned them over in her hands, before looking up at him with a seriously questioning – not sceptical – face.

"People have been working here for weeks," she pointed out, "How come it's only started to attack now?"

"I don't know," Mark admitted, feeling frustration clouding his already tired mind. "I shouldn't have activated it in the first place."

"Is it truly sentient or just reactive?" Amy wondered out loud, pocketing a few of the rocks and picking up some more. "You say you triggered the wrong combination, to stop this Satana from coming back? Then I guess you guys left, so the stone lay dormant. Perhaps it returned to normal. But maybe...maybe it's possible they tried again." She looked at him, a surprising compassion on her face, "It sounds like you did what you had to do, but maybe this is all just an accident. Maybe it will settle down again, or maybe there's a way to undo it. But either way, what's done is done."

He stared at her then, feeling awkward but unable to pull away. She was...incredible.

"What?" she asked him, he noticed redness filling her ears.

"The last conversation, I had like this..." he explained, "Well, it went a bit differently."

He was finding surprises in all places. The greatest of which was his capacity for understatement.

* * *

“It’s all about balls,” Lee proclaimed, the philosophy of the barman, as he lined up the shot on the table.

The Hog’s Head, one of three pubs in town, was not the best of them. Not that Ricky had been in many pubs, but he’d seen them on tellie. And this was not exactly like the Great Real Ale Pubs of Britain with Michael Portillo – or whatever it was his dad used to watch. This was more like a shitty working men’s club from the eighties where *A Touch of Frost* met a guy selling bootleg CDs from the back of his trunk.

But it had a pool table, a bunch of people who were busy chatting and ignoring them, and a slight haze of smoke that hid a multitude of sins. And they didn’t seem to bother about having an underage lad with them, holding onto his own pool cue and wondering how it was Lee managed to have the geometry of a robot – while on his third pint.

“That a personal comment?” he quipped.

“It’s true,” Lee continued, squinting only a little, “And not just for pool either. It’s all about having the stones to risk everything...on a single shot.”

He let loose the shot. The thick thwack against the white ball sent it rolling across old green fabric and bouncing along to knock the striped ball into the pocket, before settling nearby. The sound of the ball rolling into the internal mechanics was incredibly loud, drawing a glance from some nearby bikers, foam in their beards.

“Most of the time you’ll win,” he offered, “Some of the time you’ll loose. But you’ll never regret it.”

“Is that how you justify it?” Rob asked him, holding his own pint nearby. “Running from town to town, a girl in every port?” His tone seemed light, but Ricky heard the judgement underneath it. And if he could hear it, then likely Lee could hear it too. But amazingly, he didn’t seem put off.

“You never get bored,” Lee shrugged, “And you never look back.”

“Right, try not to pass your messages onto the kid here,” Rob asked of him.

“Not a kid.”

Rob rolled his eyes, placed his pint on the small shelf lining the side of the pool room, and nodded to the gents.

“I’m gonna find the bathroom.”

Lee was lining up for his next shot, as Ricky watched his brother disappear off into the surprisingly dense throng of people for a weekday night. Something felt off about Rob that night. He’d always been uptight, but at least when he’d been in high school, he’d seemed like he was a bit cooler – a bit more like Lee.

“He’s changed.”

Lee’s voice was not challenging, it was matter-of-fact. He didn’t even look up as he chalked the end of his cue and contemplated the table in front of him.

“He’s always been an uptight git,” Ricky answered, not meaning to be so harsh but feeling it slip out anyway. To his credit, Lee didn’t chastise him for it, instead he continued lining up his shot.

“Not always,” he answered gently, “We were in High School together, remember? I’ve seen him ways you never have.”

Despite the words, Ricky didn’t feel defensive. It felt true, it felt right, but it didn’t feel like a telling off. He wondered again why more adults weren’t like Lee. He seemed like he had some things together, even if stable relationships wasn’t one of them.

“I’m sure there’s a few stories there,” Ricky joked dryly.

“None I’ll be allowed to share I’m sure,” Lee answered, with the same small grin. He made his shot, the next one sinking into the pocket as easily as the first. Ricky had an image then in his

mind, one of a thousand pool tables up and down the country where Lee hustled the clientele. It felt like it was true, the reality was irrelevant. As he passed him this time, he casually handed Ricky his pint, who couldn't help himself but have a sip. No one seemed to mind and despite what Rob would have thought, the world did not end.

"You're saying he used to be like you?" Ricky wondered out loud. The conversation felt a little like peeking behind the curtain, and his curiosity was peaked.

"We were going to run off when we left school," Lee said suddenly, standing up full as he did and looking Ricky in the eye directly, "Get a bike each, travel the world. Maybe find a job in Buenos Ares or a couple of girls in Fiji, who knows?"

"What happened?" he asked.

"The foster system moved me away," Lee shrugged. Ricky knew Lee's family weren't in the picture, but it seemed to him then that they had never been alone – or maybe he had never been old enough – to be talked to like an adult. To hear the way the world was.

If only he knew, Ricky thought to himself, thinking there were some things he'd never talked to adults about either.

"That wouldn't have ended things," Lee continued, moving his attention back to the pool table. "We still had plans in place but then...then I took off. I ran away from the foster home, I hit the road without him. We fell out for a few years, then when we next catch up – well...I'm sure you know when we next saw each other."

That part of the story he did know. Of course he'd been there that day, standing in the rain in a black suit too big for his young frame. He'd never needed one before. There had never been the occasion.

"The day of the funeral," he said blankly. He had to blank, he had to hold it back. Like everything else, it was easier.

“Just because we fell out, didn’t mean I didn’t keep my eye out,” Lee continued, “When I heard, I came back. Enough time had passed that we forgave each other. But whatever plans we’d had way back when...he wasn’t going to continue through with. Too much has changed.”

He stood from the next shot, the first one he’d missed, and stood holding his cue as though he was leaning on it. As though it propped him up. Both of them were lost in thoughts, Lee’s unknown to him, his ones in a countryside graveyard on a rain-soaked day.

“Lee, have you given Ricky a beer?”

Rob’s voice shook them both of their thoughts, in truth making him drink a little. Ricky moved the pint quietly behind his back,

“No beer here.”

“If you’re caught, I’m the one that’s fined,” Rob reminded him, “Get rid of the beer.”

“Hey, mate, better do it,” Lee reminded him, “We’ve got plenty at home anyway.” The moment passed and a small smirk turned up the corner of his mouth as he added, “All...five.”

Ricky gave up the beer, which Rob returned to Lee, and it was replaced with a coke. As he did so, this little ritual of responsibility, Ricky regarded his brother – Lee’s words still ringing in his ears. He couldn’t imagine it, the description of the guy Lee just gave him, could ever turn into the guy next to him.

But then again, would Rob one day say the same, if he ever found out what he was up to at night?

And if so, would he be proud? Or betrayed?

* * *

“Sara knows, doesn’t she?” Amy found herself asking, as the deduction occurred in her mind. They walked slowly, cautiously peering ahead of them for signs of their static friend. Her mind wanted to project further, wanted to whirl through the possibilities that she was hallucinating and

that maybe she'd just passed out when finding Laura's body. Or maybe there wasn't even a body, and she was still at home dreaming the dreams of someone who'd watched way too much *Scooby Doo*.

But she couldn't. The air felt too cool on her cheeks, the rocks weighing down her pants pockets too awkward as they pressed into the front of her thighs. The rough feel of her lips where she'd ended up biting them nervously as she tried to calm herself down and Mark told her stories normal people didn't believe.

He was right when he'd said that she believed in what she could see. Something had killed Laura. Something had emerged from the stone. Something had destroyed the ladder. And pieces were falling into place. Maybe his explanations were not the full story – but she would be a fool to ignore the truth that they were in danger. And she was not a fool.

"How'd you know?" he asked her.

"You asked me to call her," she explained, "And you said two weeks ago is when all this happened. That's when Sara went missing, and come to think of it, after you gave me the blood sample, you weren't around either. So that's when this...Santana..."

"Satana," he corrected. Of course, the other was a band.

"...when she did her thing," she finished off, "She kidnapped the both of you and that's when Sara found out."

"Yes," Mark confirmed.

She stopped, stood still where she was, feeling that she was just approaching a bridge too far.

"Then why didn't she tell me?" she asked. There was a whine to her voice she didn't like, a kind of petulance that made her feel cheap. But it was honest, at least, it was as real as apparently vampyrs. "I'm her best friend."

"There's plenty of reasons why we keep the truth a secret," Mark answered her with a shrug. "Most notably – we don't want to bring people into this who might regret it."

"You told me," she countered.

"I've had to," he retaliated, "Otherwise it wouldn't have been my choice."

"But you still think it's alright to ask for my help?"

He frowned at that, confused, so she decided to remind him,

"I'm assuming the blood sample you gave me of Ricky had something to do with the whole 'truth is out there' thing?" she challenged, feeling the same flush of anger that drove her earlier rant about the computer. Oh God, her computer, she'd forgotten about that. "You thought it was fine to let me analyse that."

"As long as you didn't know why it was you were doing it, you weren't in danger," he rationalised. And it was a rationalisation, she could hear it in his voice.

"It's a fine line, if you ask me," she commented. She glanced around them, realising that she could see the harsh glow of the upturned floodlight around the next corner. Thankfully, they'd long since passed where Laura continued to lay slumped. She didn't need the reminder of the stakes. But she did resolve to make sure someone came back for her. She deserved that. More than that.

"What's our plan?"

"We need to shut off the security system," he reiterated, "My guess is by entering the correct combination of symbols."

"Won't that unleash whatever power is contained within the stone?" she questioned. She heard the words as she said them, and frowned to herself, "Jinkies, you get used to saying stuff like that pretty quickly, huh?"

"Possibly," he answered her first question, "But either way I would hope it would have some kind of a shutdown command. I need to study it further to enter the correct symbols in order."

She nodded, picking one of the rocks out of her pocket and tossing it up in the air in attempt to appear nonchalant. Naturally she dropped it and sheepishly fished it back up off the ground.

"If you don't have it in five minutes, we retreat," she warned him.

"Five minutes may not be enough time," he tried to push back.

"It's not good finding the right combination if you're Kentucky fried librarian," she reminded.

He nodded, reluctantly, she felt, and they began to creep further to the corner. At first, peering around, other than the place appearing rather upturned, it seemed no different than how it looked as they were working throughout the day. Sans adults, of course. Quiet, still, a big hunk of stone.

“Okay, I see no sign,” he whispered, “I’m going to move in closer to the stone.”

She didn’t know why he was whispering, perhaps only for atmosphere. They hadn’t seen ears on this energy thing, so there was no reason to believe it did or did not respond to their voice. Still, he crept forward, eyes scanning the room as she remained at the entrance to the cavern, scoping out the breadth of the place. All was still.

As he reached the edge of the obelisk, was almost within touching distance, he stopped. She tasted the copper in the air, feeling the heckles rising on her skin and knew then it was not over.

Once again, the truth was brought in front of her eyes. The thing, humanoid-esque in shape and glowing like ball lightning emerged from the stone in front of him. It moved towards him, with a kind of predatory slowness.

With a quick pray that her arm would hold up, that her aim was true, she drew back and flung one of the hopefully-likewise magnetic rocks she’d been carrying. It flew through the air, smacked straight through the creature’s face and despite the fact it didn’t have a mouth or eyes she could have sworn it screamed, repelled and thrust backwards by the force. There was no satisfying solid thwack, so the fact it disappeared back into the stone and then half-way across the cavern like it was an elephant running from a mouse would have to be all the satisfaction she needed.

“I’ll keep it occupied, you decipher that stone,” she shouted to him, before shaking her head, “Yup, not getting used to that.”

* * *

He was deeply, deeply afraid. Not for himself, though he did rather like living. He feared for Amy, knowing she was, even at that moment, putting her life in danger for him – as much as it was also for herself. He had to block it out, had to drive all his focus towards the stone itself.

His mind was his greatest asset, his analytical brain. It had to work at full speed, full focus. And for that, he had to ignore the fact that the girl he'd come to greatly admire was ducking and weaving around the room firing rocks like baseballs at a being made of pure energy that could burn them both to death in an instant.

And regardless of what she'd tried to assure him, it was in some way his own fault.

"Okay, so I previously figured the text was a creation myth," he muttered to himself. "From chaos to the creation of mankind; but in putting the story into the correct order I disregarded the symbols that headed each panel. The archaic symbols for fire, earth, water, and air – the four original elements."

It was an old cognitive trick, to talk the problem out loud to work it through. Of course, Amy might have mistaken that he was speaking to her.

"How is that helpful?" she snapped as she ducked under a swipe from the being that knocked over one of the already blown and dead flood lamps.

"Perhaps the correspondence of the symbol to the piece of the story is the key to understanding the lock," he continued to mutter, trying to block everything out. "The natural tendency would be to input the combination to tell the narrative flow of the story – but if everything begins in chaos, perhaps it is the symbols that needed to be ordered. Perhaps the order behind the chaos – or the powers that be."

"Mark, I don't care if you have to take an intuitive leap, take it and save the day!" she called out to him as she crawled under one of the worktables, previously dead laptops and other pieces of equipment exploding in little showers of sparks above her as the thing continued to stalk her.

"Okay, it could be any number of combinations," he muttered, "Alphabetically, symbolically, cosmologically..."

“Pick one!”

A thought began to blossom in his mind, the pieces falling into a new order that gave them the semblance of a shape. Perhaps the right shape?

“Okay, so maybe they need to be input in their order of importance?” he wondered, “The first thing important to most cultures is light...and heat...then air...finally water and earth...?”

He put the symbols in as he talked, moving in a squatting circle around the obelisk as he went, the occasional rock flying over his head. When the last one was struck the room was shook by an almighty scream as the being was sucked back into the obelisk, and all was still.

He finally trusted himself to look away, to pass his eyes over to where Amy was emerging from underneath the workbenches, out of breath and wild eyed. He allowed himself a moment to wonder, was it over? Was it done? All was still, after all.

His face fell, as he realised Amy’s hair was beginning to stand on end once more. The tingle ozone hit his nostrils, and he and Amy were forced to jump once more to the ground as not one, but two beings of energy flung themselves from the obelisk in an almighty pyrotechnic display – slamming into their one remaining floodlight and plunging them into unnatural light.

The room shimmered and glowed with only the light of the two energy beings as Mark threw a desperate look over to Amy. Her eyes wild she summarised,

“I’m going to say that was the wrong combination!”

Act IV

Mark launched himself into action, drawing himself from the ground, the air crackling above him. He didn't quite so much walk, as half-fall, half-crawl forward as he made his way over to the downed Amy. She was already moving, turning her head to look around at him approaching. Her eyes were wide with fear, as he felt the air around them intensify with the off-white light. She didn't have to say anything, he immediately ducked, as above him static moved with frenzy and fury.

He drew himself back up to full height, as Amy sprang back to her feet, surprisingly agile despite everything that they had been through over what had felt like an eternity. They grabbed one another, their minds in unison as they ran to the exit like a three-legged race. They made it several feet before one of the beings shot in front of them, blocking their way from the cavern. By the glowing growing behind them, throwing their shadows to the floor, they were being pincered.

If they weren't sentient, they were bloody well smart.

He whirled around, pushing Amy off to one side where she landed hard on her hands and knees. Stooping low, he grabbed one of the larger rocks she'd been throwing around the cavern and began to raise it for a throw. The second being, moving with the slow deliberate pace of a shark, was closing in and suddenly burst forward with a shocking speed.

When it connected, he screamed, his outstretched arm crackling with the sparking electricity. His teeth slammed shut, his arm felt like it was on fire as the scent of burning hair filled his nostrils. Hands grabbed his shoulders and dragged him back, but even though he moved out of the cloud of energy, the screaming pain remained.

It was Amy, who had recovered from his attempted heroics and stepped between him and the beings. He saw in her hands a pair of cables, ripped from the back of one of the flood lights and flung them into the heart of the cloud. The thing made an almighty streak as above them came the sound of a generator exploding. It flickered and disappeared, as if temporarily overloaded. She stooped, picked up what he recognised as her laptop – the scooby snack sticker gave it away – and

flung it at the second being that had started to move in for the kill. It exploded in the air with a shower of light and fury, that again drove it away.

He wished that would be all it took, but he knew, even as he cradled his reddened and still smoking arm to his chest, that they were temporarily knocked back – they were not gone. The air thrummed with their electricity, as they recuperated and threatened their return.

“Get out of here!” he yelled at her.

“I’m not leaving you behind,” she insisted, kneeling beside him.

“Rather touching, but I’m not going to let you die,” he snapped at her, more than a little sarcastically. “Now go!”

“Tell me what code to put in,” she demanded.

He tried to move away from her, hoping he could find some way to draw them from her when they returned, and get her off into the caves where at least she stood a chance. It made his arm scream with fury, as he grimaced and held on.

“Mark, what code do I put in?” she repeated, looking at him levelly.

“I don’t know,” he groaned, the edge of despair threatening to creep in, “I honestly don’t.”

“What if the code you put in originally was only for people who didn’t know how to really open it?” she asked suddenly, her eyes blazing with a sudden train of thought he’d felt himself but rarely seen in another.

“What?” he asked, confused.

“What if it’s all a diversion? A trap?” she explained, “Look, these four factions you mentioned must have been super bigwigs. And if this is some powerful thing-y-ma-bob then it seems stupid they’d protect it with something as simple as a lock out of *Tomb Raider*. So, what if they spread a rumour that it had some kind of combination lock as a kind of...”

“Red herring?” he finished, realising her line of thought. The hum in the air began to intensify once more, “Right...then anyone who would try to open it, without knowing it was a diversion, would go straight for the lock – which in actual fact just triggers the security device.”

“Exactly,” she agreed, “Maybe there *is* a way to shut it down, a failsafe. Because if the creation story activates it...perhaps the opposite is destruction.”

“I never knew you had an eye for poetry,” he mused, feeling light headed with the pain. Perhaps he was starting to grow a little delirious. “The creation story is in the order, Earth, Wind, Water, Fire. The reverse would be Fire, Water, Wind, Earth. Try it but for God’s sake be careful.”

She nodded and placed one of the magnetic rocks in his good hand before turning and rushing from him. The beings were beginning to manifest once more, his hair felt like it was standing straight out against his head. One swooped directly for her, causing her to dive to the ground, hard, likely skinning her knees. She belly crawled the final way to the stone, the last couple of feet.

The second one came for her, as through the pain he raised his other arm, sweat pouring down his face as he tried to focus. He threw, like he’d never thrown before in his life, the rock flying straight through the air. She screamed as the thing came for her, she’d only put two of the symbols in. The rock struck, bouncing off from the sheer force of the thing’s revulsion, buying her the time she needed.

The third, then the fourth and then...nothing. As though gravity resumed, the air dropped, his skin and hair dropped, the energy dissipated into nothing, and all was still. Finally, thankfully, all was still. She turned to him, breathing heavily and shaking with adrenaline, but she too realised they’d been triumphant.

“I think we got it,” he smiled, though it stretched across his face like a grimace.

“We’?” she half-joked, as she stood and began to make her way across to him.

“I’d very much like to go home now,” he pointed out, managing to get himself into a seated position. She kneeled next to him, reaching for the pained arm he cradled as though he was protecting a small baby. “Maybe grab a bandage.”

“We should take you to the hospital,” she pointed out.

“No,” he found himself saying more sharply than he’d originally intended. He tried to soften a little, not allowing his frustration and pain to bleed through as he assured her, “I’ll be fine.”

“These are severe burns,” she told him, indicating down to the blistering skin on his arm.

“And in time, they’ll heal,” he assured her. “But I can’t go to the hospital. And you can’t tell anyone what happened here.”

They would anonymously call in what happened from a payphone, of course. They would want Laura’s body to be found and not by surprise by her colleagues. But they would be far away, perhaps already at home, where alibis were needed. They left, on time and spent a little while in a café talking and catching up about the day – and that would be all. And he would just have to continue to wear long-sleeved jumpers for a while.

“No one?” she asked, likely thinking through whatever plans he already had.

“No one,” he agreed, “I’m afraid it’ll have to be our secret.”

He tried to stand, so she helped him up by his good arm, until they stood, stretching and already beginning to feel the body’s natural come down to all the adrenaline. It was then, as they looked around the cavern, and their eyes were slowly drawn up to the hole above. They both realised they had forgotten a now glaringly obviously problem.

The ladder was gone. How the hell were they to get out of there?

* * *

The night air was cool and sweet as Ricky, Rob and Lee stepped from the Hog’s Head and into the car park outside. There was the scent of freshly laid rain, but the air was dry, and Ricky found it a bit cleansing after the smoky innards of the pub. He hadn’t realised just how much, until he tasted the fresh air.

“I’m going to look out for the taxi,” Rob told them. Though nowhere was far from anywhere in town, Lee had convinced him to loosen the purse strings enough to get a taxi back up the hill. So, Lee sat on the wall, as Rob toddled a bit further odd, his gait that of the slightly drunken older brother he remembered from a few arguments with their folks.

“Good man your brother is,” Lee mentioned behind him, slurring only ever so slightly.

“Is that Yoda Speak for overbearing?” Ricky commented, allowing a bit of sarcasm to creep in.

“Hey,” Lee responded, sharply. The change in tone and the clarity to his voice, made Ricky turn to him, taken aback. His tone softened a little as the man continued, “Your brother is one of the good guys, Ricky. He fought for you after your parents died, to keep you together as a family. They don’t just give guardianship out to twenty-one year olds on a whimsy. The least you can do is respect him for that.”

“He never told me that,” Ricky frowned. He’d meant it to be matter-of-fact, but hearing the words out loud it sounded like a pathetic defensiveness.

“He never would,” Lee agreed, fishing around in his jacket for his lighter and cigarette to pop between his lips, “He’s more than just your brother now. He’s your guardian. He looks after you, because that’s what he does.”

Ricky scoffed, his breath clouding in front of him and he turned his gaze out into the night. The places where he’d stalked stormy streets and slain monsters that would turn the hair white on any adult he’d come across.

“Maybe some day he’ll realise I don’t need looking after,” he muttered.

“Maybe someday you’ll realise you do,” Lee countered.

“I’m not the child he treats me like.”

Lee stood, stretching his back as he did and squinting against the smoke in his eyes.

“Look, Ricky, there’s a big world out there,” he told him, speaking like some old ancient seafarer dispensing wisdom. “And I’m sure you’ll see it someday. All the wonders, and the horrors. But my hope for you, like your brother’s hope for you, is that unlike me and him, you’ll always have a place to fall back to. A place called home.”

“You both have a place to call home,” Ricky told him, a lot of the defiance gone from his voice as he sensed what was under the words, “You both have here.”

“And that’s very much appreciated,” Lee agreed, patting him on the shoulder as he did. In the distance Ricky saw Rob beckoning them over as the yellow light of the taxi sign appeared, “Even if it is sentimental bollocks.”

They shared a smile, as something passed between them. Perhaps it was an understanding, a moment of shared recognition, of hope. Together they walked across the parking lot, the gravel crunching underfoot, and joined Rob.

“Deep meaningful thoughts there?” he asked them both.

“Deep and possibly illegal,” Lee beamed, switching back to his charming and slightly irreverently drunk self, “Which I believe is a channel on sky. Shall we head back to yours?”

“We don’t have Sky,” Rob reminded him, oblivious to the truth of their conversation.

“Home isn’t all it’s cracked up to be then, is it?” Lee answered, dropping Ricky a wink and sharing a look. They all got in the taxi and took the short road to home. A place Ricky was beginning to realise, was probably more than he cracked it up to be after all.

* * *

Amy rushed through the door of her bedroom, after making apologies to both of her parents. They had been worried when she hadn’t returned at dinner time, until she explained that she had left the dig site and had coffee with Mark. They had then dropped each other a knowing wink, asking if she needed tea. She told them she had already eaten and made her excuses.

Getting out of the cavern hadn’t been particularly easy, and she felt scraped at the elbows and knees as she did. They had managed to do a kind of balancing act, using a half-mangled chair, the remains of the table and her clambering on Mark’s shoulders – painfully aware of his blasted arm as she clambered to the top.

She felt like rather than several hours of high adrenaline action, she’d been in a warzone for months – or PE with Ms Rawlinson for an hour. Her body had been pushed to a place it didn’t like,

and she knew she would pay for it. But it was more than that, the emotional toll screamed at her already.

She moved quickly across her room to the window, shutting the curtains in one quick movement. She didn't want to see the outside world, she didn't want to see the night. She knew what was in the dark and didn't want to. For now, she wanted it to be gone.

But looking around her room felt somehow worse, somehow wrong. She realised, perhaps for the first time, that it still retained the air of a room of a child. Scooby Doo posters, her favourite childhood books on the shelf. Pillows that had cute little animals on them. It felt wrong, it felt like it was so false. Childhood, what the hell was that? What did that even mean when...when you could nearly die on a school trip?

She kicked off her shoes and crawled onto her bed without changing, leaning her back against the soft headboard and curling her knees up to her chin. Cradling her knees close to herself, she allowed herself to cry. She shook with it, the tears, big and wet and unutterably childish to her, spilling onto the dusty pants she wore.

She was so focused on herself, on her inner world, she didn't notice her little sister until the bounce of the mattress alerted. She looked up, feeling suddenly naked and ashamed, as if she had been caught doing things far worse than having a blub.

"Are you crying?" Katie asked her, completely insensitively.

"It's not a good time," she tried to say angrily, "Go away."

"What's the matter?" Katie asked. The words were not brattish, but she felt herself bristle with it anyway.

"Katie..." she tried to warn, but she didn't have the strength.

"You can tell me," Katie pointed out, moving a little bit further across the bed and sitting back on her ankles. "I'm your sister."

Amy tried to wipe her eyes and took a moment to look at the little girl who was really only a few years behind who she'd been. It was like looking at a moving shadow of yourself, the past in a little floral nightie. Her tears, wet and salty, came away easily as she tried to compose herself.

"You know, no matter how old you are or what you do in life, you always have one question that's never answered," Amy tried to explain, knowing the full explanation of her emotions would go completely over her sister's head, "Why?"

"Sure, it's answered," Katie told her, with all the authority of the young who think they know everything.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Katie nodded, then placed one warm little hand over her own. Her face, entirely serious, levelled with her as she echoed, "You'll understand when you're older."

Amy looked at the walking innocence that was her little sister and pulled her into a hug. Katie squirmed a little, unused to such an outpouring of affect from her big sis, but Amy persisted. She hugged her sister, and in some small way she knew, she was hugging herself.

"Mushy," Katie squirmed.

"I know," Amy agreed.

Still, she wasn't ready to let go just yet.

* * *

"Sam!"

She heard him calling from behind her, as she made her way to the school gates. She didn't respond immediately, her insides still churning in that way that only someone getting under your skin could do. She loved the boy, but last night he'd crossed a line and her defences remained heavily up.

"Sam, please talk to me."

She felt the pang, deep and down dark, so she turned. But she was not yet ready to relent. He had gone too far. So, she let him know her feelings, through the cock of her head and the cross of her arms as she turned to face him, coming up the steps behind her. He stopped when she did, and she resolved herself inside when she saw his look so raw and genuine. And bloody puppy-dog like.

"I'm not sure there's anything to talk about," she summarised.

"I love you and you know that," he told her.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she snapped, hating the way he'd said such a beautiful thing, as if that made everything okay.

"That every day I wake up and my heart beats for you," he told her. His eyes, big and round and beautiful were incredibly earnest, she could almost forgive the bad high school poetry-ness to his words. "Maybe I'm not ready for that kind of love, but it's here. I have it. I love you. And nothing I can do can take that back. You think I'm jealous or overprotective, but it's not as simple as that."

"I think it is," she reiterated, feeling the urge to turn and walk away from him.

"This is not about possessiveness," he urged, "This is about me and you. This is about *my* paranoia that there's something out there in the dark that wants to take you away from me. That wants to destroy what we have. And because I feel it so strong, I don't want that to happen."

She looked at him for a long moment, tired and burdened and...well, shit, sad.

"I know what you mean," she admitted. She uncrossed her arms and shrugged, "It may sound sappy, but if anything happened to you, I would worry. I would fight to the death...or at the very least to a mild bruise...if anyone tried to hurt you. And I'm glad you feel the same way." She sighed, shaking her head, "But like you say it's not as simple as that. This is about *trust*, and the way you were treating me...you were saying you didn't trust me."

"I love you," he repeated, but she shook her head.

"Not the same thing," she countered, "Do you *trust* me?"

"I trust you," he said without hesitation.

"Then stop asking questions when I've already given you an answer," she told him.

"If I trust you, you have to trust me, and not lie to me," he said.

"I haven't lied."

"I believe you," he assured, "But that's not true." Her heart caught in her chest for a moment before he added, "You lied to me about my Action Man."

The sweetness with which he smiled that cheeky lopsided grin, and the way in which she felt in the early morning sunshine, led her to scoff and roll her eyes. The tension between them seemed to melt away, even at such a little joke as that. He was, of course, referring to the very first time they ever met.

"Please, we were five," she scalded him

"I loved that Action Man," he joked, as she slipped one hand into his. He gave her a reassuring squeeze, and she realised that perhaps, maybe, just maybe, things may work out for the best.

"Not reading too much into that one," she quipped, before adding with a little evil grin, "It did look funny floating down the river." He feigned a shocked look, to which she grinned a little further, "Reconvene the Nuremberg jury."

He stopped then, the smile going as he regarded her with the kind of look that made her fall in love in the first place. It was open, honest, perhaps a little bit of awe.

"God, I love you," he said, as though the thought was his first and last at the same time.

"Are he and I in competition?" she joked lightly, as she leaned into him and planted one small, soft kiss.

Yes, they were going to be alright, she thought. But even then, and there, she could feel the soft, light vibrations in her school bag. The one which let her know, her phone was ringing.

She would answer it later, when she was alone.

* * *

“That bloody stone,” Mark sighed, “It’s all about that bloody stone.”

He sat adjacent to Ricky, both of them at the table, both of them processing the story in it’s entirety. He’d told it for the first time, in full and to hear it out loud was an amazing adventure – fraught with danger and with a happy ending. And...one glaring omission.

“You were lucky to escape with your life,” Ricky whistled through his teeth as he slouched back into his chair, taking it all in. “Let alone the use of one whole arm.”

Mark smiled to himself and reached out for his coffee with his one good arm. The other, though dulled through painkillers, still throbbed and ached. But it was at a distance, somewhere where the nights ahead would bring it back. Alongside new, fresh nightmares to add to into rotation. And he knew he would not be alone in that, it seemed all of them were bound by nightmares now. Even ones he never wanted to be.

“The thing is powerful,” he reiterated. The words themselves were dark, but the library was filled with sunshine. “It’s dangerous – and whoever made it...they knew people would covet it.”

“Do you think they’re still around?” Ricky wondered out loud, curiosity made his features seem of his age.

“It’s plausible,” he agreed, “But I think more likely they’ve moved on. Forgotten about this place and left only their totem behind. I wouldn’t count on any help from them.”

“And the writings?” Ricky pressed further, “Did you get any closer to who the four factions might be?”

Mark thought for a moment, then shook his head. They had of course discussed the Romans, but they were likely late to the party. The stone had already been well established by the time they came across one another.

“Well, each of the writings seems to reflect different regions of the world,” he explained, choosing his words carefully for his audience. He knew from the last few times Ricky had tried to help him with research even English was sometimes too archaic. Bless. “One side seems almost to

resemble a Tibetan dialect, while another appears more like olde-English. The notable differences are only interesting from a linguistic point of view, nothing that would give us a clue to their origin.”

“So, you’re saying you think this was a global alliance?” Ricky asked and Mark found himself surprised once more by his friend. He’d picked up on that aspect of what he’d described with ease and was probably shrewder than he liked to pretend his grades meant he was, “Not to downplay the importance of our hometown, but why here? What makes this place so special?”

“Perhaps we should call ourselves a Hellmouth,” Mark joked, relishing the taste of the latte and the sweetness of caramel syrup. He didn’t often indulge, but that morning, he would. Ricky picked up his own, a hot chocolate and cradled it for a minute,

“Are you sure they’re the good guys?” he wondered.

“What makes you ask?”

“Well, I don’t take kindly to anyone burning my friends,” Ricky pointed out, “Defence mechanism, or not.”

“I’m sure they thought they were doing the right thing,” he suggested with a shrug, “Protecting a power which in the wrong hands...”

He trailed off, he need not continue. The memories of Satana, the chilling way in which she’d driven her vampyrs towards the stone. They could only speculate what such a being would want with such a power. Or what would be in store for the world. Silence, unsettled and dark, lay over the afternoon made lazily warm by the radiators turned on too early for winter by the school’s caretakers.

“Right, I am going home,” Ricky deciding, breaking their moment of contemplating. “Where hopefully once again the bathroom will not be filled with the sounds of a man dying of a hangover.”

They shared a smile, both of them weary. Ricky through a day of school and the routine of normality that continued, filling in the gaps between the intrusion of the supernatural. Mark, through physical and pain-fuelled exhaustion. He contemplated perhaps even returning home that night early and basking in a warm bath.

Ricky stood, gave his friend a goodbye nod and headed for the door. As he did, the doors opened the other way, and Mark glanced over to see Amy making her way inside. As they passed, he held his breath, but Ricky smiled warmly at her, and headed off, without the single bit of questioning or recognition.

Mark's entire version of events relayed to Ricky that afternoon, had completely neglected any mention of the young Miss Donaldson. Every step had been his alone. Not for glory, but for another purpose. Protection.

Amy frowned, the thought occurring to her as she joined him at the table, hovering at the end of the table beside him as she appeared to consider.

"You didn't tell him?" she asked finally. It did not sound as accusing as he thought it may, so he elected for honesty. A kind of resigned honesty, but one nonetheless.

"No," he admitted, "As far as he knows, the events which happened, did to me alone after you had left."

"I assume for more of a reason than simply getting all the glory?" she joked softly.

"This is dangerous work, Amy."

"I got the memo," she answered, taking the seat previously occupied by his friend as he tried not to meet her gaze. He felt guilty lying to Ricky, and he didn't like making decisions for her. But how could he explain to her the truth? She continued, "Look, you, Sara and Ricky have been through hell already. I'm sure you go through it every day. You..." As she found the words, he could see her struggling still to believe them, "...fight evil...which I think is a very bad thing that needs to be fought." She managed to draw his gaze, "I want to help."

He took a sip from his coffee, to allow himself a further moment to collect and decide how to articulate his thoughts.

"What's going on here, Mark?" she questioned. "You can use my help, you have so far."

"I can't Amy," he responded, "If you tell Ricky and Sara you know, they'll be all up for you helping. But I can't bring you into this life...I just can't."

“But why?” she began to protest, “I want to.”

“No!” he brought down his fist on the table, though he hadn’t meant to. It was then he felt the sting of tears in his eyes, the shock at himself and the sudden burst of emotion that ripped through him. He couldn’t articulate it, he the sodding Librarian and scholar could not find the words. But he had to try – as she looked at him in sweetness and innocence he had to try. “I’ve seen things, Amy. I’ve seen horrors that take a piece of you and throw it into the hell fire. And the more it happens, the more you fight, the more pain and corruption happens to you. The more it destroys you.”

He looked away, unable to take those beautiful, sweet eyes anymore, and continued softly,

“There should be something good, something pure, left in this world. If *you* got hurt, because of me. If your soul was destroyed, because I brought you into this life. I could never forgive myself.”

“Mark.” It was almost a whisper.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I could use some time alone,” he told her, curtly. “The arm is stinging.”

Reluctantly, he could see, she nodded and stood, preparing to head back out and give him the solitude he’d asked for. But something gave her pause, she half turned, and regarded him,

“Just one thing.”

With pain, he turned his gaze back to her,

“What happened to the work on my laptop?” she asked him, “Is there a way to get it back?”

“I don’t have it,” he admitted, “I never touched your laptop.”

“But if you wanted to keep me from finding out the truth...” she began, but he reiterated,

“I honestly didn’t touch your laptop.”

Perhaps it was something she saw in his face, but she seemed to believe him. Of course, that led to one thought that worried them both,

“Then who did?”

* * *

It hadn't been easy, but Amy's files had not disappeared into some dark and devious corner of the graveyard of data. It had been good work, true. Accidents happened all the time, especially when dealing with the darker and more dangerous side of life and the town. But they did not get deleted, not permanently. They had simply been...moved.

The files now existed upon a new hard drive, having been transferred onto a USB. The images, the scans and the readings she'd taken up until a certain period of time, were all still intact and flashed across a new computer screen – a fresh and brand new one, in a fresh and brand new office, refurbished to perfection.

They were important pieces of information, and information was indeed truly power. They glowed, as much from the natural blue-light screen of technology, as from their intellectual and supernatural power. The scientific mundane explaining the profane and arcane. It never failed to amuse the one glancing over the files that evening.

Of course, she had absolutely no idea what they meant, that was not her role. Collect, observe, consider. But understanding, interpreting, that was meant for others. Yes, information was power, but sometimes having it, even if you didn't have to understand it, was good enough. And she needed all the power she could get.

She reached out, with one swift move of the mouse closing down the file and unplugging the drive from it's slot. She slipped it into her purse, clicked off her computer screen, and allowed her office to return to it's soft and inviting darkness.

Then, Miss Drake, thinking deep and unknown thoughts to herself, picked up her purse and went home for the night. There would always be more time to contemplate the meaning of what she had retrieved.

She was, after all, in it for the long game.