

'til the End of the World

Year One

Story Five

New in Town

Opening

October 2005

Heroes walked and breathed. They lived and died. Brushed their teeth, cried at stories, bled and sinned. All heroes, from beginning to end. Whether cut down in battle, or giving up the ghost of old age. It was the way of things.

Claire was not a hero. But she was as much a human as any of them. She walked and breathed. She lived and one day – perhaps soon – she would die. In this they were the same. But she was not one of them, she was something else. She was a hunter.

Her age felt now only camouflage as she stood among the throngs of party goers, drinking their drinks and straining to hear and be heard over babbling conversations and thumping baseline. The bar was full, it was Friday night, after all. Everyone was letting their hair down, losing themselves desperately in the nightlife. Once upon a time she was one of them. Or would have been, had her path not moved before her.

Perhaps in another life, the version of her that slipped through the crowd – missing a hand gesture here and whispering a drip of an apology into the collective stream of consciousness there – perhaps she would be a part of the ecosystem. Seventeen, hair loose not tied up, maybe some makeup. Bad shoes, moving to catch up with friends, parents waiting for her at home.

As she reached the edge of the mezzanine floor, her hand reached out to steady herself against the railing. That girl, if she had ever even had a chance of existing in the first place, had died three years earlier. She was as lost to the past as the Claire of now was lost to the future. In dwelling there lay only bad things.

She turned her attention back towards the club, Clarus – the only real nightlife for anyone under thirty in town. A permanent testament to underage drinking violations, tolerated only so long as society's 'let kids be kids' attitudes held firm. As a result, it was packed, bodies moving almost as one in the thin fake fog, and tricoloured roving lights. Something played over the speakers she didn't recognise – and why would she? Her knowledge of popular hits ended with the release of *8 mile*.

But they would know. The four of them. Well, three, for one remained back at the Library. The ones she had been watching. The ones who would be heroes. They gathered on the floor below, laughing and joking as if they too were camouflaged against this backdrop of normal teen life. But only for them, it wasn't. This was who they were – heroes that worked against the darkness, and yet somehow remained themselves teens.

How did they do it? And why, despite her best efforts to remain distant, did she feel herself drawn to them? Why was it, when she should have moved on, continued her hunt, did she instead wander back into the club to watch like a stranger in the shadows 'kids being kids'?

Amy, newest recruit, refusing the WKD offered and sticking with coke. Sara, a chaotic force of heart, rolling her eyes and having it herself instead. Ricky, momentarily unburdened, plonking a little umbrella into Amy's glass, giving it a twirl. Somewhere, off in the library, Mark the scholar, reading a book as curls of steam played over his mug.

Heroes. Good guys.

They were part of a war being waged in the night. Fighting battles against terrible villains. Against a darkness the rest of the world knew nothing about.

Their deeds would go unheard, their names unknown. If history ever remembered them, they would not be around to know.

As she turned away from the light and laughter and love in front of her, remnants of another life, Claire couldn't help but muse on the sorrow of that. For if history forgot about them, if that chiselled stone on which heroes' stories were carved missed theirs, it could miss more. Their rises, their triumphs, and the opposite. It would miss their falls. Their maddening descents.

Down into the darkness.

* * *

The rain lashed ferociously at the town. Thick, angry clouds had blocked out all moonlight, rumbling thunder aggressively at all those unlucky enough – or perhaps foolish enough – to venture out. It beat, smacked against the rooftops. It gathered in gutters and charged mercilessly across stone and tarmac – hunting for its way ever downward.

It was not the only ferocious monster that night. Not by a longshot.

A couple could be seen, down a darkened side street. A ginnel of stone between two businesses closed for the night. A quick glance by a passing stranger may elicit only a tut, before readjusting their hood against the raging of the elements. People will embrace one another in all manner of inappropriate circumstances.

Moving closer, the flicker of unease would grow. The man's hands, so pale, grip too tight against the other man's arms. In fact, the hands that clawed into the other may be clenched in ecstatic pleasure, but the other's are limp. The small shakes of pleasure are the dangling limbs of a victim, pressed against the stone wall, legs unable anymore to bear their own weight.

The head lolled to one side, revealing the other more powerful figure entranced in the puppet man's neck. Lips of blue eyes half closed, and lips parted in pained sighs. Raindrops assault his face, catching in his eyelashes, lapping against his lips. A heartbeat slowed.

Lightning flashed across the sky as the dark figure whipped his head back. Thick, powerful fangs – those of the vampyr – addressed the storm with a primal roar. Blood, red and glistening,

dribbled down it's chin and the victim's gaping wound, mingling with the pure taste of the heavens above.

Blood haze descended, thick veins throbbed in the crow's feet of it's face, dark and freshly transfused. His eyes, pure black, dark pools of inky nothingness, saw nothing but the blood. The being, a monster unlike any other, roared into the sky as though challenging the storm itself to a duel.

To the death.

'til the End of the World

Episode 5 – New in Town

Starring:

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

Act I

Three Years Ago

October 2002

Smoke curled around her face, stinging her eyes as Kandi – in no way her real name – fished in her purse for her compact. She needed to check her lipstick, before returning back to the main street. It was always much busier around Halloween. Who knew in her line of work she'd become such a hopeless goth romantic? Ah, there it was, under the rest of the pack of cigarettes.

She stubbed her fag end out on the brick wall of the takeaway next to her – well, the backdoor anyway, as with her other hand she snatched the mirror and brought it out to have a check. Okay, so she'd done, the lighting wasn't exactly the brightest, she mused. Her eyes flickered – caught by something in the mirror. A flash.

Just a second. Like red, then another, the colour of pale parchment.

She clamped the lid and began to turn as the scattered pieces of trash began to skitter down the alleyway behind her. The wind, rising, ruffled the fur lining of her leopard print mid-coat as she saw behind her the world beginning to shimmer.

The flashes continued, little repeated sparks of reds and browns and dust, as the air began to ripple. For a second, the view down to the main street and light beyond bent and moved like water. The howling localised wind and lightning, the vortex and storm, suddenly filled with blackness.

Strange shadows moved in the darkness beyond, as Kandi crushed her ears under both hands. The screams, oh God, the terrible inhuman shrieks. Things barely human in unspeakable pain. Grunts of anger. A smell of burning, cloying at her nose. The sweet underneath like bacon. She retched, realising what that meant in a cataclysmic lurch of horror.

Then, it birthed. In one shuddering expulsion of fetid stench, a screaming feral being slid out of it. It looked like a man, naked and trembling, slick with afterbirth. Behind it, deep within the store in the air something shrieked in horrible fury. A deep, angry, frustrated cry. Then it was gone, the whole air behind its birth knitting back together until all that remained was the memory – and of course her street still waiting for her beyond.

She took a moment, covering her mouth and nose with her hand to guard against the lingering smell of that place. The thing, a grown man, was twisting and moving on the ground as though learning to walk, even though he must have been in his thirties. Over muscles and sinew of a grown adult, there were markings and wounds and cuts that criss-crossed all available skin. Over which, hard to distinguish from his own hanging flesh, lay blood and clumps of tissue – some in gangrenous colours she hardly recognised.

As she watched, horrified, sores and open wounds began to knit themselves back together. Flesh sought flash, grasping to close.

“What are you?” she whispered, gagging.

“Hungry,” growled vocal chords, ragged and hoarse.

The thing moved with incredible, horrifying speed, as the last thing Kandi saw among the gore was bright white teeth sharpening into fangs. And two dark black pools where eyes should have been.

It was mercifully quick.

* * *

Amy shoved her hands down deep into her pockets as best she could. The wind had taken a seasonable but unreasonable turn back towards British winter, and the horrible rain hadn't abated all weekend, making the ground slick beneath her pumps as she and Sara navigated their way to school. Her 'winter-coat' was as Michelin-man like as her mother could make it, and as such attempting to do anything but waddle like a toddler in a harness wasn't easy.

She would of course leave the fashionable catwalking to Sara, who decided not to put anything waterproof over her blazer and simply decided to hope instead the rain would not return again in the ten minute walk to school. She obviously didn't want polyester to meet cotton anymore than it had to.

"That was totally fun Friday, right?" Sara commented from beside her, "You really got down with your bad self."

"I know, eleven o'clock came around and I didn't even bat an eye," she dryly returned, with more than a little self-depreciation for good measure. The invitation had been honest and true, and Amy found herself deciding studying for the extension award in Biology could skip one night.

"Please tell me you're mocking there?" Sara begged of her friend, as if the idea of a parent-set curfew was akin to an Orwellian nightmare. "I fear the alternative."

"I'm not as square as you think, y'know," she pointed out.

"Hell, after putting Ricky and Mark in their place last week, I'm willing to agree with that assessment," Sara relented, as they turned the corner and began to head down the final stretch

towards school. Already, the pavements were becoming more crowded, so she lowered her voice a little, "But not willing to endorse the use of the word 'square'."

"It's an important word."

"For the people who make teacher's glasses maybe."

Amy did her best to roll her eyes as her friend but ended up sneezing when a piece of her fluffy hood went up her nose. It didn't matter, they'd reached the wrought iron school gates and prepared to slip inside anyway, passing by the throngs of people milling about the front in an effort to delay the inevitable moment they would have to go in to form time.

"Anyway, I notice we had a total lack of the tall, dark piece of cardboard you've taken to," Sara continued, as they headed towards the slickened steps. "He throw a sickie?"

"He said he had something better to do," she supplied.

"Stick a needle in his eye and drink boiling acid?" Sara offered.

"Worse, a latte."

"I didn't even think he knew that word."

At the top of the steps, flanked by two overdone stone statues of lions – the likes of which likely had not been seen in Calendar since the days of Pangea and were just another mystery – they turned and looked at one another. People passed by them, but the bell had yet to ring and everyone was too busy debating who was going to win that season of *Big Brother* to notice them. Now there was the Orwellian nightmare Sara should really have been concerned with.

"So, we get our first superhero-fighting-team-related meeting today, you all excited?" Sara asked her, "Maybe they'll do you a cake or something." A wistful look crossed her face, the kind that meant she was attempting to appear older and wiser than her fifteen years, "Looking forward to fighting the good fight? If you want my advice..."

"Sara, you have been fighting the forces of darkness... or more accurately fleeing from the forces of darkness...a week longer than I have," she pointed out, keeping her voice lower than the

surrounding goons could hear, “Just because you chopped off some vampyr freak’s head with a shovel and snogged a demon...”

“I thought we weren’t going to mention that.”

“You shoved me, I have rights,” she corrected, “Such as calling you a tramp.”

“Well, you’re in love with a piece of All-Bran,” Sara bristled as she attempted a come back.

“My arguments are so much more sophisticated,” she pointed out, “Like slapper, that’s always a good one.”

“You kiss your laptop with this mouth?”

Amy smiled at her friend, enjoying a momentary upper hand and turned on her heel towards the double doors. Sara, finding herself unsure and on the back foot with her friend’s joshing, even if it was good nature, rushed to catch up.

“Slag, harpy, tart, nibbler... I’ll let you use your imagination with that one...”

“Who are you today?” was all Sara could manage. As they got in out of the slight drizzle that had begun, and Sara swept the accumulating drops off her darkening blazer, they fell back into step, side by side along the linoleum corridor. She sighed, obviously relenting, “I suppose I should apologise.”

“For shoving me into a wall?” Amy pointed out, as sweet as a lemon. She shrugged, “A little bit of grovelling couldn’t go amiss.”

“No offense, but you’re child’s play compared to Sam,” Sara reminded her. Sara’s other friend, the queen bee of Calendar High School, was indeed not someone to be trifled with. Granted, Amy knew she could easily delete her coursework off the system if she needed to, remotely – and given the way Sam spoke to her sometimes – free of guilt. Sometimes with great power and all that. Sara continued, “Missing her birthday party and being little miss bitch after a night out? She’ll want my guts for garters that she can refrigerate until such things come back into fashion.” She frowned, deciding to clarify herself, “Garters, not decorative intestines.”

“Bribes,” she offered in way of help, “She likes bribes. And from what I can tell, not money, something else... I’m thinking something money can’t buy.”

“Love?” Sara wrinkled her nose.

“Compliments.”

* * *

Okay, so maybe third period History wasn’t the place to attempt a reconciliation, but she was at the back of the classroom and was so over World War II, she had to give it a go. Sara had been mulling it over since her talk with Amy – and what she had said was true. While she felt absolutely awful about shoving Amy, at least she could be honest with her now about why. She knew about the supernatural world, about the demon which psychically manipulated her into hurting her friends. Amy could forgive her because she could understand.

But Sam? To Sam, her other best friend (well, girl best friend, she was having lots of friends these days...), the supernatural was simply something on TV. So, she had simply had several weeks of being a bitch to her. Not kidnapped. Not fighting vamps. Not demonically influenced. Just a standard B-I-T-C-H.

“God, you’re looking pretty today,” Sara opened with, leaning across the row to try to get Sam’s attention next to her. “And the smell!”

Her friend turned to her, her long black hair falling over her shoulders as she regarded her coolly with her ice-like stare. She realised when she heard it out loud how it sounded, so quickly backpeddled,

“Is nice...” she clarified. “You smell nice is what I meant to say.”

Sam’s look deepened, shifting into a full frown. Luckily all of this continued to go unnoticed as the shrieking voice of Miss Taylor, their Liverpudlian Hitler-expert who never met a foghorn that

could outdo her, continued to reel off their list of reading and homework questions for the week. She narrowed her eyes.

“Are you coming onto me?”

“What?” Sara felt herself confused. “No.”

“You are!” Sam continued, her mouth opening wide in shock, “Oh, and to think I went shopping with a lez.”

“Would you please hold back the bile for a moment?”

“In the changing rooms and everything...”

“Sam, I’m trying to apologise.”

“Look, it’s not your fault, y’know,” Sam continued, ignoring her completely, and now staring wistfully into the space where people seemed like they were remembering things, “It makes sense, y’know? Who would get rejected by a dweeb like Ricky after fifty billion times and not decide to cross the aisle? You don’t need to apologise to me, but honestly, like, live your truth...”

“Sam...”

Sara reached out, touching Sam’s shoulder, but her friend’s face turned to one more of shock. It was at this point that the mask slipped, and Sara saw exactly what her friend was doing.

“You’re getting back at me, aren’t you?”

Sam’s look of shock instantly shifted like an etch-a-sketch, into an evil smirk.

“Look how easy...”

Sara felt her face flush with embarrassment at how easily Sam had been able to wind her up but underneath lay the understanding that she probably deserved more than a little mockery. Even if there were many, many demonic reasons behind her behaviour, she had still let her friend down a few times. But before Miss Taylor could tell them off, something went off even shriller than her – the bell signalling the end of lessons. Her authority collapsed almost immediately as everyone began to pack up and shuffle out, while she shrieked at them the last few pages in a desperate attempt to keep her footing.

“Firstly, Sara, you should know I would never use the lesbian thing against you,” Sam pointed out as she began to slip her things into her bag. How she managed to make a school backpack look like it was made by Gucci, Sara would likely never know. “Did you forget about my Aunts who run the wicker store in Hebden Bridge? And second, let’s be clear, you got felt up and dumped. It happens to everyone once in a while. Makes a girl crazy. You’ve got a get out of jail free card for that.”

Sara had to admit surprise at her friend, and how magnanimous she was being. She was sure she was in for far more ribbing than she’d received.

“And the missing of your birthday party?” she asked, hoping it would be much of the same.

“Oh, you will be tortured,” Sam confirmed.

As she shifted the last of her notepad, Sara noticed that she was also packing up a newspaper. The local one, by the looks of it, but something caught her eye above the fold.

“Hey, can I have that?” she asked. Without waiting for an answer, she snatched it from her, as Sam regarded her friend with a confused look on her face,

“I’m threatening torture and you want my newspaper?” Sam asked. Sara, who was too busy unfolding the front and scanning the article which had grabbed her attention, was barely paying attention to her anymore. “Hey, can I have that back? It has a discount voucher for Next.”

That cut through the momentary distracted, as Sara frowned at her and repeated,

“‘Discount’?”

Well, now she’d heard everything, she would have never thought she’d heard that word out of Sam’s mouth, like ever.

“What are you so interested in anyway?”

“I’ve got to run.”

Sara finished jamming everything else into her bag as fast as she could, pretty sure she was squashing the remains of her packed lunch into oblivion, but too distracted to care. Something had caught her attention in the headline, something which she wanted to get onto right away. And since it was lunchtime, she knew precisely where she needed to go.

The Library.

“Uh, voucher?” Sam called after her, as Sara left the classroom with the paper tucked under her arm. She didn’t even catch as Sam sighed to herself, “What a bitch.”

* * *

The peaceful oasis of the Library was punctuated by unusual sounds coming from the office, as Ricky sat tried to concentrate on the pages in front of him. He slouched in his chair, knowing full well Mark would correct him and tell him to sit up when he eventually came out of his hobbit hole of academia. But for now, if he wanted to slouch, he would damn well slouch.

Despite himself, when the door opened, he did straighten up a little – and smiled warmly as Amy joined him. She came carrying books, only these a heck of a lot thicker than the ones he had in his locker or even the one in his hands which he was attempting to read. Well, flick through and look at the pictures. She smiled back, her look clouding a little as she sat at the grand oak table opposite him and frowned as she took in the muttering noises from beyond the office door.

She nodded in his direction,

“Is he okay?”

“Oh, there was supposedly a murder Friday night,” he explained, finding the resigned tone remarkably familiar already.

“Really?”

“Well, a body was found,” Ricky corrected himself, “We’re trying to find out cause of death now. Meaning Mark is trying to find out cause of death, while I do my homework reading.”

Amy lowered her eyes to take in the title of his book and raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t do a class in East African Drumming,” she pointed out.

“I’m branching out.” She nodded.

“Zoo or Nuts?”

"FHM," he admitted, deciding to relent and slip the glossy magazine out of the book he'd been using as camouflage and slip it back into his school bag. He just had to remember to shove it under his bed after getting home to avoid Rob coming across it. And probably nicking it for himself. Perv.

Amy simply rolled her eyes and smiled, then set about getting her laptop out and setting herself up for a bit of lunchtime work. He decided to fish inside his bag for the remains of his lunch – he was certain he'd left a crisp or two, possibly even a yoghurt somewhere down deep in the briny depths.

The door clattered open once more, this time as a breath of wild air inhaled itself into the room. Sara, looking wild eyed and out of breath, arrived with a grin on her eyes and eyes lit up.

"You guys are not going to believe this!" she declared. Nay, challenged.

"What now?"

"A body was found Friday night!" she explained.

"Mark's on it already," he pointed out.

"Yeah, but apparently it got up and walked out of the morgue!" she exclaimed, producing like a magician's rabbit, a newspaper from under her arm. Despite the slight smushing from being held, the headline still proudly declared into the radiator-warm air of the Library "THE WALKING DEAD!!".

The Calendar Free Press may have been a small-circulation newspaper, but it more than made up for it in hyperbole.

"That's not usual," Amy commented.

"Apparently, it was this guy found in an alleyway in the middle of the night," Sara continued, coming over to the table and seating herself next to Amy as she excitedly recounted what she'd read. Ricky found himself wondering if she was the same way about celebrity gossip or whether Sara was simply excited to finally have something supernatural that wasn't attempting to get her to kill all her friends for a change. She continued, "After he was taken back, the coroner noticed that her entire

eyeball was black. But before they could begin the autopsy, the body disappeared – the security cameras showed her walking out of the morgue.”

“Black eyes?” he frowned, reaching out a hand for her to pass him the newspaper for him to see for himself. It turned out she was right, the newspaper did indeed say a dead man with ‘neck rupture’ and black eyes had decided the morgue wasn’t the place for an afterlife.

“I know, that’s what grabbed my attention,” Sara agreed, sitting back triumphantly in her seat as Amy frowned at her.

“Could it be a vampyr?”

Remembering that of the three of them Amy was the only one not to have seen a vampyr up close and in the flesh, quickly explained,

“Their eyes are red.”

“Could it be a different kind of vampyr, maybe?” Sara suggested, adding with a shrug, “Goth or emo vampyr cult, for example.”

“The mere notion of you mentioning that means you need to put down the Anne Rice,” Mark snarked as he finally emerged from his office, “and pick up... well, nearly anything else.”

“Mark,” Sara greeted, her smile as fake as her words conveyed, “charming to the last.”

“Indeed,” Mark dismissed, before explaining, “I overheard your conversation.”

“We broke through your research?” Ricky asked, “Very self-contained research, I might add.”

“It’s only called research if you’re aware that a search engine can look for things outside of ‘busty babes,’” Amy pointed out, more to mock him than Mark, Ricky was fairly certain. It wasn’t his fault the way his taste in magazines lay. He wasn’t interested in Kerrang. Mark, however, well Ricky wasn’t even sure he understood girls were girls and probably saw sex as a form of binary fission.

“Mark and search engines?” Sara frowned, “I see a bottle of whisky and a smashed computer screen in the future.”

“Veering slightly away from topic now,” Mark pointed out.

Though this was now amounting to their very first team meeting, Ricky already began to see the way it was going to go. Mark, dour, Sara, mocking, Amy, well-meaning but a little confused, and he – wondering what he could punch. Already it felt like a rhythm. And Ricky had to admit, despite many of his doubts, something about it felt right. Bonkers, but right.

“Dead man walking, we got the topic,” Sara batted back to him. “So, let me guess. Zombies, possible new type of vampyr, or even ghoul are all suspects. Maybe a few more obscure demons or whatever have the capability to reanimate the dead, but in order to figure out whatever is putting the spring in Lazarus’ step, we’re gonna need more clues. That about sum it up?”

Despite himself, Mark had to shrug in agreement.

“Maybe she was knock, knock, knockin’ on heaven’s door but got turned back by the bouncers,” Amy joked. The other three looked at her in unison, as Amy’s cheeks flushed red and she sheepishly sank a little in her seat. Sara reached out one hand and gave her one little, patronizing pat on the head.

Yep, bonkers.

But somehow right.

* * *

Thwack

Why was it only ever the shuttlecock that made that sound? Tennis balls thumped, cricket balls smacked, but it was the shuttlecock, swatted like a bothersome fly, which seemed destined to thwack. And yet thwack was a sound built for speed – and after a two foot burst back towards the net – the shuttlecock instead gently floated to the ground like a feather.

Thwack

Of course, until his badminton partner decided to whack it back to him and send him running backwards, looking up and trying to pick out the tiny white thing as it began paratroopering down to

his side. Justin always did that, always whacked it up into the ceiling as if he would become blinded by the lights.

“Can we please talk about something else?” Justin asked him, as he waited for his sparring partner to return the serve.

“I’m just saying...” Luke began to answer him, but then it was there – just floating down in his vision between the tops of the massive net curtains tied back in the huge gymnasium and the huge clock on the wall showing they had only a few minutes left before they’d be called back to the changing rooms. He hit it as hard as he could – see how Justin liked it for a change.

Thwack

This time, Justin missed catching it, and found himself stumbling off to one side, grunting in frustration. When trying to swing, he instead managed to backhand it back across the gymnasium – and had to trot over to pick it up.

“Come on, you have the hottest girl in school,” Justin reminded him, resuming their conversation as she returned shuttlecock in hand. “You’ve seen things on the hottest girl in school most of us can only dream about...”

“Okay, please stop objectifying my girlfriend into a sex object,” Luke asked, “It makes me uncomfortable.”

“And yet while the rest of us are dreaming,” Justin continued as if his friend hadn’t said anything, “You’re constantly complaining that she’s secretive.”

He threw a look over to the coach, who was carefully studying something in his nails and paying absolutely no attention to anyone in the class. If he didn’t call it soon, Luke feared he would have to continue to suffer through his friend’s advice well into fifth period and beyond. Perhaps he would never escape and found himself once more saddened by his regrettable decision to confide his concerns to his friend.

“She’s more than secretive,” he corrected him. “She’s outright hiding things from me.”

“You are aware that’s the definition of secretive?” Justin frowned, “Like, it’s not a secret if everybody knows. Then it’s a fact. Or even a statement.”

“Have you ever been in love?” he asked.

Thwack

“Does Britney count?”

Since he was fairly certain his friend was meaning Spears not any girl he’d ever dated, he was sure it didn’t.

“So, you’ve never been in love,” he clarified. “Trust me, when you feel this way. When the one you love is lying to you, however small you think it is, it hurts. Like, more than you can stand.”

Thwack

“You know I do love that colour on you,” Justin pointed out, dryly, “It really brings out your superiority complex. Ooft, bugger.”

“Serve.” Luke rolled his eyes.

“Look, you want to find out what she’s doing, where she’s going when she’s not around...follow her,” Justin told him, with a shrug.

“Seriously, just serve.”

“You’ll feel better.”

“Just let me dust off my trench coat and dark glasses,” he threw back, sarcastic to the end.

Justin smiled and did as he was instructed. He served.

The not-soft end of the shuttlecock gave one final *thwack* between Luke’s eyes, as he glared at his friend. His self-satisfied, smiling friend, who had given him the worst advice he’d ever had. The teacher’s whistle wailed and Luke found himself pushing all thoughts of Sam aside.

It would, as ever, not last long.

* * *

Amy's nerves crept into her chest as she walked along the corridor. She didn't know why she should be feeling it yet, but it was there. Calendar Memorial Hospital was a place where people came and went all the time. The town may have been small, but the hospital did serve some of the other surrounding towns as well, meaning there were always people milling about. She, Sara and Ricky made their way along the corridor smelling faintly of disinfectant as she played over in her head what she would say if someone, anyone, asked them what they were doing.

Though, one thing she didn't know at that young age – because both of her parents were liberals – was that the NHS wasn't exactly well known for diligence. Already, the staff were more interested in getting their job done, then questioning three teenagers sneaking into the morgue in the middle of the night.

She gulped, as they stopped in front of the large peach coloured double-doors that signified entry into that most unusual of places. The one she'd seen on TV but never actually thought she'd have to go into during her lifetime.

"What happens if we get caught?" she asked her companions. Ricky was glancing back down the corridor to see if there was anyone about, while Sara was shielding her eyes against the fluorescent tube above and trying to peer into the dimness of the room beyond, was the one to answer.

"We become the equivalent value of a pack of fags."

Amy glared at her friend – the one who now was seeming way too comfortable with all this supernatural cloak-and-dagger behaviour for her liking. She didn't even seem nervous at all as she turned back to the two of them.

"Are we sure this isn't just the ice-cream fridge?" Sara joked, before putting on a jokey spooky voice, "Today's flavour: human flesh."

The coast was clear, so Amy moved past her friend, who was very likely irritating to hide her true nervousness, and instead stepped into the chilly but dimly lit morgue beyond. Before the doors swung back, Ricky and Sara slipped in quietly behind her. She didn't have to worry about them being

seen, at least not by the cameras which she'd put on a little loop – but as she peered around, part of her kept her thinking someone would emerge from the shadows. Maybe from some small little office, hidden from view and lit only by a dim desk lamp. Something. But no, the morgue seemed...for lack of a better word...dead.

There were two tables in front of them. *Autopsy tables*, her mind reminded her, as she realised they were metal ones unusually high and with weird holes she began to realise were drains. The bulbs hanging above them were switched off, only the slightly cold blue light of the emergency exit to their right was illuminating anything.

“Shouldn't there be one of those worker people here?” she wondered out loud, but Ricky shook his head.

“The security guard makes sweeps every half-hour as of nine o'clock,” he confirmed, “The coroner goes home by seven, so unless a call comes in of a sudden death, it's pretty quiet. So, since it's now five past nine, as long as we're in and out in twenty-five minutes and no one dies, we'll be okay.”

“Generally, a lack of death is considered okay,” Sara corrected him, before shuddering, “In the non-sub-zero world, that is.”

She was right, the room itself was unnaturally cold. Wasn't quite a freezer, in fact other than the tiled floor and the metal tables, the room was basically like any other. A desk over to the side near some cupboards, a large metal door heading off to a different section – and around the corner in the dimness she thought she spied what looked like an office.

“I was expecting bodies,” Sara pointed out.

“They'll be in the next door, in the crypt,” Ricky pointed to the large metal door to their left, “The higher the number on the drawer, the more recent the body. Resets at the start of each month.”

Amy joined Sara in giving Ricky a look, one which said they weren't entirely comfortable with his overfamiliarity with their environment.

"I have never been here before," he protested, weakly, before looking distractedly into the corner, "Oh, look, an office."

He swiftly walked off into the darkness, she heard the click of a desk lamp and heard shuffling as he began to mess about on the desk. She sighed, realising there was very little other reason to delay the inevitable next step – and she as the scientific whizz kid was given the very unseemly task of checking out their corpse.

Who's idea was this anyway? Oh, yeah, hers.

She sighed, and with a resigned smile, held her lunchbox of borrowed instruments – including her magnifying glass and latex gloves – and allowed the happy face of Scooby Doo to goofily grin at Sara.

"I guess I'll check for recent corpses."

As she wandered off, she heard Sara mutter behind her,

"Trapped in a morgue with creepy people."

She wasn't creepy. But considering Sara didn't know her biological arse from her elbow and Ricky had already admitted he only knew how to hit things, she was going to have to be the brains of the operation. With a quiet breath, she slipped through the metal door and into the even chillier 'crypt'.

It was named adequately, she could tell as soon she slipped inside. This was the room with the drawers – the rectangular, seemingly too small, wall-mounted doors signifying behind each one there lay the last remains of a human body. The clinically detached part of her knew this was a simple inevitability of life, but it didn't make it any easier to feel the chill creeping into her bones. This wasn't just a place where they held people, it was a place of inevitability.

She brushed it off, reminding herself of the task at hand and began to move along the rows. Some had blank cards, some had none – and the ones with writing simply had numbers and dates. She ran along until she found the one for last Friday and stood for a moment, steeling herself. She reached out for the handle, felt the slick, cold beneath her fingers, and pulled.

To inevitability.

* * *

Mark rubbed at the bridge of his nose in the place where he would have imagined some day glasses would have rubbed. He felt like he would be needing them some day, after all, though after hours of reading incredibly tiny handwriting in dead languages, anyone would feel ready to close their eyes for a bit.

He, however, was more intent on figuring out the mystery – and so sat forward in his chair and reached for his cup. But as he opened his eyes into the soft light of his office desk lamp, and his fingers brushed against the ceramic, he sensed a presence and knew he was not alone. He sensed no hostility, and as he caught the vague outline in the reflection of his window, half-frosted at the bottom, he knew he didn't have anything to fear.

"Little late for a visit," he pointed out.

"Early for some," Claire answered. He turned in his chair, as she moved from where she had been standing in the doorway, and sat down on the tiny two-seater.

"Answer enigmatically if you wish, but would you like a coffee?" he offered, "There's still some poison in the pot."

"Thanks, but I'll pass," she smiled.

Though she was not quite as stand-offish as she had been the first time, they had met, her similarly slipping out of nowhere and back into as quickly, as he knelt in a dingy alleyway searching for a mystical dagger, she was still an enigma to him. He estimated seventeen, given how she appeared, though she dressed older. Likely from somewhere in Lancashire, given the slight trace of an accent, but not one where there was a particularly strong dialect.

Then there were her eyes. Her somewhat haunted eyes. He imagined his would give off a similar vibe, to someone else in the know. Perhaps that was why she had sought him and Ricky out in

the first place. Of course, if finding likeminded souls was her goal, the randomness of her appearances and close-held nature of her information-sharing policies were somewhat inhibitory.

“Then how do *you* stay awake ‘til all hours?” he teased.

“Hope. Fear.”

With her it was hard to tell how much was joking – she was drier than the Atacama at times.

Still, he was glad for an excuse to break from the pages for a little bit, he decided to ask,

“So...how can I help?”

“I’m bored,” she admitted.

“You flatter me.”

“I thought we could compare information from our respective battle fields,” she clarified, with a wry smile.

“So, you aren’t omnipotent?” he pointed out, “Well, we had a lovely run in with an incubus last week.”

“Sounds exciting.” Deadpan and without a hint of surprise.

“Not as much fun as you’d think, actually,” he admitted, “As for this week, you’ve just narrowly missed a trip to the morgue.”

“Anything interesting?”

“Well, apparently Lazarus has been doing guest visits,” he sighed, “Only he’s a little black-eyed and presumably doesn’t speak Aramaic.”

The change was sudden and swift. Her eyes which had a kind of restless boredom in them, suddenly brightened. Her look grew sharp, brow furrowed and she sat up straight. None of the practised relaxation remained, this was a person on alert. He noted it, knowing full well the only clues he would ever get from this young woman would come from observation, rather than elaboration.

“Black eyed?” she repeated, “As in completely black?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, before adding, “I don’t suppose you know anything about it?”

“Have you found where they’re coming from?” she probed further, shifting in her seat more towards the edge, the precursor to standing.

“They?” he reiterated, confused by her pronouns. “No, I don’t think...”

She stood, taking him aback with her abruptness. All of the previous banter, as stilted as it had been, was gone and her entire demeanour became entirely businesslike once more.

“Hold on...” he said, “what happened to sharing information?”

“Don’t call me, I’ll call you,” she told him instead.

Then, like the information she likely had, she was gone. The doors whispered quietly to one another, closing in the main library and he was once more alone with his books and the nighttime. The whole encounter left him feel a little deflated, and a little bewildered. But his initial instinct had been correct, while she was very unlikely to tell them herself what was happening – her sudden departure by itself was another clue.

He just had no idea where within this jigsaw it sat.

* * *

Sara had to admit, she had no idea what she was looking for. She was probably about as useless as a chocolate fireguard in this specific situation, but she also knew she wasn’t about to let her best friends wander into a morgue alone and have all the fun without her. Well, as long as she didn’t have to look at the bodies, it was fun. Otherwise, it would turn into her future therapy session origin story.

She whistled, as her fingers walked over the edges of the folders she was rifling through. The guys at Calendar morgue so needed to upgrade their systems from the ol’ filing-cabinet version of a CD, but even so she could see that there was more than meets the eye. She never before understood why the obituary section of the Calendar Free Press required a whole page.

“There’s just a few deaths, ain’t there?” she commented. Ricky, with his back to her, was going through the documents on the coroner’s desk – but very likely wasn’t finding anything either. Nor did she fully believe he would understand it when he saw it either. He was just as bad at science as she was, and neither one of them were exactly Gil Grissom at the best of times.

“Amy in the crypt?” he asked, distractedly.

“She’ll scream if she needs us,” she shrugged, closing the filing cabinet drawer next to her – she’d barely made it through the Davidsons’ before she’d given up. She turned over to where Ricky was trying the drawers, hoping that the coroner didn’t have some dodgy secrets. “D’ya think we’ll really have to look at the bodies? A little Lee Harvey Oswald action?”

“Hayley Joel Osmand,” he corrected her, still distracted. She tried to peer over what he was looking at, to see the guy had even worse handwriting than Mark. Seriously, how was anyone supposed to tell their natural causes from their violent demonics? She sighed.

“Something interesting?”

“Nah, just a scarily high death rate the last two months,” he pointed out, “All of them odd – one man died of ‘sudden neck rupture’.”

“Gotta love a classic,” she quipped.

“A housewife apparently shot herself in the head...three times.”

“Shows commitment on her part.”

“And an office worker carved PG into his chest, before dying of a heart attack.”

“Well, I too was disappointed by the introduction of 12A,” she finished, before pressing further, “Nothing about Mr Black-Eyed Pea?”

Ricky shook his head but before they could search any further, the two of them were interrupted by a sudden, stifled scream. The kind which could have been made by a fifteen year old nerd. One in the direction of the crypt.

“That means she needs us, right?” he asked, dryly.

He didn't wait for an answer, the two of them bolted for the metal door. Hoping that Amy had put the bodies back away before whatever happened, happened – and also hoping it was just a rat, the two of them burst into the frigid crypt room with speed.

The scene before them was everything she'd feared. A man, really a walking corpse, stood with his bare arse to them – naked as the day he was born (and now reborn), with the toe tag still trailing around on the ground beneath him. He held Amy around the throat with one pale and blue veined hand.

"I've found one," Amy croaked through the man's iron grip. It was then he noticed them, turning his face in their direction. The snarl of bright gleaming white fangs and the dark pools for eyes told them much. Black-eyes for sure. A quick flick of Ricky's wrist, which sent the nearby scalpel flying through the air, soon made him 'black-eye' instead.

The creature roared in anger as the blade dug into the socket – but not deep enough to go into it's brain. It did have the effect of causing the thing to drop Amy, who collapsed to the ground and went to scramble, her lunchbox going skittering across the tiles. Sara rushed over to her, as the focus of it's rage became Ricky.

The two of them grappled, as Amy and Sara shielded one another by the nearby gurney, as Sara added bare naked blue arse to the list of things she never wanted to see. The thing slammed Ricky backwards, banging his back into the half-pulled out drawer on which it'd previously been lain and actively trying to bite his face off.

Ricky, ever the one to think even when not fully on his feet, grappled for anything nearby. Noticing something that looked like a hacksaw, Sara half-crawled over to it and slapped it into his stretched hand – the feral thing barely able to notice the motion in it's blood-haze. It might have saved it's unlife, for the moment the hacksaw-thing was in Ricky's hand, it was over.

Blood, thick, cold and almost coagulated, gurgled out of the throat of the creature, who was unable to roar after it's vocal chords had been cut. It was enough for Ricky to push it back, then drive

forward – business side first – and pushing the thin, sharp metal straight through the creature’s neck.

A few moments later, and scorched tiles and blowing ash were all that remained of the thing.

“Are you alright?” Ricky asked, regaining his composure quicker than either of them.

“I’ll live,” Amy agreed, already beginning to pack her things back up into her lunchbox – although even she probably knew it was time to retire it.

“Okay, is it just me or was that Gothic Emo Vampyr after all?” she pointed out, as she helped Amy, job done, back to her feet.

“Fang marks on his neck and that wasn’t a barbecue fork,” Amy agreed, dusting herself off.

“So, the one thing we ruled out is the one thing we’re looking for,” Ricky summarised, “Bloody brilliant.”

He looked at the room around them – the cold, clean and sterile environment a whirlwind of instruments, scattered metal trays and scorch marks. He looked to his two friends and decided, with no other option, to say,

“Let’s get the hell out of here.”

So, they did.

Act II

The truth of all places is that there are borders. Borderlands, one might say. And Calendar was no different. There were many borders, many borderlands, in many places. Some of these were obvious – where the roar out of town ran out of even the upscale semi-mansions owned by the few footballers from nearby cities, that soon gave way to pure forest. There was the literal divide between North Side and South Side – demarcated by the river.

And there was the borderlands – the short place in between where you were not quite in one world, but also not quite in another.

It was there, not named or given any kind of moniker by locals, through which the confident young woman strode that night. Between the well-lit, and populous main town; and the decrepit, run down and abandoned South Side, there was the in between. The place where the number of thinned out, as did the quality of the characters which frequented it. It was a place where not everywhere was abandoned – even if it appeared so.

It was a place where people would pass through quickly, if they had to pass through at all. And most of them headed for somewhere warmer. Somewhere where posters were not from the ancient past, weather-worn and fading from brickwork. Where cigarette butts went into bins, not stubbed onto the ground between wads of gum and other detritus. Where neon signs advertised their business more than just with a simple 'open'.

Sam walked through that place with confidence. A young woman of sixteen, striding as if she belonged – even dressed as though she did not. And behind her, indeed in trench coat and glasses, was a sixteen year old boy who neither belonged, nor dressed as such. He should never have listened to Justin. Stupid sodding idea.

He ducked into a doorway, hidden in the shadows and pausing his gentle tailing. Hours before she had told him that she was going to her friend Julie's house, which is why they couldn't

meet up that night. That was fine, but it sounded like a lie. And though he hated himself for it, his better nature did not win out.

She'd stayed home, until 10pm, and then slipped from her room with a wave to her folks. He, hiding amongst the shadowy park a hundred yards away and feeling just about like a fool at that point, and just about ready to go home, had decided he would follow. She had walked, down the hill with him following at a safe distance. She walked with purpose.

Perhaps she had been going to Julie's, he'd thought at first. But then she turned right where she should have turned left and her journey took them even further down the hill. Towards the river. Into the borderland.

And there, he cursed himself, as she had nearly turned around. She had nearly seen him. But as he pressed himself into the darkness, he heard the click of her heels resume and she began to put further distance between them. He steadied his breaths, counting to three – and then peered around the corner. She was out of sight, and though he could still hear her steps, he needed to move.

Something barged into him, a large and hulking shape that took his breath away. There was a bony hard protrusion that he soon realised was a shoulder, when he looked up and saw what had shoved him.

"Hey, kid, it's past your bedtime," the thug mocked him. His sunglasses had fallen on his face and skittered loudly across the floor. He was so stunned, he barely had time to catch his breath and turned to see the thug was not alone.

That they were stereotypes was obvious. Both of them shaved heads, one short and thin, the other tall and fat. Maybe in their twenties, though with the pock-marked face from bad childhood acne and the cracked lips of constant smokers, it was hard to tell for sure. Both had dirty, ripped jeans and wore T-shirts from bands Luke had never even heard of. And above all, they looked mean.

"Look, whatever you want, you can have it," he told them, raising his hands to show he didn't have anything on him. He could no longer hear the sound of footsteps, or heels, and realised if he didn't hurry it would all be for nothing. "I just have somewhere I need to be."

“Oh, I could see that,” short-and-thin returned to him, sniffing like his nose was stuffed and would never, ever really clear. “Stalking pretty young things in this part of town is almost a sport. So, what’s say we have a little chat about how things work down here?”

“I don’t really have time,” he snapped, feeling defiance flood into him. But there was a healthy dose of fear – and as tall-and-fat began to move, fear definitely began to win out. Short-and-thin smirked at his companion, who stepped forward and with one big bear like hand grabbed Luke hard by his shoulder.

He tried to step back, to get away, panic rising in him as he realised everything he was doing was not some stupid game. He felt and heard the crunch of his glasses beneath his boots, the cheap crap he’d picked up on holiday in Malaga last year, and saw what was coming next. A fist, the size of a bowling ball, slammed into his stomach with such force it pushed every drop of oxygen out of him. He doubled over, feeling like a hole had been punched straight through his torso, his eyes bulging in pain.

Not content, tall-and-fat continued his assault, as he saw a dirty knee rushing for his face a second before contact. It was warm and flabby, but underneath solid. Stars exploded behind his eyes as he felt the crack in his nose and tasted blood, before finally he was released and thrown like a ragdoll onto the ground.

“Now, you’re gonna give us your wallet, your watch and anything you’ve got on you,” short-and-thin continued, as though they were having a polite conversation. “Then you’re gonna go away, and don’t think about coming back.”

Luke did as instructed, throwing his wallet away from him, as if in some desperate attempt to lure them from him. Not one to be outdone, short-and-thin jabbed hard in the ribs with his grotty trainer, before walking over and picking it up. With that ritual done, so to were they, as they walked off, laughing with each other over whatever thick old jokes thugs laughed about.

Luke lay on his back, groaning in pain and looking up at the stars, thinking to himself what a mess he'd found himself in. His face hurt, his ribs hurt, and more than that, so did his pride. But above him, the stars just kept on shining.

They, it seemed, didn't care.

* * *

As the night dragged on, Mark found himself wondering for once whether or not he should simply give up the ghost and try again in the morning. He felt the tiredness in his bones, down deep – but it was his eyes that hurt the most. And, perhaps, was it also the solitude? He could go home, of course, but to what avail? Things there were still as uptight, waspish and laced with tension as they ever were.

"I'm never doing morgue duty again," he heard the mumble of voices coming from the corridor. Given the janitor did not sound like a teenage girl, he assumed it was Sara. "Check out your own bodies next time."

The three of them entered once more through the double doors, looking a little worse for the wear than he'd seen them before. Ricky's hair was mussed up in a way he didn't think was intentional, was Sara was wearing a face of displeasure. As always Amy just appeared as herself.

"Fruitful?" he enquired from where he stood next to the stacks.

"Definitely," Sara grimaced, "and now I think I'm kinda sterile."

"We kinda know what's going on, I think," Ricky started to explain.

"Well, you're infinitely more in the know than I," he offered, feeling grateful that perhaps his wish was fulfilled, "So, what are we looking at?"

"It's a vampyr!" Amy blurted, almost excitedly from beside him. Ricky couldn't help but shoot her a frown.

"Steal my thunder."

Ricky and Sara made their way over to the table, as Mark came to join them. Both plonked themselves down into seats with a weary sigh, as the clock high above them chimed midnight. Amy and Mark remained standing as Amy mumbled an apology for 'stealing his thunder'. Ricky waved his acceptance.

"Standard run of the mill vampyr?" he enquired, "One of Satana's perhaps? Confused now their leader is dead?"

"Unless they have the vampyr equivalent of the Ebola virus..." Ricky shrugged.

"Or that black blood thing from the X Files..." Sara interjected.

"Or that black blood thing from the X Files," Ricky agreed, "I think the black eyes indicate something else."

"Another cult?" Amy offered, "I mean, who says that vamps *have* to have red eyes? Maybe each type or cult has their own style?"

"Coloured contact lenses?" Sara wondered out loud, "That's gotta be too evil even for most vamps. 'cept maybe Dracula." She shot him a look, "Is he real by the way?"

"Let's jump the shark before we answer that question, shall we?"

While he sighed and placed back the volume in his hands – knowing now it was useless to continue his line of pursuit into black-eyed demons – Sara, thinking she was being sneaky, stuck her tongue out at him when she thought he wasn't looking. He elected to ignore it, instead leaning against the nearby chair and stretching out some of the tension in his spine.

"I think this gives us two potential leads now," he offered, "Firstly, I guess we must continue the research, to find out if there's any reference in the literature to vampyr activity and black-eyes specifically."

"How much does that narrow it down?" Ricky questioned, "Honestly?"

"If we cross-reference, quite a bit. V isn't a small section in the volumes, you're aware," he commented dryly. He hesitated a moment, unsure whether he should mention his other strange visit, but figured he would be in for a penny, "And we also have Claire."

Ricky's ears pricked up the most at that, his look clouding in a way Mark hadn't seen before. He knew Ricky respected her, she was after all the only other person they'd met who'd already known of the forces surrounding mankind. But it was something else, something deeper. Perhaps, as a hunter, Ricky saw something of himself in her. And she did not exactly appear to be projecting a happy future.

"You think she might still have her ear to the ground?" Ricky asked. He nodded, while off Amy's confused look, she contributed,

"Who's Claire?"

"You know I asked the very same question," Ricky pointed out, "Didn't get an answer."

"As far as we can tell, she knows more than we do," Mark explained, "Besides, when I mentioned the black eyes to her tonight, she ran off like the hounds of hell were on her heels." He frowned as he heard it out loud, "Considering that's a real possibility, poor choice of words."

Amy finally took a seat next to Ricky, as Mark realised he would have to put some rally into his own troops – and perhaps those in front of him – if they were indeed in for another all-nighter of research. While not his first rodeo, he didn't know if he had the strength to hold onto the bull alone that night.

"So, who's up for research?" he asked them, clasping his hands together. "I'll put the pot on."

"I would," Ricky began, "But one more night when my bed seems unslept in and Rob will have my head for a lawn ornament. Not a metaphor either, he wants one of those flamingo things."

"And I also would...." Sara agreed, "But I really don't wanna."

Two strikes of three, Mark raised an eyebrow at Amy, who to his surprise, simply smiled a tired but resigned smile and said,

"Assuming Sara will be my alibi, I'm ready to Google."

"She likes you more than a friend," Sara mocked, before wincing in pain as something hit her shin under the desk. Ignoring them completely, Mark enquired if Amy would like a cup of tea and she said that sounded like a wonderful idea.

Rubbing her shin, Sara and Ricky stood and headed for the door, like the two deserters they truly were.

“See you in the morning.”

“We’ll bring the coffee.”

Absolute, bloody, deserters.

* * *

“So, like, if anyone asks? What if the police ask?”

“Why would the police ask?”

“Well, what if Luke asks?”

“Then I was with you.”

“You want me to lie to your boyfriend?”

“Look, if *anyone* asks, if bloody Posh Spice asked, you would say I was with you.”

“You want me to lie to Ms Beckham?”

Sam grunted in exasperation. Talking to Julie, even though she’d known the girl since Year 2, was sometimes like talking to a brick wall. One that was decorated with posters of Tweety bird and that guy from the *Goonies* but wrapped in a pink floral dress. Bless her cotton socks, she was not the most intelligent of people at the best of times. And these were certainly not the best of times.

They stood in the courtyard, the grey clouds above threatening rain but in the way of an eighties bully – threaten a lot but doing very little. She had caught up with her before class and was simply asking her to confirm what she had told...well... people.

As if on cue, summoned by the storm – or perhaps only by the fact that it was five minutes until form, Luke made his way over to them. She hadn’t spoken to him since the last night’s goodnight text, when she was heading over to ‘Julie’s’ – and not even a good morning one. She sensed something in the air.

"She was totally with me last night!" Julie squeaked when she saw him. Thank God it wasn't Posh she was speaking to.

"I didn't ask," Luke returned, deadpan.

"Well, in case you did."

She glared at her friend and was surprised to see Luke was doing the same. There was something different about him that morning, something meaner in his eyes. He glared, she glared and after a second, Julie bristled with defensiveness.

"I'm going to do something...over there."

Her friend walked off in a random direction, which Sam was fairly certain was the art department. In the complete opposite direction to her form room but gone was gone and she had bigger fish to fry.

"Is she caffeinated?" Luke wondered out loud, but Sam barely heard what he said. She had finally noticed what looked different. There was a slight bruise to one eye, a slight bulge to one side of his bottom lip – and a cut just at the bridge of his nose that was ugly and red. He was hurt. She instinctively reached out a hand to his face, and hesitated when he turned it away from her.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Some stairs decided I looked too cool for them," he snapped back.

"Luke..."

"Honesty goes both ways, Sam."

He turned his look at her, and she realised he was mad. Madder than she'd seen him in a long time, and he was directing his look at her. It hurt her deeply, but at the same time, something began to rise back in her.

"Now what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Where did you go last night?" he asked, ignored her question completely. She felt defensiveness well up.

"I was round at Julie's, I told you," she reminded him, curtly, "We had an America's Next Top Model marathon, with low-fat ice cream."

"Wow, good rehearsal for a smooth delivery," he commented, sarcastically.

"What do you want from me?"

"And I take it Julie's always that nervous?" he answered back, once more ignoring her question. Her heart quickened as she felt the first deeper pangs of being royally pissed off. "You threaten to get her and her little dog too?"

"Just...stop," she sighed, "For fuck's sake."

"Why are you lying to me?" he pressed, before adding sarcastically, "I've taken the classes, I know 'lying is bad' and I'm sick of it."

"What's with the damn leash?" she snapped, "You want me to tell you more, you gotta back off a little. Let me live my fucking life."

"A life without me, is that what you're saying?" he challenged.

The sky above them rumbled, and for the first time she felt the small drops of rain beginning to fall. Around them, other students began to file away at the sound of the bell, but the two of them remained. She threw her hands up in exasperation, feeling her heart beating a mile a minute.

"I can't even talk to you when you're like this."

She shifted her bag on her shoulder and decided to accompany her friends. Inside, she felt the storm was worse than anything happening around her. She wanted to slap him, wanted to scream at him, and somewhere underneath, wanted to cry. Wanted to apologise, wanted to tell him everything. But it wasn't enough, not really.

"Where are you going?" Luke called after her, as she made her way in the direction, she had just seen Julie going – this time in the opposite direction to the art department.

"I'm storming off," she snapped, "Look it up."

* * *

Ricky wished he could have said he was fully refreshed, but seeing as it took another three hours for him to finally drop off into sleep – thoughts whirling around in his head of vampyrs and Claire and all others – he'd only managed to snatch a few before the sunlight streaming through his windows rudely told him to go to school. Well, that and Rob returning home from the night shift and kicking the end of his bed until he agreed to get up.

Brothers.

He'd already taken two extra shots of coffee in his weird one that sounded a little bit like an Italian-American movie star. Cappuccino Sara had referred to it as, while she'd gone for latte. The two other coffees remaining in the tray were for the research team, as the two of them made their way back into the Library in the bright sunshine.

"Morning campers, we have caffeine!" Sara greeted, as the weary bleary eyed Mark and Amy looked up from the table – almost exactly in the same places as they'd left them several hours before, "It's like cocaine without the whole 'legality' issue."

"You are way too sunny for a human being," Amy pointed out, with narrowed eyes that escalated into a yawn.

"I've gone Stepford," Sara capitulated, as they headed across to the table, and Mark received his black coffee from Ricky with gratitude, while Amy sniffed at the thing Sara placed in front of her, "By which I mean Starbucks."

"This is decaff," Amy pointed out to her. Sara smiled sweetly,

"Think of it as a placebo."

While Ricky and Sara sat down beside their friends, he saw the weight of books seemed to have trebled since the night before – many of them in Latin. Sara flipped through a few until she found a drawing of a demon with no clothes on and pulled a face, while Ricky studied the faces of Mark and Amy.

“Please tell me you have something by now,” he asked, hopefully, hoping against hope that they could finally rest a little.

“Besides a bad case of screen-eye?” Amy joked, with a weak smile.

“I’m proud to report, we have in fact made progress,” Mark offered, brightening a little.

“Actual progress?” he glanced sceptically at the books and scribbled notes around them.

“See for yourself,” Mark invited, standing and heading for the counter. He went around the large oaken structure and began to rummage around, before bringing out a large map of Britain on a stand. Ricky couldn’t help himself but frown, wondering when and where they would have acquired such things in the small hours of the morning when even Home Bargains wasn’t open. It was then he noticed all the little black pins over it and his confusion went up another notch.

“Oooh, pin cushion Britain,” Sara joked, “Bush’s favourite game.”

“That’s how many reported sightings we’ve found all across the country,” Amy explained.

As Ricky studied the map, he began to see how many large clusters there were in different areas. A few down South, one on the coast, then a few up North. A cluster near Loch Ness – no surprise he’d always meant to ask Mark about that one – and small scatterings elsewhere.

“Even if you discount that some of the internet accounts would be nonsense – especially around ’94 – ’95 when *X Files* started doing that alien thing,” Amy continued, “Pretty solid. And we’ve found on the internet thousands more across Europe and the rest of the world.”

“So, they’re common, we’ve just never seen one before?” he tried to summarised, Amy nodded in agreement.

“It gets more interesting when you arrange them chronologically,” Mark picked up, “Although legends have been rife about black-eyed monsters all through Europe and Asia for thousands of years, the first reported cases in England began in Dover about a hundred and fifty years ago.”

“Only a few reports at first, but then it was like, boom,” Amy interjected, “We think Dover was a hive.”

“Or at least ground zero for their arrival onto the British mainland,” Mark agreed, “Since then there have been scattered reports across the country, only every now and then there would be another surge of reported sightings.”

“Reel it in people, I’m completely lost to the message,” Ricky joked.

“Next time you’re up all night research, I’ll mockingly remind you of that,” Amy shot back at him. Her tone said she was joking, but her tiredness actually gave it kind of an edge. He shot her a humble look and an apology which she gratefully received.

“Basically, we think the surges could be accounted for by a Source,” Mark continued, coming back around from the counter and leaning against it. “The few sightings could be from the direct turned, the black eyed vamps, spreading out across the country. But the surges would be explained by perhaps a leader settling in that location.”

“Think like an Uber Vamp,” Amy suggested.

“But if the black-eyed thing is like traditional vamps, wouldn’t their numbers just spread?” Sara asked, leaning forward in her seat, clearly interested. A thought obviously came to her as she smirked and added, “Kinda like a black plague?”

Only she laughed at her joke.

“Unless the only vamps with black eyes were the ones directly contaminated by this ‘Uber-Vamp,’” Mark suggested with a shrug, “Perhaps if these other vamps could even make more – assuming they’re not sterile like a mule – they could possibly be the traditional red-eyed kind. And don’t forget, this is not an infection spread like rabies, turning a vampyr requires time, patience and effort – and swelling numbers in one area too much would likely cause other hunters to descend upon them.”

“I hate to think we live in a world where vamps of any eye colour are considered ‘traditional,’” Sara made a face and leaned back in her chair. Ricky found himself having to agree, as resigned as he was to the supernatural.

"We are still no closer to figuring out who this Uber Vamp is," Amy finished, "I mean, he's gotta be one scary bloke to ensure he's not written down about anywhere."

"Look, guys, you've done well," he assured them, "It's okay to take a rest."

"Just doin' the duty," Amy beamed. Despite everything, and despite the fact she still only had decaff now in her veins, there was still a sweet brightness about her that made him smile. She actually seemed flattered by his compliment, and he wasn't going to take that away from them. He stood.

"Seriously, you guys get some sleep," he suggested, "Or at the very least, go to lesson, it's like the same thing anyway."

Mark and Amy both shot him a look which said very plainly what they thought of his insinuation.

"Where are you going?" Mark enquired politely.

"I'm going to find the one person we know might know something," he offered, meaning he was going to find Claire. Sara stood up beside him suddenly too, appearing determined.

"And I'm coming with!" she declared. Everyone's look suggested, like Ricky also suspected, Sara was attempting to get out of third period again. "What? I'm altruistic." She frowned.

"If that means what I think it does."

Third period was clearly English Lang.

* * *

Ricky had no idea if the apartment block where he and Sara attended would still be occupied or not. He had tracked down Claire the week before and was unsure whether her comment about being moved would come to pass or not. She was, after all, still a wild card. She had helped him fight vampyrs and kept things from him in equal measure. She'd shown up whenever she wanted and left just as quickly. Getting a grip on her was like trying to hold onto a soaped up eel.

"Jeez, I didn't know they gave council houses to mysterious demon hunters," Sara muttered as the two of them made their way up the staircase. He didn't know what she meant, it wasn't too bad. Sure, it was a bit scuffed from many boots, but it was at least clean. "You need some kind of hope in this line of work."

"We don't need it, we're teenagers," Ricky commented.

"So, we have family, free room and board, and she doesn't," Sara probed further, "She's gotta be what? Sixteen, seventeen? Not that much older than us and nowhere near old enough to legally take care of herself."

"Right," he agreed, completely unsure of where she was going with her thought process.

"So, she's either emancipated, run away from some kind of foster care system after being taken away by social services..." she continued, and as they reached the landing and proceeded down the hall of dated wallpaper, he had to admit she had a point, "...or she has no family. At all, because if she'd simply run away, they'd be looking for her. And I've never seen her on the side of a milk carton."

"You can't possibly know any of these things," he pointed out, but she was on one.

"My guess, her family was abusive," she continued on, "She got taken away by the council or whoever does that stuff but was separated from her brothers. Then she ran away from the foster home, which is why she no longer trusts anyone with personal information. Maybe she even phoned the police to get them to stop what was going on, but the police just took her and her brothers away."

"She has brothers?" he asked, turning slight to her as they reached her door. Or, well, the door he remembered she was behind last time.

"Hey, if she fights like a guy, she's definitely got brothers," Sara assured him.

He both admired her and was again confused by her in that moment. He loved Sara, but she was incredibly judgmental when she wanted to be. She was completely guessing everything she was saying based off of a few interactions, drawn from God knew what form of Health & Social Care

course she was considering at sixth form. But the thing was, he knew so little about Claire, any part of it could be right.

He went to knock, then noticed that the door itself was slightly ajar. Not like off its hinges ripped open or anything, it was simply that the lock hadn't quite caught. Almost as if someone was entering or exiting in a hurry, with other thoughts on their mind, and it hadn't latched to.

"Stay here," he told her.

"Like hell."

He nudged open the door, drawing his knife from inside his coat and holding it defensively. The door didn't even creak as it went, it was well oiled. As it opened, he could see someone still lived there – the open kitchenette, and living room were exactly the same, though as spartan as it had seemed when it was hers. There were only two other doors, one he presumed the bedroom and the other the bathroom.

He nudged open one, to peer beyond into an empty bedroom. Neat, tidy, the bed made and the air fresh from the window open at some point and then closed. A bottle of water on the night stand. Again, lived in, but not currently occupied.

"Ugh, I hate this tile," Sara muttered from across the hall, as she evidently had peered into the bathroom. "All clear, though."

They regrouped in the living room, where they found the only signs. The trunk, which had been placed under the window, was open – and out of it clothes had been strewn.

"This is what happens when you decorate yourself," Sara joked, while Ricky felt his chest tighten.

"Something's happened to her," he realised, but Sara shook her head.

"No, I don't get that sense," she countered, moving over to the trunk. "There's mess, sure, but it's completely confined to this trunk. If someone was trashing this place looking for something, they'd have done the whole place, not this one spot. My guess? Claire wanted something in this trunk and did this herself."

"In too much of a hurry to clean up?" he asked.

"Whoever these black eyed vamps are, she's met them before," Sara suggested, resuming her CSI-like analysis only this time with more concrete assumptions rather than her vague social-worker pseudo psych eye. "Definitely. And she's got a grudge or something against them. The moment she hears, she comes here, grabs something and rushes back out. It's that...or she's a really specifically bad tidy-upper."

"Let's go," Ricky suggested, "There's nothing here."

"You think she's decided to take them on alone?" Sara wondered out loud, putting words to what he was feeling, as they headed back for the door.

"Let's hope not," he commented.

But, down deep, he felt different. It wasn't a hope she wouldn't, it was a fairly certain she had. After all, if the snippets of ideas they'd been throwing around them were even partly right, he was beginning to put together a jigsaw. He knew already they were quite alike, and so if she really did have a grudge against these black-eyed vamps, he knew she was going after them, alone or not.

It's what he would do.

* * *

Calendar had one thing that many other towns didn't – a pretty damn decent Victorian sewer system. Well, storm drains really these days – most of the modern sewage went down a different path – which meant that criss-crossing under the town in a hundred different directions was a warren of tunnels just high enough to walk along, which thankfully now only stank of decay and mildew rather than...well, other less than savoury things.

It wouldn't matter to the thing up ahead, of course, she didn't even think vampyrs had a sense of smell, given the crypts and hell holes she usually found them in. And of course, some of

them decided washing was for the clearly living. It helped her to keep track, even there in the almost pitch-black darkness, the vents up to the surface from below giving barely enough light to see by.

She moved from where she'd paused, sensing above. Claire knew she had to continue to move with caution and try to avoid the soft ripples she could cause in the ankle deep water below. The thing had sensitive hearing, and she would quite easily tip her hat if she moved too quickly. She shuffled, she continued, and she hoped.

Part of her thought back to the boy in the Library. Okay, so he was her age, but they were all of them children compared to her. None of them knew what they were up against, how could they? They'd stumbled into this world, while she'd been dragged in kicking and screaming and bathed in blood.

The feeling stung her eyes, the memories threatening to surface, but she wouldn't be thrown off. The fact that she was quietly ignoring the rising feeling in her chest, the combination of righteous anger and excitement...and the steely hatred fuelling her, was not lost on her – but it was quietly pushed aside so she could focus on what she needed to do.

She would not yet allow herself to wonder if He was among them. Not yet. Sometimes it took a while for Him to show up. But she could find out. Yes, she could do that.

The thing she was tailing had turned left, she was almost confident. There were the soft, uncaring splashes of someone not concerned about not making noise up ahead. It was likely heading back home, as the day grew towards sunset, for turning right would take them more deeply into town. Running through the topography in her head, she was fairly certain they were underneath the school – and heading out towards the woods behind.

As she turned the corner she realised she'd been more distracted than she'd thought, she could see the thing ahead. She pulled back, instinctively, seeing it beginning to turn even as she did. She still herself, pressing herself back against the cold, slimy wall of the drain, hoping the ripples had stopped. It's own footsteps had stopped. She stilled her breath, closed her eyes and hoped into the darkness.

When she heard the splashes, she began to think it was coming towards her, only for her eyes to fly open and see that a large fat rat was splashing around in the water by her feet – heading in the direction of the vamp. It gave ripples, it made sound, and it clearly reassured the thing that all it's concern was simply one fat little rodent going about it's day. The creature ahead resumed it's journey, and after waiting a little while Claire did the same.

To think she owed anything to rat. Down there in the dark dampness, she didn't find that a particularly unusual thought.

But beyond, at the end of the tunnel, there would be far worse things.

* * *

The late afternoon sun finally broke through the thunder clouds as they receded. Not wanting to be caught having to attend last period, Sara and Ricky meandered slowly along the river on the way back from Claire's flat, and in the general direction of the school. Any earlier and a teacher may drag them to class, but they could slip back into the library amongst the throng of people trying to escape after the last bell if they wanted.

Besides, she wanted to know more details, having picked up on plenty Ricky was not saying.

"So, what do you think of her?" she opened with, as they crossed the little stone bridge at one of the narrower points and was on the north side once more.

"What do you mean, we do I think of her?" he asked, his tonal register going a little bit higher in surprise and, as she suspected, a touch of the ladies doth protest too much. Yeah, that's right, she was finally scraping a C in English Lit. Still couldn't conjugate a verb with confidence, mind you, but she was finally beginning to understand that little southern midget who liked to play dress up.

"Well, she's attractive," she pointed out, though of course the boy would already know that wouldn't he? "Mysterious, you bet. And have you seen her arse?"

“Not lately,” he quipped back, with a frown, “Or ever.”

“It’s a nice arse,” she summarised, “So being she has many attractions and men are natural slaves to their passions...you would have noticed her. When you noticed her, you would have formed an opinion, however fleeting. I’m asking about that opinion.” He pointedly looked out across the river as they wandered, but she wasn’t going to let him off that easily. “Trying to keep up my end of the conversation here.”

“And mine?” he asked.

“Little bit.”

“And since when are men bigger slaves to passion?” he questioned her, “Do I have to remind you who nearly killed her friends for her new boyfriend last week?”

“Oh, please, boys are just as big a slut as girls,” she challenged, as they paused, her wrapping her arms around herself for a little warmth in the late afternoon chill. Even in the sunlight, which was broken by the small trees lining their riverside path, it was still beginning to go south temperature wise, “Only they call them boy sluts, and they don’t usually get chance to call them that because boy sluts are just boys who are breathing.”

She frowned as that thought came to her, the world around them was not the path she was expecting. Ahead she saw the hulk of one of the old mills.

“Why are we here?” she asked him, expecting that they’d have begun the slow ascent up the hill towards the school instead of staying on the flat. She’d obviously allowed herself to become too distracted by her own attempts at psychological probing.

“She likes to patrol this bit sometimes, because creepy things tend to like abandoned places – like that mill,” he explained.

“And you know nothing about her?” she asked innocently, raising a sarcastic eyebrow.

“What’s your point?”

“Nothing,” she shrugged, “Boy Slut.”

She sighed and looked around them, glancing up at the broken windows of the nearby mill and feeling a little more than trepidation.

“Look, this place is deader than dead,” she suggested, “It’s a corpse without the zombie magic. So why are we here?”

“I don’t suppose you have any better ideas?” he threw back, agitated. She’d struck a nerve, obviously.

“We find the bad guy, we find her.”

“Mark and Amy are doing that,” he reminded her.

“And they could benefit from us being there.”

She realised it had crystallised in his eyes as she’d said it, and he finally understood what she was getting at.

“You’re cold, aren’t you?” he challenged, “You just want to get back to the radiator in the Library.”

“Am I that transparent?” she asked.

“You’re practically glass,” he agreed. She stuck her tongue out at him for good measure, but they shared a smile. She went to head back to the turning in the path, but he pointed out, “That’s not the quickest way.” She stopped and glared, “One more building, then we go back.”

“And coffee stop?” she pushed.

“And we’ll stop for coffee,” he agreed, knowing she meant the sugariest frappe in existence.

“Then darlin’, I’m all yours,” she assured him, hooking her arm through his and allowing herself to be led into the abandoned mills.

The things she did for friends. Even if they were boy sluts.

* * *

Of course it would be a castle, Claire thought to herself. The moment she finally emerged from the darkness of the storm drain, into the depths of the woods, she realised that it was nearly night. Things moved in the trees around her, small animals and creatures getting ready to go about their nocturnal work. But no monsters, not yet.

But there, at the top of the lane, she could see it. Castle might have been a strong term, it was more like an old stone fort which had long ago been abandoned. The area was littered with old sites, and this one – ruined to the point of almost pointlessness, couldn't even crack the top 100 of UK heritage sites. Calendar 'castle', so far out and hidden amongst the trees, as to be unsellable even to bored kids in half-term.

But it would do, if they were setting it up.

She slipped into the shadows of the arched entrance and peered into the courtyard beyond. All was still, and silent, as the final rays of sunlight crept slowly like searchlights across the muddy ground beyond. Shadows hung to her right, to her left, to everywhere. But they were still, like her, as she held her breath.

Slipping her blade from her jacket pocket, she held it close to her chest, defensively, then stepped from the shadows of the arch and into the courtyard. A flock of birds, nesting in some ancient remains of a drum barrel – the kind of thing kids had probably stood around as it burned in some underage after school party – burst forth and fluttered into the night like bats.

She jumped, God help her, but she did, her heart thundering into her chest. She paused, looking for any other movement, willing herself to sharpen everything, and slow her heart to a normal rate.

Then there it was. The laugh. The cackle.

Her heart stopped, dropped and rolled. She recognised it, she knew it. Him.

There was no one there, nothing but inky blackness in the openings like sores in the moss-covered stone walls. But He was there. Of course He was. He was watching her, from somewhere.

Again.

"I see you haven't lost your knack for playing games," she called out into the darkness. The trail of sunlight reached her, she stood in its spotlight, as it moved across her body, jostled by the leaves of the trees beyond the castle.

"Claire, Claire," the voice came from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Then, localised behind her, "Little Claire Kramer all grown up."

She whirled to face the doorway, expecting to see Him. His shadow, hulking and great in the doorway she'd just come through. But there was nothing, no one. Softly, like the flutter of wings, something moved elsewhere and she allowed her eyes to flicker.

"Still like to hide in the shadows?" she challenged.

"Not alone," he agreed, his voice silken, mocking. "You've joined me here now."

"There's still sunlight," she pointed out.

"Not for long."

She began to realise that the sunlight bathing her was nearly gone, it moved up across her face, blinding her eyes as the shadows deepened around her.

"Shit."

"Are you ready for our catch up, Claire?"

"Fuck you," she hissed.

When the sunlight passed her eyes, moving above her head and slipping away like safety, then she saw him. Like oil pouring from water, a darker shadow moved from the inky blackness of the nearby archway. Tall, handsome, pale skin. A man in his thirties, with the black eyes of an evil so ancient they barely had words for it.

Around him, things moved, his things. But it was only him she had eyes for. It all came down to him. And always would.

"Sundune."

The name tasted like blood.

Act III

“You know, I think I have something.”

Mark looked up from where he stood at the counter, as Amy struck what she was thinking was gold. She waved him over, taking a moment to rub her eyes a little and look back at the screen. Other than the brief distraction her lessons that day had granted her, she had been in front of her laptop at each other moment – and even into that evening.

“Well, that’s one more thought than I have,” Mark commented, as he moved over to join her at the table. Bless him, he did attempt to look at the screen, but he must have been as boggle eyed as she was.

“It’s not much,” she tried to downplay. She knew Mark was the expert, or at least their supernatural research whizz guy, and after having found the key, a few times using her laptop. Although to be fair at one point she had spent several hours going down a rabbit hole in a dungeons and dragons forum by mistake. “Just a correlation between the term Sundune, black eyes and vamps. Apparently, it’s like the name of the cult or something.”

“No.”

She frowned at his abruptness, but when she glanced at him, she began to realise that the look was the start of something else, his brow was furrowed in that way of academic thought that she thought before only she seemed to possess amongst her peers. Of course, Mark was two years older, so maybe that had something to do with it.

“Well, I realise it’s a scary thought,” she joked, “but please try not to panic.”

“That’s not what I mean,” he answered, taking her seriously, “I mean, it’s not the name of the cult.”

He moved away from her and deeper into the stacks behind them, where shadows lay. There she heard him rustling about, not needing the light in his own domain. She sat there, waiting for him to re-emerge.

“Uh, Mark?” she called out after several moments.

He finally returned, as if he'd realised he'd errantly left the stove on, book in hand.

“In my research I keep coming across the name Sundune,” he explained, “Not in connection to the black-eyed vamps per se, but instead as a physical entity. The eastern personification of the devil, almost.”

“You're saying Sundune...”

“Might be the name of the vampyr responsible for the black eyes, yes,” he finished for her. She frowned, as he placed the book on the table in front of her. What she saw in the drawing was only shadow.

“What does it say about this guy?”

“Like I said, he's a rather shady figure of indeterminate power,” Mark continued to explain, frowning his brow further, “I've been seeing the reference a few times scattered across a few books, but picking apart what is myth, legend and what is fact can sometimes be hard work. Especially as it said this being was less of a figure and more...well, they called him 'eternal'.”

“Eternal as in long life or eternal as in actually live forever immortal?” she asked, feeling her stomach knotting either way. “Or as in the band Sara keeps trying to get me to listen to?”

“It doesn't say,” he admitted with a shrug, “I guess to ancient peoples, the difference wasn't always so stark. I guess now I have a name to focus on, that could narrow my research.” He sighed and glanced she thought a little distastefully towards her laptop. “You don't suppose that thing could help us, do you?”

“It's called a computer, and please be civil in front of it,” she answered him, pulling open a search engine.

“Then I repeat my question more courteously,” he answered, with the whisper of a small smile. She returned it back, feeling somewhat of her spirit renewed.

“Yes, I'm sure he could,” she agreed.

With more of an idea than they'd had so far, Amy felt her spirit lift. They were getting to something, she knew. Of course, underneath the lifted spirits was a sense of something else. They were getting close...

But perhaps so too, was danger.

* * *

Sam shuffled in place, wanting it to be over as quickly as possible. The alleyway where she was, wasn't exactly somewhere she wanted to be. But, of course, if she truly didn't want to be somewhere, she wouldn't be. So which lie was better to tell herself? It didn't matter, only one thing mattered.

"You're getting my stuff you know, you could be patient," her companion snapped. Nearby his two companions, little and large as she thought of them, cackled about something or other as they drank beers and sat on the wall as lookout.

"And you're getting my semi-hard earned money," she barbed back at him. "It's called capitalism."

She didn't like Drazen, that much was always going to be the case. But he was a means to an end, and since she no longer wanted, nor was able to speak to her parents, she would have to focus on this instead. Necessary evil.

He sniffed, with the reddened nose of someone with an eternal cold, although she suspected it was something far unseemlier. He glared at her, Drazen was a proud man, and he didn't like attitude. Well, 'man' was a loose term – he was probably only a few years older than her.

She glanced across at his mates, Little and Large, as she saw them thumbing through a few spoils. She knew they liked to have fun around town and had been in more than their fair share of arguments and fights with the local police. If Calendar could be said to have a gang, these three morons were as close to it as they would ever have.

Still, as he slipped her the small brown bottle that rattled as he did so, she pushed it down into her handbag and slipped the money across to him in return. With their business done, her eyes caught on something.

“Your boys resorting to petty theft now?” she couldn’t help but ask. Drazen smirked, showing remarkably clean and white teeth for a low life – even if it was a shark’s grin.

“Call it an on-the-job training program,” he joked.

Something amongst the others, falling out amongst the litter of wallets and the clang of a few bis of jewellery and watches.

“They been busy?” she asked.

“Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies,” he continued, counting the money as he went. She knew it was all there and their business was done, so she took to wander over to the two guys on the wall. Both of them looked up at her, in a mixture of naked gropey lust and weary reproach. They held the look of people who knew she was better than them, and also people who knew she wasn’t. She didn’t care for it.

“Hey, pretty girl,” Little said to her, “Not many with your heels in this part of town.”

“Just looking for a little information,” she pointed out, behind her Drazen wandered back towards the back door of the club. This was not Clarus by a long shot, this was the Fish Tank – where some pretty unseemly stuff went down by the sounds of it. Again, the irony that such ‘unseemly’ things included her by this point, was lost in her sudden recognition.

“And what do you want for it?” Large asked her, before chuckling in a way that said he thought he was incredibly funny and witty. She knew what names they’d have called him in the school yard and had to admit they’d had a point.

“The leather wallet there, with the Man U logo, who’d you get it from?” she asked. Of course, there would be a thousand wallets like that in the world, they were a dime a dozen down in Manchester in the markets. Just like the market stall she’d bought one from, a few months earlier.

One she'd bought for someone very special to her. Someone who's sixteenth birthday had just passed.

"Blonde kid in the wrong part of town," Little responded, with a shrug. Her heart sank in her chest as the pieces began to fit themselves together in revelation, "We, uh, sent him on his way a little. With a lighter load, of course."

Little and Large both chuckled this time with the memory. She didn't bother thanking them as she turned on her heels and walked off. Behind her, the two boys were already back to being distracted by their little collection, while Drazen's calm and bleak eyes followed her journey down the alleyway.

She didn't care about any of it, because she felt far worse brewing.

* * *

"No banners? Still working?" Sara asked, as she and Ricky re-entered the Library, feeling the warmth slip back into her bones almost immediately. Mark must have bribed the maintenance guys or something, the Library radiators always seemed to stay on. She made a mental note to ask him about it, "I take it this mystery isn't the usual groundskeeper-in-costume?"

"Lack of mysterious informant," Amy answered back, "I take it you haven't found Claire?"

"Not unless she's really slimmed down," she agreed.

Sara slipped into place next to Amy, around whose laptop there were now several cups of tea most of which had been drunk. She smelled green tea by the scent of it and was glad to feel for a moment like Mark was listening to her about the Amy-caffeine. If he ever broke it one day, an evil would be unleashed that would make black-eyed vamps look like Care Bears.

"So, what have you found?" Ricky asked, as Mark took a moment to look up from the book he was reading. He stood, leaning against the counter – though the evidence of the other discarded books across the table was beginning to mount.

“Our research has led us to a demonic entity from China, known as Sundune,” Mark explained, “We believe him to be a vampyr, though clearly not of the usual variety.”

“Again, any time ‘usual variety’ and ‘vampyr’ are used in the same sentence, it’s time to call the boys in white,” she commented. He gave her a glare, so she graciously waved for him to go on.

“Thank you,” he returned, before continuing, “The black-eyed vampyrs seem to move like a clan throughout the world. A town will have a few sightings before a surge that’s almost predictable. We believe this is when the leader, Sundune, actually arrives in town, after his initial heralds. We managed to trace this all throughout history, until 1963, when his last sighting was somewhere in London. After that, there’s been no surges again until the pattern picked up again about three years ago.”

“What’s the reason for the gap?” Ricky wondered out loud.

“We think it’s like when a serial killer takes a hiatus,” Amy offered, “Like when they’re caught and go to prison for something else. We think something physically stopped him.”

“Okay, and in the land of the sane people, vampyrs don’t go to prison,” she pointed out. All three of them gave her a look for that one, so she relented, “Okay, in a sane land there are no vampyrs, but my point’s still valid.”

“So, he’s tough, powerful and puts the shits up the Chinese, sounds like fun,” Ricky commented, Sara shrugged in agreement. “How old is he?”

“If age is power, he’s a napalm bomb,” Mark admitted, “He’s at least four thousand years old, possibly even older than that. I assume no one survived his birth, certainly to this day.”

“Guys, I think I have a connection,” Amy interjected. She was back at her laptop screen, while Mark had been talking. The three of them turned their attention to her this time, as Sara asked the obvious question.

“Between what and what?”

“Between Sundune and Claire,” Amy answered, before going on to explain, “I’ve been sifting through reports of the towns with the most recent sightings, moving backwards. Three years ago,

one of the first after his 'return', a family was slaughtered in their home by what the fourteen year old daughter told the police was a man dressed in black, with black eyes."

"I guess the girl recanted?" she asked.

"Yeah, she was given to her aunt's custody, but disappeared soon after that," Amy continued, "No one's seen her since."

She turned her laptop around to face them, and it was immediately obvious what had stopped her. On the screen was a family photo, a little blurred, but the kind with mum, dad and two kids standing around posing. Perhaps it was the kind that would have hung in their hallway. Or in a frame next to the phone. One moment of getting the kids to stand still, the camera timer set by dad on the tripod he'd been bought for Christmas.

Sara felt a pang of guilt for her earlier comments. They didn't look like abusers. They looked like a nice mum and dad. A little brother, maybe ten or eleven. Next to him his older sister. Three years younger, trying to smile through her boredom and the lameness of the family photo session. But the fact it was unmistakably their mysterious informant was clear.

"Our very own mystery lady is Claire Kramer," Amy explained, "Now seventeen year old daughter of John and Eileen Kramer, and older sister to the eleven year old Karl Kramer. All deceased bar Claire."

"Sundune's her target," Ricky interrupted suddenly.

"You can't *know* that," Sara tried to point out, but he shook her off.

"Wherever he is, she is," he snapped back, "Trust me. At the very least one of Sundune's vamps was responsible if not the monster himself. She'll want blood. Lots of it."

She looked into her friends eyes and knew he spoke the truth. She knew, without having to ask, what was running through his minds. They had never talked about the death of his own parents, granted to a drunk driver rather than an ancient immortal vampyr. But she could guess what he would be feeling in that moment.

He knew. She didn't. And she accepted that.

* * *

Rusty cold chains encircled her wrists as she lay on the cold, dirty stone floor underneath. Slick with rainwater coming in from who knew what holes and windows, smelling of damp earth and the rot of something else underneath. She lay there, groggy as her brain begin to slip back into consciousness once more. For a moment, she could be camping, until the sharp, cold memory of blackness rushing at her returned.

“Your mattress sucks,” she spat into the darkness around her, broken by moonlight coming through the high opening above. She didn’t need to look up, she could feel him there, grinning at her in that mocking way. He would be in the doorway, looking down at her, dressed all in black. He may have been mythic, but he was also predictable. Certainly, to someone who’d made his life – and death – her obsession.

“Oh, dear God, there’s been a terrible mistake,” he mocked.

“Yeah?”

“You will be released immediately.”

“Uh...”

“Immediately following your death.”

He didn’t chuckle at his own joke, but Claire did. Her hands trembled but she clamped down hard, using them to push her up to sitting, her back against the wall as the chains holding her clanked. As if there was any point – the castle and the woods were probably crawling with his underlings – she wouldn’t make it ten feet if he didn’t want her to.

He wandered, over to the barred window on the far side. This one looked out into the courtyard, with a view from where she was sitting of the moon. It struck his already pale face and made it ethereal. He was handsome, carved from moonlight. But it was a crocodile beauty.

"I see your sense of humour is in tact," she answered, spitting a bit of blood from her mouth from where he'd obviously struck her unconscious. She felt a bust to her lip.

"Along with all my bones."

"206 too many, if you ask me," she muttered.

He turned to her, his gaze piercing and more intense now his demonic visage slipped back beneath the surface. They were blue, she noted, she could have sworn last time she saw him they were green. Maybe they were always something different, to everyone – for most of the ones who saw the black, wouldn't remember it.

"So, Claire, how've you been?" he asked, his voice deceptively casual.

"You want a nice little conversation?" she asked, trying to keep the defiance in her voice, despite the fear worming it's way around her heart. "Whatever happened to the 'now-I-will-drop-you-into-burning-lava-very-slowly' routine?"

"Please, that went out of fashion with Dr No," he pointed out, "I'm much more agreeable as you know."

"Of course, it's how you get your victims to trust you," she agreed, "You're like the fucker that offers kids sweets."

"Your mouth has improved."

"So has your right hook."

He glided across the room towards her, his boots seeming not even to touch the dirt, then lowered himself into kneeling beside her. This close, looking so human and so not at the same time, she had to turn her face a little. She focused her eyes on the moon, not wanting to let him see her fear, even though her heart pounding in her chest was likely so obvious to the both of them.

"Oh, Claire," he mocked, his voice a song from cracked lips, "You show such promise. Why do we always fight when we're together?"

"Because you're evil, I'm not," she spat back, sarcastic, "It'd never work. So why don't you kill me now and get it done with?"

“Why would I kill you?” he asked, as though offended by the idea, “When I can have my fun with you?”

She couldn't help herself, she turned back into her face with a look of disgust,

“Oh, please tell me you mean chopping off my ear or something,” she asked, “The thought of you having fun, well...have you ever seen those documentaries on elephant seals mating?”

He punched her in the face. Hard, fast, and controlled. More coppery blood spilled across her tongue that she spat out, but as she turned her face back to look at him, she saw he was smiling. She'd not chinked his armour, nor made any kind of notch in his thinking. He was no more bothered than if she'd read him the yellow pages.

“Insert comeback there,” she spat.

Seeming not to move, his hand seemed to be behind her head, grabbing her matted hair and yanking her face back to look up at him. Dominant, controlling, he sneered into her face.

“Do we get to the pain now?” she asked.

“Oh, Claire...” he crooned, “I think of the worlds we could travel together. The things we could do. The torment we could visit on those who stand in our way...” He placed one cold hand on her cheek, where a single tear was threatening to fall, softly and tenderly. “But then I remember the knife you stuck in me, I see the fire in your eyes, and I come to the same realisation every time.”

His hand clenched, his fingernails digging into the soft flesh of her cheek, drawing pinpricks of blood.

“It's much more satisfying to watch you bleed.”

He dug further, she clenched her jaw, fighting back a scream.

That only made him do it harder.

* * *

The air hummed with expectation, as all four of them worked together. Amy at her laptop, Mark amongst the stacks, and Ricky and Sara doing their best to wade through the texts in English because neither one of them had a Rosetta stone. But beneath it, he felt the urgency beginning to rise, Ricky wanted to get to her before she did something stupid – and they still didn't even know where he was.

"You know, he really needs a better name," Sara pointed out.

"Who?"

"Sundune," she clarified, "Not really fear inspiring."

"What would you prefer?"

"I don't know," she mused, "How about The Destructor?"

"Tacky," he dismissed, with a frown, before adding, "and I think it's already been used."

"Fine," she pouted, "Doomsday."

"Now I *know* that's already used."

"You know my point," she sighed, as she placed down her book in futility, him trying to continue on. "No one is going to give notice to a villain if his name sounds like some kind of Sci-Fi novel."

"That was just 'Dune'," Amy piped up from across the table.

"Does he have an opposite?" Sara pivoted, shifting in her seat. "A good guy? Like 'Moondrift' or something."

Ricky found himself lowering his book despite himself, finding her brand of crazy just distracting enough,

"That doesn't actually sound half-bad," he admitted.

"I know, right?" she smiled, "That sounds like some kind of comic book werewolf hunter."

"Then why is he hunting a vampyr?"

"Revenge," she supplied, "The vampyr stole one of his werewolf kills for some reason. Now he's wanting to take him down, only he finds himself saving the young girl who wanders into his

clutches. Now he's a single adoptive father to this young girl, as well as a hunter of the vampyr killed her family."

"My God, you've thought about this a lot," he muttered.

"Why do you think my research notes consist of a doodle of a werewolf attacking a stick figure?"

Sara turned her book around to show indeed she had doodled something which was approximating what she thought it did, but Ricky found himself having to point out the one obvious floor.

"That kind of looks like a horny Scooby Doo."

"Reality check, people," Mark declared as he re-entered the conversation from the stacks. He held in his hand a new tome, this one bound in what looked like some bits of golf leaf.

"We're real," he defended.

"Thank you grasshopper," Sara quipped.

"I've found something," Mark told them, his brow furrowed once more, but more than that, he looked upset.

"Then why do you look so morose?" Sara asked, indelicately.

"Well, there's a problem," Mark sighed, "The key text we need is in Chinese."

"I thought you spoke every language in existence," he pointed out.

"Well, my Mandarin is a little thin," Mark admitted, as he placed the book down on the table. Even glancing at it, Ricky could see the language, dense with symbols, was very most definitely not in English. Even if he could read the words, he could not tell you for a second what they mean. Amy glanced over at it and likewise frowned.

"That's useless."

"I'm aware of that."

"I mean, because it's in Cantonese," she explained.

"Well, then, that's even thinner," Mark pointed out.

“Uh, Amy, how do you know it’s in Cantonese?” Sara asked.

“I can read Cantonese.”

The three of them looked at her in unison, and he was fairly certain they were all thinking the same thing. But, as ever, it was up to Sara to articulate.

“You weren’t born, were you?” she suggested, “You were created in a laboratory from part human part machine. How can I totally not know you speak Chinese?”

“I said I *read* Chinese,” Amy corrected her, “And only because my Aunt Crystal lives in China. I thought it would be fun.”

“Well, now it might be the key to saving people’s lives, so please take a crack,” he asked of her.

He felt it now, the quickening in his chest. The anxiety springing into forward motion and action. After so much time spinning their wheels, he felt like he was on a rollercoaster. They’d been clack, clack, clacking up the tracks – pulled along the chain to the top. Now he felt like they were just breaching the peak, and he could see around for an incredible distance.

“Oooh, not good,” Amy commented, bringing him back from his thoughts.

“What?” he asked sharply.

“It seems to describe an immortal being,” she pointed out.

“Vampyr, Sundune, we got it,” he reminded her, feeling bristly once more.

“No, this has a different meaning,” she corrected, “It’s not immortal like a normal vampyr is immortal – killable but not by natural death. This is something else. It means eternal, truly.”

“That’s not good,” Sara offered.

“Strike him down and he becomes more powerful than you can ever imagine,” Amy read from the pages, before frowning at the Star Wars reference, before continuing, “Until a body is found to restore him to this earthly plane.”

“That explains some things,” Mark mumbled nearby, “Why there’s no picture or physical description of him in the text, for one. He has a spirit. Kill him, and the spirit merely pours itself into another vessel.” He sighed, “This is clearly a problem.”

“We’ll worry about that later,” he brushed off, standing. “For now, I want to know his MO. I want to know where he’ll be. If Claire’s gone after him by herself, and I’m betting she has...”

“Clock’s running,” Sara agreed, but there was no trace of humour in her voice. She added quietly, “We know.”

He grabbed his coat and began to put it on, heading over to the weapons cabinet as he went.

“Call me if you find anything,” he told them, indicating to his Nokia as he threw it back into his coat pocket, alongside a nice shiny dagger.

“Where are you going?” Sara called after him, concern in her voice.

“To find Claire,” he called back, “I need to find the vamps – and this time, no more books – I do it my way.”

He couldn’t quite articulate what he meant to say to her in that moment. It was more than being done with research, more than simply understanding they had another big bad monster in town. It was deeper than that.

He wasn’t dumb. He knew he saw something of his future in Claire. A hunter, shaped by tragedy, driven by vengeance. It clouded his thoughts sometimes. If she could not be saved from it..., could he?

* * *

The town huddled close behind closed doors, as the thunder rumbled in the sky above. The storm, which had lasted for several days now, on and off, had come again – as though they were only passing through the eye of it. As if the maelstrom had simply been holding it’s breath, waiting for things to change once more. To reignite.

High on the hill above town, looking down across the twinkling lights starting to flicker in the thick, wet drops of rain, something began to shimmer and move. Lightning flashed, some people saw. Told themselves it was normal. But red and parchment coloured lightning is not normal, nor good – and people’s rationalisations would not be enough to keep people safe.

For something was coming to Calendar. Something that moved through the thin fabric between worlds and arrived. To those ignorant, it appeared as though a very localised fog arrived in Calendar, high up on the hill – with flashes of localised lightning. To those sensitive to such things, the hairs would raise as something slipped into the world that was not of it.

Both would do the same thing, close their curtains and turn away.

While It, the visitor, began it’s hunt.

* * *

Ricky swept through the alleyway in the rain, confident and calm. He was already soaked to the bone, but it didn’t matter, none of it did. Alone, vulnerable young teenage boy, there in the rain walking home and cutting through darkened shortcuts to get there. It was exactly how he needed to appear – and it worked.

As if shadow standing from darkness, he sensed one of them rising behind him. Something, haunted and hungry, and just several steps back from feral, was behind him. He saw no tell-tale red light, sensed no stench of the grave. These were monsters, yes, but they were different than those he’d faced before. Except, of course, it was for their newborn in the morgue. This was something else.

He did not need to turn around, to know he would see black eyes.

Because as he looked forward, he saw two more at the end of the alleyway – both of them human in form, but darkness inside. They blocked off any escape, as he inwardly smirked. Like he needed an escape. Three would be tough, but he’d done it before – as the burnt out convenience

store on Elm Avenue could attest. After all, the one in the morgue had combusted just like any other vamp. This would be no different.

He turned his back on them, to feel a quick sharp sting of surprise. The rain's noise had covered theirs. Not one, but three stood behind him, their shapes almost indistinct amongst the shadows. He stood in a rare patch of moonlight, as he totalled it up in his mind. Five. Three now in front of him, one closer than the others, and two more behind him.

"Well, bollocks."

Thunder rumbled above, as in lightning and rain it began.

There was no preamble about these guys, the three of them began to rush at him, even as over the din of the bouncing rain he could hear the two behind doing the same. They moved fast, but still not fast enough. The first he tripped, stepping aside and allowing the creature to go straight over his foot as though he'd never seen slapstick comedy in his life. The other two however, were in no laughing mood.

While their companion slammed face first into the dirty gravel below, the other two flanked him, grabbing both his arms and dragging him to slam against the alleyway wall, pinning him backwards.

No.

He brought both of his arms together, drawing on all his strength. Whether out of weakness or surprise, the two creatures were brought together in a violent thud. It was enough to disorient them, shake their grip, as he punched one and kicked the other in the knee. He took the moment to pull off his sodden coat, to give him more freedom of movement, and threw it like a matador over the head of the one he'd kicked. He brought up his knee, driving it straight into the beast's face and heard the roar of furious indignation.

It was then he spied a discarded rusty shovel against the wall and grabbed it with both hands. Always one to improvise, he brought the angry pock-marked blade of the shovel flat side down onto the head of the shrouded vamp with a resounding thud. It fell down to the ground,

stunned, as he whirled it in one smooth motion across the face of a second. The other two had yet to reach them, he had time.

With a kick to the stomach of the first one, who had started to recover, he flipped the shovel ninety degrees in his hand and swung it down in a wide, accurate arc through the head of the one with his coat on it's head. As rusty as it was, the force slashed through the fabric and the creature burst into flame – taking his new jacket with it. Well, shit.

The second was decapitated with another swing, bursting into a beautiful shower of flame, as he stood, finally over the third. He knocked it onto it's back, held the shovel aloft and turned to the two joining them from the far end of the alleyway. Their blank, black eyes were completely expressionless, but he somehow saw fear in them anyway. They did the only thing their instincts were now screaming at them. They turned. They ran.

He held the blade of the shovel alight, pushed his trainer deep into the chest of the scrambling monster beneath his feet and glared. Guide versus monster – and it was no surprise who won. In a voice as booming as the thunder above, he demanded the answer to one question.

“Where is she?”

* * *

Claire didn't know when things changed, but they did. Above her, the sounds of the thunderstorm continued to rage and pick up once more in it's intensity. The occasional flashes of lightning, the moonlight still breaking through clouds. Everything was becoming dreamlike in it's intensity, even as she tried to dissociate herself from it as much as possible from where she lay on the cold, unforgiving ground.

Sundune stood above her, blood dripping from the end of a blade. They were shallow cuts, enough to bring pain but not much else. She knew he had learned to take his time, she'd heard

plenty of the stories – and none of them were exaggerated. But they had barely even just begun – she knew.

But above her, the sounds changed. Perhaps it was the flash of lightning that was unusual in its colour – like that of old paper. Perhaps it was the sudden change in Sundune's eyes. Or perhaps it was the screaming of his guards as above her stone prison, they heard it echoing following a sudden and inexplicable boom well beyond the sound of thunder.

Or perhaps, it was something she never thought she'd seen. Her tormentor, the monster, distracted from his work. And, almost imperceptible, the tremble in his hand.

"They're here," he muttered softly, though she did not think it was for her.

"Who?" she spat, coppery blood staining her teeth.

"The Guards," he answered, the capitalisation clear in his tone. Was he afraid? It didn't matter, either way he was distracted. One chance.

She swept her legs under his, causing him to fall down to the ground next to her in surprise. She scrambled over him, wrapping her chains and shackles around his neck and pulling hard. He didn't need to breathe, she knew that – but he did have to be awake. She slammed his head, calling on all the last of her strength, against the ground in a manner that caused his eyes to roll up into the back of his head.

She knew she wanted to kill him then, the small knife still coated with her blood lay nearby. But she also knew hell had come to the castle, something unknown – and she didn't yet know whether it was a saviour or something far worse. Her survival instincts kicked in, the beauty of knowing an immortal vampyr was that there would always be another opportunity, and so she fumbled instead in his overcoat pocket for a key.

Stupidly, he had it on him, and within moments she was free. The sounds from above grew worse as a faint but perceptible stench filled her nostrils. Somewhere between burning and ozone. She needed to get out, so she rushed for the door and up the steps, limping as she went.

She didn't think to look back, and so she missed the smirk creeping across the sleeping face of the demon she'd left behind.

The screaming intensified as she made her way up the narrow stone steps and into the crumbled half-corridor in front of her. She was back on level ground, able to see down it flashes of red and bone, as from far off a vampyr flew towards her, screaming it's death throws as it burned in the air. It disappeared into ash that showered her as she peered for the source of it's horror, but there was nothing she could see.

The wall to her right collapsed, as the booming sound of thunder clashed with whatever was happening in the castle. She rushed forward, over the rubble and stones and to the end of the corridor, the only direction away from current monsters. She emerged into the courtyard where a new sight met her eyes.

A massacre. Parts of vampyrs, not yet dead but nearly, blood and gore and viscera over low stone walls and barrels left by kids. A fire, a pyre, was blazing and the already ruinous castle looked in even worse state than when she'd arrived. But through it all she couldn't see it, the thing causing the chaos. She could hear it though, the screaming from somewhere to her right telling her where it was.

She saw one of the vamp's swords lying next to it's twitching hand as it tried to reach for it. The being combusted, death finally coming swiftly as mercy as the rain lashed down and tried to mute it's end. She grabbed the sword, picked it up, and almost immediately dropped it when a searing burning sensation worked it's way into her shoulder. A hand, like a vice, had grasped her – torching through her skin brighter than any of the day's pain.

Sundune had followed her, Sundune had her – and Sundune whispered something into her ear. It sounded twisted, like words mushed through broken, sharp teeth. And then, inexplicably, he let go. She swung the borrowed sword behind her in a wild arc, which he ducked, the blade becoming stuck between the edges of two stones. She kicked hard with one boot, driving it into his face as he fell back into the shadows.

There was nothing more to do. In the chaos and the rain and the blood, she ran. She ran for the archway back to the main path. She ran to the rain and the salvation. She ran towards the shame of once again being denied vengeance.

She ran.

Act IV

Ricky's heart beat with rhythm as he raced along the path through the woods. The rain had slickened the already boggy mud into patches that felt damn near impassable and the slowing of his progress was making his heart beat even faster. He raced towards the castle, he raced towards her – hoping against hope that he would not be too late. He needed to get there before her death... or before worse.

He knew he should have gone back to the Library, on some level knew the threat they were facing was worse than anything he could have imagined – and didn't even know how to deal with properly. But still, he had to go. He had to fight. He had to at least save her. And he couldn't really articulate to himself why.

The sounds of distant thunder began to soften in their intensity, as he heard above it another sound. Running. Footsteps. Coming towards him.

His heart leapt in his chest as she saw Claire come from around the corner, then fell right back down again as he took in her state. She was hurt, bleeding, torn. But she was on her feet, even if her run was a fast limp – she was alive.

"Ricky!" she cried out when she saw him.

"Claire!" he cried back, trying to bridge the distance around a particularly nasty puddle. She stepped forward a few more times, then stumbled, as he rushed to catch her. She ended up half-kneeling in the mud, collapsing against his arms.

"Need to...get out here..." she breathlessly tried to tell him.

He held her for a moment, suspended between whether to pick her up altogether or help her to her feet, his eyes drawn further along the lane to the edges of the hulking castle he could only just begin to see on the horizon. Weird flashes and screams came to him, louder now as the rain began to abate around them.

"What happened?" he asked her.

“Not here,” she told him. “Not now. Please, we need to go.”

He looked into her eyes, into the stranger’s eyes. He saw her hurt, he saw her pain, he saw her terror. He saw his future. And he nodded, he agreed.

He lifted her into standing, bracing her against him, as the two of them turned and walked, leaning on one another, down the hill. There was only one place left to go – and the only place where answers could be found.

* * *

Three Years Ago

Okay, she was going to be shouted at, but to be fair it wasn’t her fault. Their netball coach was a bitch and had demanded that they continue practice since apparently, they weren’t yet ready to take on the team from Calendar High School. The Summers vs Calendar games had become legendary amongst...well, sad Lancashire PE teachers.

She opened the door, expecting already to hear her parents moving about in the front room, getting ready to chew her out. While she figured out what the right balance between sarcasm and her charming teen wit to use to still get some tea and maybe a bit of sympathy. She could perhaps mention the graze on her knee from when that bitch Sandy Sanderson knocked her over.

Or maybe not. That might make her dad go on about getting his leg shot off in the war. Veterans, they thought they knew everything.

“I’m back,” she called out, kicking off her moody boots on the hall before she stepped foot on the carpet. She might be able to get out of an argument, but if she dared to grace Juliet Kramer’s fifteen quid a square metre plush Egyptian Beige carpet, the rest of Year 9 would not be worth living. Given her potential GCSE options, which was actually not too bad a prospect. “Sorry about the late-etude, practice ran late.”

But she could smell no cooking. Usually there was a little afterglow, even with the clock standing around 8pm. But there was nothing there. She turned and frowned into the living room, where no one was sitting. Normally by then, they'd sit to watch the tellie. It was a Friday night after all, given the time they'd have finished the first episode of Corrie and be onto the Bill before the new twice-nightly Fridays resumed for your pleasure. Of course, her mum would only pretend to watch it – it was her dad's thing – but she would naturally turn her nose up from her cross-stitch at Tracey Barlow's latest shenanigans.

She hated Tracey Barlow, another Juliet Kramer quirk.

"Hello?" she called out, throwing her school bag onto the empty sofa and listening out for any signs of life around her. "Mum, dad? Dweeb? People of Earth?"

Had they gone out? The front room lamp was on, but everywhere else seemed dark. She moved back to the hallway, looking up the stairs towards where she should have seen light spilling from her little brother's room. By now he'd probably be like hunting Pokémon on his Gameboy Advance or some shit. It seemed like he was always obsessed with that these days.

"Dweeb?" she called out her affectionate pet name, "Where's mum and dad?"

No light, no response. She frowned again, feeling unease creep into her chest, as she turned and decided to head for the kitchen. They had an extensive garden, were they all out in the summer room maybe? Or had something happened? Had they had to rush off, and she'd find a note pinned to the fridge, like when nan had taken a fall last summer?

The only light in the open kitchen was the light spilling from the lamp in the living room, but it was enough.

Drip.

Blood coating the walls, the floor every surface, coming from everywhere.

Drip.

Her brother, his eyes glassy, leaning against the cabinet, his stupid Pokémon socks blood red.

Broken Gameboy. He was a Sapphire guy.

Drip.

The fridge, standing open, the light blaring out at her, a bottle of milk smashed and glass shards holding it open as liquid poured out slowly.

Drip.

Her father's slippers from behind the breakfast counter.

Drip.

Her mother held as in a lover's embrace by a man dressed in black. He could have been kissing her neck, her eyes closed.

Drip.

Something broke. She rushed, he dropped her mother to the ground, to land with a final thud. Like she was nothing. Turning, smiling, grinning that grin of bone – the face she would come to forever hate. Licking blood off his lips, grinning with a mouth full of sharp teeth and eyes as black as the night behind him.

Drip.

She grabbed the knife on the counter, still on the chopping board, from where her mother had been making tea earlier. It still had garlic on the blade. She drove it into the man's side, and he chuckled. He chuckled, held her hand, and grinned at her.

Drip.

She was backhanded, landing on the ground in blood. And the man was gone. The man was gone, and everything was still. And the only thing stirring in the Kramer household, was a fourteen year old girl named Claire. Who, for the last time in three years, cried.

* * *

"After that, the police came," her voice continued, a story she had not told since that night in the police station. "And I'm sure you know the rest by now."

She looked up at the four of them gathered in front of her. She was sat in the chair at the end of the table, they had brought her to the Library. Mark had gently tended to her wounds, using disinfectant, bandages on some of the larger ones. He was a good field medic, did a better job than she'd been doing for herself for years.

She knew she had to tell them, she knew she had to explain, but it pained her to do so. Precisely because of the way they now looked at her, with sympathy, with uncomfortableness. Perhaps even with some pity. It made her feel weak, angry, frustrated. She shook it off, trying to play it down, trying to look away from their emotion-laden eyes.

"Since then, I've tracked him down from place to place," she continued, "Wherever he's gone I made sure I was there. Most of the time, he's gone before I get there – and there's just his lackeys left behind."

"And this time?" Ricky asked softly. She wanted to smack the concerned look off of his face, but she stilled herself. He only cared. Or thought he did, anyway.

"I tracked Sundune down to London," she continued, "But whatever shitstorm he'd whirled up was over by the time I got there. It was then I met a wise woman, she told me where he was going – which turned out to be here. She's the same woman that told me I would meet the Guide."

"Two things my Lord must ye know of the wise woman," Sara joked. Claire appreciated the attempt to lighten the mood but wasn't exactly in a laughing mood.

"Yeah, my dad made me watch *Blackadder* too," she answered, "But she's more like a seriously powerful seer. There's things she knows that most people don't remember. It's weird, but she seemed to know that here was where I was needed. And I arrived ahead of him this time."

She stood, feeling the fresh tug against the bandages and the aches in her muscles as she did. Adrenaline had gone, leaving behind the empty and hollow feeling she never entirely trusted. Perhaps, because it was always ready to come right back again.

“Look, I have witnessed Sundune do more terrible things than any of you could imagine,” she warned them. She knew she was looking at kids, whatever they thought of themselves. But she could already see they were going to argue with her, “You don’t have to help me, I’ll kill him myself.”

She turned, preparing to head for the door, but behind her she heard Ricky move.

“Or he’ll kill you,” he said softly. His hand gently touched her elbow in a spot without bruises or cuts – one of the few – and she told him firmly,

“Let go of me.”

He did, he did let go, but he didn’t move. She spoke to him, not ready still to turn and see the look in his eyes,

“He’s going to pay for what he did to my family,” she told him coolly.

“And how do you plan to do that?” he challenged.

“Well, hacking and slashing works pretty well,” she answered sarcastically, turning on him now and regaining more of her defiance. Her head swam as she did, but she tried not to let it show. “Especially if you don’t stop until there’s nothing left.”

“He has a spirit Claire,” he told her, condescendingly she thought, as if she didn’t already know. “Killing him that way won’t work, he’ll just come back.”

“Then we start all over again.”

“We need to find out a way to kill him for good,” Ricky insisted, almost pleading with her. “We need to know his weaknesses before we go up against him.”

“Bullshit and you know it,” she challenged “You don’t know what I feel, there’s no way you could.”

With that she turned back towards the door, confident that with a little bit of rest, she could press their advantage before he could continue. But Ricky wasn’t done.

“I do.”

There was a sorrow in the tone she recognised, even though the words themselves were not unusual. She looked at him once more and this time the pity she saw was not for her, it was for himself.

“My parents died in a car crash,” he told her. “If you checked me out before you got here, you probably already know.” Behind him, the other three shifted uncomfortably, but remained silent. She knew what they were feeling, like they were witnesses to something that they should not. Something private. Something intimate. Something only, she and Ricky, now, should know. “Drunk driver, behind the wheel of a truck, took them out because he couldn’t wait to get to where he was going before he sobered up. I wanted to kill him.”

He took several slow steps towards her, passion blazing in his eyes.

“I wanted to hurt him in ways sane people don’t even know exist,” he continued, low and soft, but honest. “The ways only people like you and me know exist. But I didn’t.”

“That’s different,” she told him, her voice softer now, as she tried not to give him the same look that so infuriated her moments before, “The guy who killed your parents was human. Even if you wanted to kill him, you couldn’t. Sundune doesn’t have that problem. He can die.”

She needed to get out, to get away, she turned and headed towards the door.

“Claire, wait.”

“I’m done waiting.”

The door exploded inwards in front of her, as the storm itself seemed to burst into the Library. Screaming, howling wind, rain and lightning – red and parchment coloured flashes in her eyes. And finally, the nightmare she had escaped at the castle, she saw.

Hooded, robed, suspended in the air. Made of thick, cloying smoke, yet horribly solid at the same time. She screamed, but it was lost in the fury of the thing itself screaming. Pain, hot and burning, suddenly hit her shoulder – the same place where Sundune had touched her – causing her to fall to her already damaged and injured knees.

The thing swooped for her, behind her, she heard Ricky scream her name. Then, a bright red, burning flash... then nothing.

* * *

He was upside down, at least that's how it felt to begin with. After the red flash, and the world went with it. But as he connected once more with the cool wooden floor beneath him, he realised he wasn't upside down, he was lying down. And when his eyes groggily opened, the back of his skull feeling like it was housing a big old egg – he saw the ceiling of the Library high above him.

"Guys?" he called out. He managed to tilt his head, ignoring and pushing past the pain – and managed to see a pair of feet half-in and half-out of the office door. Then one foot began to twitch as he realised Mark was coming back around to consciousness.

He rolled, managing to get himself back up to his knees, and looking over his friend who had done much the same. Mark grabbed the door frame to steady himself, as he likewise took a moment.

"The girls?" Mark asked him.

"That's women to you boys," Sara's voice came to them from nearby. They both turned to look at the source of the sound, where Sara's feet sticking up in the air told them she was still in her chair – only the chair was now upended. Amy, crawling out from under the table, had a big welt in the middle of her forehead, but likewise seemed as living as the rest of them.

"Did the world explode?" Amy wondered out loud.

"Just the door to the Library," Mark remarked, getting to his feet. Ricky glanced at what he meant and saw indeed, the door through which that... thing, for lack of a better word... was hanging off of it's hinges. "Drake's going to have my testicles for earrings."

It was Sara who pointed out the obvious, first.

"Uh, guys, we seem to be one woman short."

The memories flooded back to Ricky, the moment before. The thing, a form so confusing in its shape, which burst through the door had grabbed one clawed hands towards her as he was watching. And then...something else...

"That thing grabbed her," he told them. "I saw this tattoo, on her back shoulder. It was glowing and seemed to glow even more when it touched her. And then... well... this..."

"Your vagueness is so endearing," Sara commented, as Amy helped her to her feet and the two of them stood there, frowning at the door.

"Tattoo?" Mark asked, "Like some kind of marker?"

"What the hell is going on here?" he demanded, feeling the same surging swell of anger and hurt returning. The sense that things happening, so far outside of his control, returned stronger.

"A dementor took Claire and Sundune is probably responsible," Amy summed up, as she checked her laptop for damage. "Plus, body art always ends in badness, like my mum said."

He went to chastise her but then realised she was right.

"Sundune is behind this," he repeated.

"Getting rid of the thorn in his side?" Sara asked out loud, before muttering, "He could have just picked it out with a pair of tweezers like a normal villain, there was no need for the nuclear option." She sighed, "Okay, I'm stretching metaphors here, but I'm tired of this."

Yeah, he was tired of it as well. He went for the weapons cabinet, the others bristling as he expected they would. But of course, they didn't get it. It wasn't exactly their fight. Not in the same way. Not in his way. Not in Claire's way.

"Um, what are you doing?" Amy asked, articulating what the others were thinking.

"I'm going to find out what happened to Claire," he pointed out, as he rifled through the various weapons in the cabinet. He selected one of his favourite broadswords, then put in the code to turn it back into a simple magazine rack. "Then I'm going to have breakfast and get her back. Maybe not in that order."

“Even if you do manage to hold out again Sundune, how the hell are you going to get him to tell you anything?” Mark challenged, urgency in his voice. “He’s not exactly afraid of death.”

“I’m going to appeal to his sense of reason,” he answered, slipping the sword into his backup coat. He knew he kept a spare in the Library for a reason. Outside the thunder rumbled as he added, “Using my best persuasion methods.”

“Wait,” Sara told him. He turned to glare at her, preparing to tell her that he was going no matter what, but she shook her head, “Claire tried this, and look where it got her. Maybe before you go off half cocked you should think about what she didn’t take with her.”

Suddenly, it came to him. Sara was right. There was one thing he had, which Claire hadn’t. He could only hope it would make the difference.

* * *

From where he stood, he saw darkness, he saw blood and he saw the monster himself. It was true, the man seemed like just any other guy. Dressed in boring black, perhaps his fashion even mirrored his own. Tall, slightly blonde hair, almost Nordic features. Pale in the moonlight, and the licking fires dying down around the courtyard. He could almost pass for a human.

Almost.

But the creature, Sundune, when he laid his eyes on him – it wasn’t a look – it was a feeling. Something beneath the surface, something that made the moonlight glow in a different way, or the flames move as if for him. Something in the way he held himself, told anyone around, he was not a simple man.

“God those buggers have their fun, don’t they?” the being commented dryly, as he brushed at some entrails with his boot. He sighed, the sound of a grave crypt freshly opened. “So, you’re the boy, I take it? The Guide?”

“I am.”

The creature turned, slowly but surely. He didn't have his demonic visage on, his eyes were a simple green. He smiled at him, a weary and exasperated, performative smile, and Ricky tightened his grip on his sword. Still sheathed, for now, but ready.

"You know the whole 'good guys running in packs thing' is so cliché," Sundune mocked him, "Then again, lone wolf is just as overdone. Come about your little girlfriend, have you?"

"Where is she?" he demanded, moving slowly through the shadows of the archway, listening out for any sounds of moving shadows. It seemed the creature Claire had mentioned had thinned his ranks somewhat. Maybe that would even the odds. Or maybe it would just mean they died slower. He would wait and see.

"She's where she'll never bother me again," Sundune answered, before continuing with a shrug, "But then again, if I got out, I suppose she can as well."

"I want specifics," he snapped.

"And I want it to rain blood," Sundune countered, "As the *Stones* say you can't always get what you want."

Ricky drew his blade, glinting in the firelight, as around them the rain began to swell once more. What had become a light drizzle returned once more, though the thunder and lightning of earlier had softened to a low and distant rumble. The storm was moving, but it was not going quietly. Neither, did he reckon, would this monster.

"Look, I know you're invincible," Ricky pointed out, "I know you won't die if I chop off your head. But I do know it will hurt like hell. And every time you spawn, I will do it again, and again, until you beg me to kill you once and for all."

"Do you know how many people have promised that?" Sundune mocked him, "And yet they always fail to deliver."

"Trust me, I won't."

Sundune slowly paced over to one wall, where a stack of swords lay sprawled. He took his time to fish through them, as Ricky circled, pacing, preparing, waiting. The creature was taking his time, frowning at some of the poor craftsmanship no doubt.

“You know in Hell... “ he began, “... well, not *the* Hell, obviously, but the worlds far enough down the Spiral to be practically indistinguishable... you can’t ever actually die.” He picked up one that seemed to satisfy him, one that nearly rivalled Ricky’s own in glint and sharpness. Of course, his was bejewelled with black crystal. “They torture you in a new way every time until you barely have anything left to you. And then you wake up and it happens all over again, for another day. It breaks you, you know. But everybody takes some time for it to strip away everything they were. I wonder how long the little Claire Kramer has? It’s almost worth it to go back there to find out.”

“Almost.”

He raised the tilt of his sword, sweeping into a fencer’s bow.

“First blood?” he cocked an eyebrow.

“All blood,” Ricky sneered.

The thunder rumbled distantly once more, and they swept into action. A clash of two very different beasts. Sundune, the elder, moving with fluidity and grace. He danced, licked like flames, as his sword cut swathes through the night. Ricky, the younger, hacked and slashed with raw power. Rain fell, fires burned, and steel clashed against steel.

But, as Ricky began to realise with a dawning horror, he was getting tired. Sundune, however, was not. Raw power wasn’t going to do it, and it would cost him everything. He had to only hope he had delayed long enough.

Ducking a swipe by a hair’s breadth, Sundune knocked him flat onto his arse, landing hard amongst the ruins of stone from one of the crumbling walls. He spluttered, as rain poured into his mouth making him cough.

“Do you know how useless this is?” the creature mocked, barely raising a breath. “Your death will not bring her back, it means nothing. My place in that place is now hers. The mark ensured it.”

"It means something to me," Ricky spat at him.

"Then you're just a foolish boy."

Ricky felt the laughter begin to well up in his throat as he rolled over onto his back and looked up at the monster in the eye.

"Glad to know I haven't beaten out the sense of humour yet," Sundune commented, "That'll come later."

"I'm disappointed," he cackled, enjoying the moment longer. He'd already seen the flash of movement where needed and knew it was time. "You're supposed to be some big bad arsehole, but you're just another overconfident dickhead on the run. Al-fucking-Capone."

Sundune snarled, flashes of black veins moving around his eyes, as Ricky scrambled and got to his knees, sitting there before the elder, sword off to one side.

"You know, ten years ago this place used to be open to the public," Ricky explained, "They had a whole house of horrors in your lovely dungeon – I hope you repurposed the chains. Love the redecorating by the way."

"Thanks for the history lesson," Sundune snarked.

"And do you know how they kept the lights on?" he continued, "A very dangerous generator..."

The flash of realisation in Sundune's eyes was all he needed, the split second distraction. He didn't know whether to attack or to turn, but either way it didn't matter. It gave him a decision to make. Ricky had already made his. He ran up to his feet, barrelling into the older man and catching him by surprise, driving him back and over the pile of wooden boards and loose kindling in one corner of the courtyard. As Sundune fell into it, Ricky arrested his own momentum, slipping slightly in the mud and turning back around.

He didn't stop to look back, as he pelted straight for the archway. Behind him, the explosion that ripped apart the entire side of the castle where he'd thrown Sundune onto his arse, did it all for

him. There was a warm push at his back, a rumble so loud that thunder couldn't touch it, and Ricky didn't stop until he was part-way down the lane.

There he regrouped with his sodden, happy friends, who looked shattered, cold, but like him triumphant. Before they headed back home to civilization, Ricky turned one last time to look back at the castle, the burning remains blazing hot in the sky, the rain not able to touch it. Maybe it wouldn't kill Sundune forever, maybe sooner or later a new vessel would arise. But for now, it would have to do.

"That's one," he muttered to himself, knowing the creature itself would now hopefully be beyond hearing. "One for Claire."

Then he turned back to his friend, and back into the night.

* * *

After the storm, Sam stepped out into the dawning morning. The sky was bright but grey, no blue in sight. The clouds now were a blanket, not a threat, so she decided to walk with just her school blazer. As she stepped out into the day, she saw Luke standing waiting for her as he always did. His wounds, bright and red still, just getting to the point of beginning to scab and heal. The bruise on his lip was beginning to deepen into a softer purple.

"Hey, ready to go?" he asked her, muted. She nodded, and together they walked along the street. She did not offer her hand, he did not take it. They walked stiffly, silently, until they rounded the corner past the shop on the end of the street. It was then she made her move.

She turned and she pushed him. Not hard, though she noticed his wince, but enough for him to back up against the wall. The surprise, the hurt on his face, was evident, as Sam glared at him.

"I know you followed me."

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

Bless him, but the boy could not lie. His cheeks were already red and his eyes shifted downwards, down towards the ground where memories lay. She was not going to give in, they needed this. Or, perhaps, she needed this – and to not have to deal with any more bullshit.

“Your bruises – you got mugged,” she explained, getting it out there. “I was in the bad part of town, I can add two and two and get four. What the hell do you think you were doing?”

“I could ask you the very same thing,” he snapped back at her.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she snapped and turned away from him. “I’m sick of this, you start off with the constant questions, now you’re following me around? Could you *be* more stalker boyfriend?”

When she looked back at him, he was scared. She could see that, down deep in his eyes. He was afraid of losing her, he was afraid of pushing too far, but the boy was hurting. She also saw shame in his face. She felt the same, she didn’t want this to be over, but she knew things couldn’t continue the way they were.

“Look, Sam, I love you,” he confessed, “Just...stop lying to me. Whatever you tell me now, tell me the truth and I will accept it as the truth and never ask you again.”

“It’s never going to be over,” she scoffed in disbelief.

“I promise you,” he assured her, “Give me something, and I’ll back off everything else.”

She regarded him for a long moment, holding onto herself like she could hug herself better, like the nightmare would end. But it wouldn’t, not until she did something which, while she would not regret, she could still despise herself for having to do. One last lie.

“Do you know why Julie has a new handbag?” she asked suddenly.

“What does that have to do with...” he began, but she interrupted him.

“Shut up and listen,” she snapped, and he did so, his mouth almost comically slamming shut. “She had her handbag nicked a couple of days ago. One of the guys she described remind me of one of the guys at my dad’s factory. I confronted him, and he explained he sold the necklace she had in there to a pawn brokers downtown.”

“Necklace?” he asked.

“Family heirloom,” she slipped in, “The last thing her real mum gave her before she died. Kind of important to her, y’know?”

“Why did you go down there alone at night?” he asked, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“There’s plenty of things I don’t tell you, Luke,” she shrugged, sarcastically, “Maybe it’s because you follow me around in the dark and get mugged.” There it was, the look of hurt and pain on his face she never wanted to see, the shame spiralling. She reached into her bag and brought out his wallet. Still with his unused library card in it. “Look what the pawnbrokers had.”

He took it from her, holding it like a talisman for a moment, unsure what to do, but then he put it back in his pocket. They stood there for a long time, a long moment, as she watched the thoughts go through his head. All of them, and she waited for him to come to a decision. To believe her, to do as he promised and end it, or to discard her lie for what it was, and end them.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally.

“A little trust, Luke.”

“You have it.”

She looked him in the eye a moment longer, her heart beginning to slow back into normal rhythm. She held out her hand to him and he took it, and together they walked to school. And Sam, deep down in her bones, told herself that the one last lie had worked.

Of course, it wasn’t the last one either.

* * *

Mark’s small office felt gloomy and cramped that morning. The normally comforting blanket of heat from the radiator felt stifling as he stepped in to switch it down. Ricky sat upon the sofa, Mark in his chair, and the two boys regarded each other over a cup of coffee – stares venturing into different worlds neither of them saw.

“Sara came to see me this morning,” Ricky broke the silence first, the words quiet. “Said she was sorry about Claire.”

“A bit premature,” he remarked, “I don’t believe she’s dead.”

“But she’s in a place worse than that, right?” Ricky asked him, eyes meeting his for the first time in their conversation. Mark knew what his friend was asking, he was asking for answers, or for reassurance, and Mark found himself unable to come up with either. He continued, “But that’s not the point. She consoled me...as if Claire was someone special to me. And yet, I only just met her.”

“Ricky...” he went to say, to try and offer comfort however faltering.

“What did I know about her?” Ricky asked, and for once Mark could see the sting of tears in his friend’s tired eyes. He wondered if any of them had truly managed to sleep at all the night before, or whether they had all tossed and turned with the burden of too much knowledge. “Her name, her tragedy, but what else? What effort did I actually make?”

“You’re both Hunters,” he suggested, “fighting a nightly war, at times side by side. There’s a bond there that Sara is not the only one to pick up on.”

“I keep thinking about her,” Ricky answered again, his eyes going back to that distant place, “I keep thinking about her life, how alone and how isolated she was. I keep thinking about how if it wasn’t for you guys there, setting off that generator in time for me to... stop him, I could be dead – or like her now. Lost, somewhere. Not knowing if there’s anyone out there looking for me. Because I never got to know her.”

“What did Sundune say about where she was?” he asked quietly.

“That she was where he was meant to be,” Ricky answered.

“Then I may have something,” he explained, slipping the book next to him a little over the table. “I think I know what was behind Sundune’s disappearance, back in the sixties. I think... the guards we saw... I think they belong to Hell. Or at least, a dimension like Hell. We’ve already seen it before with the Hall of the Guide, the way some things can exist layered over our own world.”

Pockets, some large, some small. Other realms. I believe the demonic entity that came into the Library, which took her, might have been one of the guards of one of these... prisons.”

“I think they caught him. Or he was sent there, to spend an eternity in pain. I guess the who and the why doesn’t make much of a difference anymore. But then, three years ago, somehow, he must have escaped. And I believe they have been after him ever since. The reason why he’s always been on the move. The mark you saw, I believe it was a sygil. A... prison tag for lack of a better word.”

The look in Ricky’s eyes showed Mark he didn’t understand. He saw hope dawning there for a moment. He didn’t get it, he didn’t understand, and Mark felt his heart break.

“If he escaped, then you’re saying Claire can escape as well?” Ricky asked.

“Sundune is an immortal vampyr,” he reminded him, softly, “For whom pain is a way of life. Claire is strong, yes, but still so human. There’s only so much pain a mind can take before it’s... changed.”

There it was the dawning realisation. But something came there then he did not expect, a resilience, a grim resignation.

“Then we have to find her.”

Mark nodded his agreement, knowing that his nights of researching were far, far from over.

“Sooner rather than later.”

* * *

All of us fight for something greater than ourselves, she thought. For a purpose, a world which we can only be so lucky to see one day with our own eyes. It is a world free from the fight, free from the darkness, and free from the horror which shapes our lives.

But even as we fight, it begins to corrupt us, to destroy us. Soon we can see nothing but the darkness around us. And in the light of the new dawn, will we fit into this new world? Or will we be so blinded by it that we become the monsters ourselves? Conjoined with the fire and the violence?

She thought, perhaps in death. Her eyes saw nothing, the pain had blissfully ended. Then, Claire saw the ceiling above her with eyes renewed, fresh. Alive.

Foul stench filled her nostrils, cold steel beneath her back. Screams, oh the screams, the moans and the groans of the damned. Things moved in shadows she could not see. All she saw, from where she lay paralysed, was the glint of steel.

Then pain.

And screams.