

**'til the End of the World**

**Year One**

**Episode VI**

**Out of the Hunter**

**Opening**

*November 2005*

*Something is wrong with me, I can almost feel it.*

Everything was quiet and calm in the alleyway. The night air was still, cool, settling after a warm day. Even the rats didn't scurry down this particular one, a cobbled ginnel between two rows of old stone terraced houses. Rain from the day before still puddled in between the cracks of the world, barely a ripple.

*It's like this cancer inside of me. Black and uncontrollable.*

A figure came flying from the darkness to slam hard against the wall beyond. Grit and grime dug into its face, the stench of fetid remains of old rubbish taken out was strong in its nostrils, enhanced by its well...not exactly God-given abilities. It processed it, as pain lashed its thoughts and drove its blood fuelled frenzy.

*The violence just grows and grows until it bursts...*

"You need to get out of this town," the second figure speaks, moving slowly from the shadows where it's brutal attack had taken place.

The first, a creature of the darkness, looks up at the newcomer. The one it has heard whispers of amongst its kind. The boy who is no more than walking death to his kind. The one who

destroyed the leader. It sees him, standing there beyond it's red-soaked vision, it's fangs pricking the bottom of its lips and drawing the taste of it's own rancid blood.

"You killed Satana," it hissed at him, "No one else will have me now."

It speaks of the packs, the ones who follow behind their leaders. It is true. With the death of his master, he is unclean, he is unworthy of consideration. He is left to wander the streets of this shitty backwater town, feeding on vermin and vagrants like a leech. He sickens himself with it, but there is no way to change it.

"Oh, I didn't mean that way..." the boy replied.

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"The violence just grows and grows until it bursts out and then something dies," Ricky explained, unsure what to do with his hands. They were in his lap, as he sat on the sofa in the warm library office, lit only by the desk lamp as he explained to Mark what had been troubling him. "It's like... like there's a time bomb inside of me. A darkness that's gonna explode. And I don't know when."

There it was, out in the world. The growing sense he had, the darkness which he couldn't quite shake, was there and ever present. Recurring in nightmares of ash and fire and blood, now played out every night as he hunted them. The monsters. The blood-drinkers. The killers.

He looked up at his friend, Mark, who's face was remarkably unphased. He looked at his friend with sympathy, offering nothing yet in return as he furrowed his brow in thought. Ricky could not meet his eyes in shame and looked back down at his hands.

Could Mark see, behind his eyes the flashes he was having? The images of the final moments in that alleyway, with that vamp. His face blank as he beat the creature bloody, until finally the flames took over once more and the sorry creature became nothing but ashes in the wind and swirling in the pools of water collected amongst the cobbles.

Could he see what he felt like inside? Like a monster?

Or a hunter.

*'til the End of the World*

*Episode 6 – Out of the Hunter*

*Starring:*

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

**Act I**

Mark regarded his friend with an even look, one meant to be calm and reassuring. Inside, his mind was whirring. Not with judgment, per se, because as both he and Ricky knew his so called 'abilities' or 'gifts' were hardly something he had brought on himself. But to feel that there was a growing darkness inside him, a kind of detached violence, made him uneasy.

Especially, as his mind drifted back to the milky white eyes of the screaming medium he'd visited. The one who grasped him with her hand hard, bleeding and told him in a raspy voice to 'beware the darkest soul'. Was this what was happening in front of him? The darkest parts of Ricky's nature giving in to the violence and the darkness? He supposed, one question remained – if Ricky's gifts were demonic rather than divine, could he still be turned towards a higher purpose? Could he still fight the forces of darkness, rather than succumb to them?

None of this he articulated that night, it was late and both of them were reaching their limit for the day. Instead, he reassured his friend that they would dig deeper into what 'the Guide' meant. What the lineage he had inherited belonged to. Even if the world itself seemed to have forgotten the term, there was always a way. Even if inside, he continued to doubt.

"It's been a week now," Ricky sighed, leaning back against the sofa. "God knows what she's been going through."

Mark checked himself from a sarcastic response. Claire. The topic always seemed to come back to Claire when they spoke, and he did not always feel like it was a deflection from the darker nature Ricky found himself confronted and paranoid about. He knew, because Mark felt the same himself, that what happened to Claire was a failure on all their parts. He had done scant reading on hellish dimensions since they learned of Sundune's imprisonment and none of it had been particularly pleasant reading.

"I'm afraid unless you know anything more..." Mark began, as had seemed to become ritual, "We're out of luck."

Ricky grunted in frustration, as he uttered the words they all felt,

"I just wanna help her," he said. "I gotta help her."

"What do you suggest is next?" he asked, before adding, "Did you find Mickey?"

Mickey was a 'Fencer' – beings or demons who claimed neutrality in the war between darkness and light and had been Claire and Ricky's first port of call to find out what the word on the street was about the term the Guide. The answer had been a bust, but from what Ricky had described of the man, his demonic nature was a little less than title only.

"Mickey the rat was nowhere to be found," Ricky admitted, "It's like every informant I ever knew has disappeared. Something's got them spooked, they've run back into the woodwork."

"Sundune?" he suggested.

"Could be," Ricky shrugged, "But it's gotta be more than that, Sundune's dust in the wind now."

Well, after the fire and explosions and fight at the castle Sundune's immortal spirit was more likely simply floating around waiting to be brought a new vessel by his acolytes, but 'dust in the wind' seemed as good an explanation as any.

"Not forever," Mark reminded him, "And when he gets back into a body I believe he's going to have taken his death somewhat amiss."

Mark leaned back in his chair, the wheels creaking beneath him as he thought. There was something else, he knew. Something he hadn't yet told Ricky about – and which was the only avenue he could next consider. He hadn't lied, per se, to Ricky – but perhaps it was a lie of omission. He could only hope that his friend would understand when he chose to reveal it.

"There is one other option available to us," he began, hesitating before committing to it, "Something I've kept back from you for some time."

"Please don't tell me you're evil," Ricky joked, though Mark could tell by the way the smile didn't quite touch the edge of his tired eyes that he feared exactly that.

“Do you ever wonder why I so readily believed you last year?” he asked, referring to the events which brought them together in the first place. “When you came to me with a fantastic story of supernatural beings?”

They didn’t talk about those early days, for very good reason. But it was true, Mark had known about the supernatural long before Ricky’s dreams drove him in his direction. And he had never exactly been forthcoming as to why.

Well, when you’re facing death sometimes you forget to ask questions.

“I assumed you read a lot,” Ricky admitted with a shrug.

Mark paused, taking a sip of his green tea to buy himself time to think how he was going to articulate what came next.

“I was three when my parents died,” he began, settling the cup with a slight rattle back into its saucer, “Me and my brother were granted into the custody of our Aunt and Uncle, who lived in Calendar. They’re not exactly the warmest of people, part of the reason I think John left. Growing up, with two people who never wanted children, they kind of tend to leave you very much to yourself. And so, if you stay quiet, you start to hear things.”

Ricky, to his credit, remained quiet and non-judgmental, regarding him his attention and no recrimination. Not yet.

“Since I was little, I kept hearing things,” he continued, “Snippets of ideas, whispers or demons and some kind of war building. When I’d be left alone, I’d sneak into my Uncle’s study and find volumes and volumes of demonic and supernatural lore. It was then I first began to hear a term. ‘Covenant’.” He settled into the home stretch, “I believe they’re part of an organisation that knows about the forces of darkness. I don’t know what their aims are or motivations, but I believe they know things. Whatever is going down, whatever has happened to Claire... perhaps there may be a chance they already know about it.”

“Why haven’t you told me about them before?” Ricky asked him. Mark strained himself to hear a hint of scorn or recrimination, but there was none.

“Because they are as apathetic as they are secretive,” he admitted, “When we were having problems with Satana, when you were poisoned, I went to my Aunt, Beth, for help. She warned me off asking questions, told me never to speak of it to my Uncle. She didn’t seem to like my proximity to you, though they know you are the Guide. They don’t know I’m helping you, or at least, I don’t believe they know the extent of it – and I don’t think they will like it when they find out.”

“You think they might do more than just stand on the side lines if you push them for information?” Ricky correctly assumed. He nodded.

“If I push them overtly for information, yes,” he admitted, “But my Aunt Beth was a little softer – she didn’t tell my Uncle about the conversation after all. I can possibly get something from her without him finding out.”

“I get why you didn’t tell me,” Ricky told him, suddenly, “Some stuff is family, I get that. Part of me didn’t want to tell you how bad things were getting for me, but I did. And you just told me about them, so... that’s good. We can trust each other, right?”

“Yes,” Mark agreed, hoping his face would not give away the other bit of information he’d kept to himself. They could discuss the darkest soul at another time. “I’ll speak to her tomorrow.”

That seemed to satisfy Ricky, who sighed and stood, heading towards the door.

“Speaking of tomorrow...”

“Ricky,” Mark called to him. His friend paused in the doorway, standing between the warm office light and the darkness beyond.

“Yeah?”

“We’re going to get Claire back, you know.”

“Yeah, I really hope so. Goodnight.”

That done, there was nothing else the night could give them. So, Mark packed up himself and headed for sleep. In the morning, things would change yet again, and he wished to be ready for it. As ready as he could be, anyway.

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Tiredness lived behind his eyes as Ricky finally made his way into the quietness of the home. Rob would be half-way through his nightshift, likely back when the sun's first lights began to flitter through the curtains and Ricky would have to rush out to school. He did what any other teenager would do when coming home, even if it did happen to be after midnight. He dropped his school bag on his bed, hung up his coat and stashed his favourite broadsword at the back of his closet. Y'know, normal stuff.

Even though he felt more exhausted than he had in a long time, but not the kind which ached his bones and told him he'd worked physically, he knew he couldn't sleep. It was emotional exhaustion. He was annoyed with his feelings, which kept coming and going in waves. Sometimes he was angry at Sundune and upset with himself for not being able to keep her safe. Sometimes it was frustration with Claire for not letting them in on what was going on sooner, so maybe they could have had a chance to save her. Sometimes it was feeling relieved at having his best friend Sara and the twin brains of Amy and Mark to help them. Sometimes it was a fear, of everything he had to do before him – the world of possibilities of monsters that existed every night.

What he was afraid of most though, was the numbness. Sometimes that would spread too through him. The sensation that he needed to be done, like his heart and brain had been touched with that novocaine stuff they gave you at the dentist. Made you feel like sure, stuff could touch you, but it didn't matter. Perhaps nothing mattered.

The blankness that was scarier than the emotion, even if both were equally tiring.

His thoughts continued to whirl, so he decided to stick on the television and plonked himself down in front of it. He considered whether he was hungry, but having finally placed his body upon the sofa if slightly awkwardly shaped second-hand sofa, he realised he didn't have the mental capacity to get back up. Not tonight. Not until he finally chose to slink to bed anyway.

He went for the remote, sticking off the end of the coffee table and managed his most vigorous manoeuvre of the night – leaning forward to grab it. As he did his eyes settled on the framed photo of the family. Mum, dad, Rob and him. How old had he been? Like twelve? He still had on a Mortal Kombat top so it couldn't have been much younger. It was on the trip to Wales – he could still see the lighthouse they visited in the background.

Grief wanted to grab him then, he could feel it. It slunk into his heart, reminding him that time was only an illusion, and their death was a second ago, not a year. He could sense it there, trying to touch his heart. But the weariness, the numbness wouldn't let him. It snaked at him, tried to pry and was pushed away. He couldn't.

So, he leaned back into the sofa, remote in hand, and as the soft glow of the night's crap TV swam before him, he allowed his mind to simply settle into the grey fog of nothingness for a while. Maybe that would help.

Maybe in the morning it would be different.

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He had to judge the timing perfectly. As he got himself ready that morning, waking (from what little sleep there was), showering and choosing which jumper to wear, he listened out for the sound of his Uncle leaving. Mark had to wait until he heard the sound of the door, then the low soft rumble of his diesel engine, and after a count to ten, make his way down the stairs. And all at a time when it was perfectly plausible for him to leave for college.

He padded slowly down the steps as the clinking sound told him his Aunt Beth was clearing up. He turned into the kitchen from the bottom of the stairs to find her indeed clearing away his uncle's plate and cutlery and heading over to the bubbling and steaming slowly filling sink. Why did it seem all their conversations like this were due to take place over doing the dishes? Perhaps it would be a ritual for them.

The tinny sound of the radio seemed so far away, but of course, outside there was the sound of slowly commuting traffic.

“Uncle John gone to campus today?” he asked casually as he appeared there. With her back turned to him, slipping the goods into the soapy water she agreed. Of course, he knew he was – he always went to the university on Tuesdays early, to prepare for his afternoon classes.

He slipped into the seat at the small dining table, today’s cloth a soft pink with small cream covered flowers. Perhaps they were meant to be elderflower, but more likely they were just meant to be pretty.

“Are you all ready for tomorrow?” she asked, turning back and replenishing the toast in the centre of the table. Despite not feeling hungry in the slightest, and in fact with a touch of apprehensive nausea in the pit of his stomach, he took a slice anyway and a bite. Perhaps it was the forthcoming conversation, or perhaps it was the mention of his birthday that brought it about. Or perhaps it was the culmination of everything together.

“All I have to do is live another day,” he glibly answered, but it was honest at least. He’d never been a particularly big birthday person, even if this one was more significant than most. Neither had his Aunt or Uncle been one for exuberant celebrations, either.

“It’s a big day,” she reminded him, pulling out a seat and sitting with him at the table. “Your eighteenth, it’s the end of your childhood.”

The tone was pleasant enough, but the undercurrent felt a little more menacing. Was the room a little darker? The morning sun blotted out by a sudden swish of cloud?

“That’s already come much too soon,” he answered, feeling the wooden taste of the toast in his mouth unable to cut through his distaste. He placed it down onto the plate beneath him, hesitating, readying himself for the plunge. “What do you know about hell dimensions?”

For a moment he thought she would pretend not to have heard him, she froze in the spot, just after having put the lid onto the tub of butter. Then, like melting ice, she slowly placed the tub back onto the table and sighed. She would not meet his gaze.

"I thought we weren't going to talk about things like this."

"I get that there are things I don't know, and things out there bigger than me and my place in this town," he responded, "But all I can see is the people I care about, so I have to do something. I have a friend, a hunter, who's trapped somewhere dark, where she isn't meant to be. Because she tried to do the right thing. I'm out of my depth, and I need some help."

"And I've already make it clear that I can't give it," she answered. He almost imagined he saw a slight scoff before she gently corrected herself, "*We* can't give it."

"Please..." he almost begged.

It was then her look softened and for the first time he saw the woman his Aunt was. Not an authoritarian figure in his life, someone who provided a home and shelter and food. Not someone who checked his grades were okay and came to parent's evenings. Someone who was a person in her own right.

It was as though he never realised the face she wore was a mask, a façade. A carefully calculated layer over what she truly thought and felt. Perhaps she too was trapped in some way, by the world around her. One thing was clear – she believed what she was saying.

"Mark, I'm sure I don't have to tell you the dangerous nature of what's out there," she explained, her eyes finally turning to him and her look meeting his own, "but the greatest evil can come from man, not from demons or ghouls."

Something occurred to him then, a thought he never thought to question, though it seemed obvious in retrospect. He reached out and place his hand on hers, hers still warm from the washing up bowl.

"This 'Covenant', which side are they on?" he asked.

"Their own."

A long look passed between them as he thought he finally began to see clearly. Neutrality did not mean safe, and he'd been mistaken for thinking apathy was their main trait. There was more to this than he'd known, he could see it in her eyes.

“They care nothing for family, nothing for friends,” she continued in a low voice. “If they catch you doing this, the consequences will be dire. For you... for me... this is the promise. Please don’t break it.”

He stood, unsure now what more he could say or do. She was frightened, he could tell by the slight shake of her hand as he’d held it. Whether she wanted to help him or not was irrelevant, she could not. Or believed she could not.

But, of course, it made the last day of his childhood even more important. The last day he could, in wilful ignorance, defy the authority that came before.

“I have to,” he told her, in quiet defiance. “That’s *my* promise. To my friends.”

He turned and walked for the door. After a moment, the clank of dishes in the sink and the soft swish of water told him she’d returned to her day. Fearful or not life went on, and he had promises he intended to keep.

\* \* \*

“Remove your shoes from the table or I shall remove them from you.”

The grumpy librarian wandered into his domain, as Sara graced in looking up at him from the latest issue of *Teen* magazine. It was boring this issue, she honestly did not care which member of Destiny’s Child was doing what these days. She’d always been Team Kelly, but it seemed Beyonce was hogging all the limelight.

Honestly, you do one Austin Powers movie and think yourself a movie star. Kind of sad really.

“You coulda just said ‘shoes,’” she reminded him, as she obliged him and put her feet back down onto the ground, forced to sit up a little more normally in her chair. “Jeez, do you have to be such a drama queen?”

*He’s definitely a Michelle,* she thought to herself.

“What are you lounging about for?” he asked her, his tone his usual touch of acerbic, as he moved behind the counter and began fiddling around doing his Librarian type things. She didn’t want to ask and so allowed him to simply use his stamps and fiddle with his books however he liked.

“I’m avoiding class,” she explained. History, third period. She hated it with a tremendous passion. Who cared about history anyway? Hadn’t it already happened, and so what was the point in going over it? Why did they not have like a Future-Story GCSE instead. She could imagine robots and stuff for an exam. “Is that so bad?”

“If Drake finds out, you know I’m in for an earful of bile,” he pointed out. She regarded him properly, putting her magazine onto the table in front of her and frowning. Okay, so he was bordering on slightly more acerbic than usual. Like vinegar left out in the sun too long.

“But you would be willing to suffer through that for a dear friend, would you not?” she teased. He remained engrossed in something he was filing, but his eyebrow raised as thought caught in a fish hook and she could take a hint. “Not. Fine, put it on my tab.”

“Sara, go to class.”

“Someone’s grouchy this morning,” she highlighted, “Did you find someone returned a book with the dog ears? I know you hate that.”

He actually ignored her, instead heading into his office to continuing doing his boy broody thing. Well, that gave her all the answers she needed about his hormonal state. Besides, fresh victims came in through the door as Ricky entered the library and Sara threw him a bright smile.

“Ricky! A bright spark in my boring morning,” she greeted.

“Do you have to be so loud?” he groggily asked her, doing his best imitation of a zombie. The Romero kind, not that horrible remake with Ving Rhames. Call her a classicist she preferred a slow zombie. Or, like, no zombies. He joined her at the table, sat down with the ooft of someone giving up on life, and placed his forehead on one of the thick tomes she’d been considering sneaking out to mess with Mark. “Book cool.”

“You have been hanging around here for way too long,” she commented cheerfully, “perhaps you would like some Prozac, or... a life?”

Instead of responding zombie-Ricky instead picked up the book beneath his head, fanned it open to around the middle and then placed it like a little tent over his head to provide coolness and darkness.

“Have we been boozing again?” she joked.

“I fell asleep on the sofa.”

“Ah, that explains the button impressions on your temple,” she agreed, “Kudos on getting Sky.”

He grunted, she rolled her eyes, and then – as if by magic – salvation appeared. A third visitor to the library that morning, ahead of lunchtime. The short, unspectacled figure of her geeky best friend, Amy, walking in and seeming a little uneasy with how big Sara’s grin was.

“Amy, please tell me you’re cheery this morning?” she half-begged, to which Amy, puzzled replied,

“As I ever am, why?”

“You have entered the land of Doom,” she warned her, “Where Librarians refuse to get into the Birthday eve spirit and Guides bury themselves in books...” She indicated down to the weirdo next to her, “... literally.”

“The boys all hormonal this morning?” Amy asked, moving deeper into the Library.

“Like a fox,” Sara agreed, unsure if she had used that correctly.

“Please... leave...” came the muffled voice of their buried chosen one. Sara decided to take that as a cue, to leave the testosterone to... test or whatever, and stood, picking up her things and deciding to leave *Teen* for Mark or Ricky. There was a quiz on how to deal with pre-menstrual tension, after all.

“I think, Amy, it is time for us to depart,” she told her friend, as she moved around the table and linked arms with her friend.

“We could go for breakfast bagels, my treat?” Amy suggested, knowing full well the breakfast ‘bagels’ consisted of lukewarm hash browns on yesterday’s bagels and lashings of ketchup. Brunch of queens in other words.

“Oh, Amy, light of my life.”

With that they made to depart, leaving Ricky and Mark to their boy-induced gloom. However, she could not resist a little parting shot, waiting until she heard Ricky sigh in relief before dropping a particularly heavy book on the table and running for the door where Amy was waiting for her.

She heard his retort clear across the room as she fled.

“Evil cow.”

\* \* \*

“Hello?”

Mark heard the voice and wished he could fall into a black hole, but he had avoided her for several days already, so he counted his blessings, took a deep breath and stepped out into the main room of the Library. Steeling himself for war.

“For a moment I thought it was a flesh and blood student,” he joked dryly, “You got my hopes up.”

Miss Drake, replete with navy blue power suit and he swore way too much lipstick than was customary for a supposedly dowery thirty-something headteacher. She looked like she belonged in the board room with Alan Sugar rather than running a small town school – but she was all they had. Perhaps the Demon Headmaster wasn’t available.

“I heard you’ve trebled your usual turnover level,” she returned, “Mr Kent, Miss Carpenter and Miss Donaldson have all been gracing your doors these days with alarming irregularity.” He couldn’t help himself but scoff.

"Your spies must be everywhere," he mused.

"I keep my ear to the ground," she agreed.

"Is that why you can't hear me when I ask you to leave me alone?" he asked back.

"No, that's selectively choosing to ignore you," she admitted. She sighed, clearly from her behaviour she didn't want anything, she was bored. She wandered over to the counter, running one crimson fingernail along the length as she asked, "So, have you promised them weed or something if they start hanging out in the library?"

"I do have a life beyond dope and felony," he assured her, wondering whether he could squeeze in any further of the seven dwarfs she imagined in her mind.

"Books?" she asked, deceptively lightly.

"Selectively choosing to ignore *you* now," he pointed out, deciding to busy himself with some book returns and hoping she would go away. She did not, instead leaning against the counter and pretending to be mildly interested in what he was doing. She did not love administrative work, anyone who saw her at the governor's meetings could tell that. "Whose parents are you hiding from?"

"A year seven I made cry," she admitted. "Oh, don't give me that look, he was being a child."

"Did you take your face off and show him what you look like without makeup?" he enquired, politely. He had to admit a little verbal sparring with her was making him feeling a touch better after the morning's gloom.

"No, contrary to your popular beliefs, I'm not like your brother," she answered. He glared, they rarely spoke of his brother John – and certainly not back at home. Evidently, Drake didn't care as she continued, "How is the old Librarian then? I hear he's singing in a bar on Canal Street at the moment. Quite the show."

"I would insult your family, but I very much doubt you have one," he threw back.

"I have a family," she admitted, "Just... not here."

"Ah, only come out at night, flitting from village to village stealing people's essences?"

It was her turn to bring out the glare and Mark simply regarded her with a patient look which inside he did not feel.

"I just wanted to wish you a happy birthday," she told him, sweet like a glace cherry.

"You're a day early."

"I know, but I figured with the big celebration you're certainly preparing, you wouldn't be in tomorrow for me to wish it to you in person," she answered.

"You mean, *you're* going to be off sick tomorrow to avoid the parents coming back in again?"

"You know me too well."

With that, she must have judged the coast to be finally clear, as she turned and headed for the door. Once there, she paused and turned back to him, he caught her out of the corner of his eye. Something in her tone and the look on her face gave him pause, and he looked across at her. She seemed, not barbarous, but a little sad.

"Good luck tomorrow, Mark."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a big day," she explained, "when you turn eighteen. One more turn of the world and you're an adult."

"Ah, the world of booze, whores and fur flyin'?" he quipped.

She didn't answer. Instead, gave him a small, enigmatic smile and turned and disappeared off into the afternoon. Mark thought on it a moment longer, shook off what she'd said, and got back to work.

Adulthood, it seemed, wasn't waiting.

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The street seemed calm, but it felt false. The cold November air tingled against his skin as he walked, but his mind still felt cloudier somehow. The sky was fresh, just cold. Blues were darkening in

the distance, while the sun threw out it's last orange rays of light against the few sporadic clouds that still hung around. The temperature had dropped, and a light breeze had begun to blow, skittering the dry leaves across the pavement in front of him.

His path was one he'd walked a thousand times, from school back to home. Go parallel with the hill at first, crossing several adjacent streets until finally reaching his own. Turn right and head past the few errant warehouses in the small industrial park (there were about three places all of which seemed to be care related) and then straight on down towards the petrol station. Their terraced back-to-back was near the bottom.

Ricky shuddered, wishing he'd grabbed more than just his school blazer in the morning which was barely giving him any warmth. He found it hard to concentrate, the light stinging his eyes. How could he be so tired? He'd slept after all – and before 3am for a change. And yet his weariness hung over him like a thick fog.

An engine sound drew his attention. It wasn't unusual – the road wasn't exactly a main one, but it was still more common than not for a car to pass him by. It was different, it was the way the sound rose – sharp acceleration, with a suddenness like a lion springing into action. His hunter senses sprung into action likewise, as he whipped his head around to see what was happening.

The car making the noise was large – perhaps more like a jeep than an average car. The kind of bulky crap people were beginning to favour despite not needing. It was solid black, the sheen the only give away for the windows which themselves were tinted deeply. He couldn't see anyone underneath, but they seemed to see him – and clearly. The bonnet was pointed towards him.

Realising it was coming straight for him he had only a moment to think. Any longer and the jeep would have ploughed into him. So, without thinking further, he threw himself to the side, away from the road and down the embankment separating the industrial park from the main. He heard the bump of the rim as it hit the curb and he knew they weren't stopping. He pinwheeled, feeling out of control as he flew down the embankment barely touching the ground, hand, foot, hand, foot, before landing hard on his front on the tarmac below.

It was only a short distance, but his mind whirled as if he'd been spinning for hours. He'd lost all sense of direction as the screeching sound of tires dragged him back to reality. The jeep hadn't bothered stopping – two clear tracks coming down the muddy slope behind him, cutting through the swathe of brown leaves from the nearby trees and digging up some of the grass. It hadn't been able to hit him, had swerved in fact past him and screeched to a stop nearby.

He scrambled to his feet even as out of the corner of his eye he saw two men emerging from the vehicle. In combat gear. All black combat gear like some stupid video game. What the hell was going on?

Feeling like he'd somehow found himself in one of those awful Bourne movies, he rushed for the nearest door. His instincts were in full flight, his hands nearly shaking with adrenaline rather than fear. The mumble of voices came to him, though the two men were speaking to each other rather than him. Two loud bangs registered as he realised, given the sound of metal ricocheting against metal that they were shooting at him.

He ducked behind the nearest car, as bullets continued to fly. Actual bloody bullets. They pinged around him until all of a sudden, the resounding booms stopped and he realised they were reloading.

There, a door.

He rushed and kicked with all his strength – nearly ripping the door from its hinges, but it worked. The place was closed for the day, but it would be open for him, as he rushed through into the relatively safety of the dark interior. He could hear boots on the tarmac behind him and knew he was pursued.

With his heart pounding in his ears, blood flushing through his face and the strongest feeling of clarity he'd had all day, he rushed from inside the reception area into which he'd broken and headed through the next door. Inside he found himself in a larger, more cavernous space, in which there were three or four cars all being worked on. The smell of paint hung heavy in the air, and he

didn't stop to wonder exactly where he'd found himself, not when he could hear the two men behind him.

As long as they didn't have night vision – and given the Splinter Cell load of bullshit he was finding himself facing in the suddenness of the afternoon, he wasn't sure they wouldn't – he ducked further into the shadows, slipping behind one of the further cars. He heard their steps and as he'd finally slowed himself to a stop could listen out for more. Breaths, but not rapid. Heartbeats. Human heartbeats.

He chanced a glance. They were fanning out, one, perhaps the leader, gesturing for the other to go around to the side where Ricky was crouched. His eyes dropped down through the car window, and he saw, with surprise, that they had left the keys in the ignition. Well, if the whole place was locked up, why not, he supposed. With incredible slowness, fighting the urge to rush, he grasped the handle, and slid it with an almost imperceptible click.

Seconds later, he waited for them to get closer. Step, by step. He chose his moment, then two bright high beams cut into the darkness, the engine roared to life, and he slammed on the accelerator as hard as he could. It was not his first time driving a car – no matter what Rob may have thought – but it was certainly his first time in a life or death situation. The car lurched forward, the engine and wheels screaming in the dark as shouts sprung to life.

The closest one to him was clipped by the car as he drove past, falling off into the darkness with a cry of pain that Ricky hoped was somewhere between serious and not-yet-life-threatening, as he steered towards the final shutter at the highest speed he could muster. There, the other, perhaps the leader, rose his barrel and fired. Spider-webs cracked across the windshield as he went with Ricky ducking to avoid.

The shutter rose in front of him, sudden, the car going full pelt. It buckled, crunched, lurched and then suddenly there was stillness. The car did not burst through the shutter and out into the street as he'd expected, just sent flecks of paint everywhere.

“That works in the movies,” he muttered to himself, as he flung open his door and registered both of the men on the ground – groaning and recuperating and somewhat alive, as he turned and raced back in the direction of the office and the outdoor world.

Outside, he had two options – to run or to remove their only means of transport and do something mildly illegal.

He wasn't far from the school, the chances of him being caught were next to nothing. So, he rushed to their jeep and found to his second surprise of the day the keys were dangling from the still ignition, the engine still idling. He jumped behind the wheel, said a quick prayer to a God he didn't strictly believe in, and peeled out of the parking lot.

From Splinter Cell to Grand Theft Auto.

As he drove away, one thought overtook the others – over the metallic taste of pure fight or flight in his mouth. None of the feelings were pleasant, but he was at least feeling something.

**Act II**

Mark sat in the darkened Library, waiting. He had been packing up his belongings at the time – well, putting his current working notepad into his satchel and hoping he would be late enough to miss an awkward family dinner. Regardless of what his Aunt had said to his Uncle, the dinners themselves were never exactly full of warm and friendly banter. Then the call had come in. Ricky, out of breath, asking if he was still there.

Since he technically still was, he'd promised to wait.

Was that screeching tyres?

Most of the teachers, including a surprising Drake, had headed home for the night – the car park had been pretty much empty when he'd last glanced from his office window. He considered going to look, but realised Ricky had arrived – the doors bursting open as his wild-eyed friend returned.

"Ricky," he greeted, "As much as I appreciate an excuse not to go home for dinner, what's the matter?"

"We have problems," Ricky told him, a little out of breath. Mark took it in, the look in his eye, the slight red rims which were normal now and probably mirrored his own now they no longer slept quite as well at night. The shake of his hands, slight, was new – something he'd not seen on the young man in their time together. A look of confusion, panic.

Having seen him fight once or twice, whatever it was which made him panic so was definitely something to pay attention to. Mark indicated he sit at the table, joining him, Ricky did so.

"I gathered that."

"I was just attacked," Ricky explained, laying his hands on the table. Perhaps to brace himself, perhaps to steady. More likely to help combat the flood of adrenaline rushing through his system. Ten minutes, roughly, and his fight or flight response would calm enough.

“Vampyr? Demon?” he probed, before attempting a little humour, “One of Sara’s blind dates?”

“Guys with guns,” Ricky told him, to his surprise. “They had a black jeep, and a whole load of hate on for me in particular. Real splinter cell shit. I felt like they’d mistaken me for Jennifer Garner.”

Mark blinked at him.

“Can we do this in two cultural references or fewer, you know I struggle?” he pointed out, “Although to be fair, my older brother loved *Alias*.” This gave Ricky pause enough to frown at him, so he shrugged, “Must be the wigs.” He sighed, thinking through and leaning forward, “Okay, if you were the target and not just caught by random happenstance...”

“Oh, they really didn’t like me very much,” Ricky assured him, “I’m taking it personally.”

“... then most likely it has something to do with you being the Guide,” Mark offered, “Or someone you pissed off.”

“One of Sundune’s vamps?” Ricky suggested, “One of Satana’s vamps? The guy I shoved in Costa yesterday?”

“I would rule out the vampyrs, given the daylight,” Mark pointed out. He’d recently settled that particular question through research. Apparently, it would give them a horrible sunburn, and thus most vampyrs avoided them altogether – but it was not immediately fatal or inflammatory as books and movies may suggest. Then he caught on, “You really hit someone in Costa?”

“It was a latte thing,” Ricky dismissed with a wave of his hand, “Back to the issue...”

Mark furrowed his brow in thought, leaning on his knees and knitting his hands together as he thought. Ricky stayed silent beside him, allowing him the time to think. He could hear his breathing slowing, his jitters returning somewhat to normal. The peace, the quiet, must have been helping.

“So, men in tactical gear, guns, unremarkable vehicle,” he worked out loud, “They sound organised. Not likely affiliated with law enforcement – but guns aren’t so easy to get a hold of these days. If they’re organised and targeted you, I keep coming back to the idea that they are targeting

you because they know who you are – either as a Guide or as someone hunting monsters.” He hesitated a moment, and then finally suggested what he’d been considering for a while, “I think it’s time we head back to the Hall of the Guide.”

“The blown up one?” Ricky reminded him, sceptically.

“We haven’t been back since Satana’s kidnapping and your... well, experience,” he reminded him in turn. “For all we know, it could hold some answers.”

“Or cinders.”

“If it’s impassable, we’ll just turn around,” he suggested, “Otherwise, I would say we go first thing in the morning. In the meantime, I would suggest getting as much rest as you can.” While he didn’t add it, the bags under Ricky’s eyes were making him look tired. Well, more tired than usual, but he found himself unable to voice his full concern for fear of Ricky taking it offensively.

“So, you bring the black magick, I’ll bring the party mix?” Ricky joked weakly. At least the shakes had stopped, that much was something. Mark nodded his agreement, and Ricky headed for the doors. As he did, Mark allowed his thoughts to wander back to the problem, and his body to wander into his office and look out at the parking lot.

Funny, he could have sworn he’d heard the sound of tyres braking suddenly nearby a few minutes earlier. But as he glanced out across the car park, he saw not a single vehicle remaining, and the street beyond was quiet. As he continued to watch, the shape of his friend stepped out into the shadows. He paused at the edge of the car park, turned his head this way and that as if looking for something – then shook it, as though to clear it from cobwebs.

Mark did not know how the sense came to him, but something down and deep told him something was very, very wrong.

The next day, he determined, they would find out exactly what.

\* \* \*

The band of woods which stretched around the western slopes of the Old Man of Calendar was particularly on the nose name wise. They were called Witches' Woods. And while Mark had told him the only association was some tenuous link to the nearby Pendle Witches – who were about as magickally inclined as your average water bucket and simply now a testament to the tragic nature of humanity – it never paid to be too careful.

This had, in fact, been the very woods in which Calendar Castle still remained – or the burnt remnants of that old fort. There Sundune's spirit would likely still linger, and there remained many more things out in the woods, old and new, which he was sure they'd discover in time. They certainly weren't the places people frequented for fun – even reckless teens such as they.

"What the hell have you got in here?" Ricky grumbled at Mark, from several paces behind him. The large bag which Mark had shown up with at the meeting spot – the visitor's parking down near the main road – was slung across his back and weighed a bloody ton. Mark simply glanced back at him with an infuriating bright grin for the morning.

"The black magick stuff," Mark quipped, before adding, "I see you've forgot your party mix."

Mark paused at another fork in the path, this time taking his time to look between them and rubbing the bridge of his nose. Seriously, the guy should get glasses the way he touched his face so often.

"Are you lost?" he asked.

"Not in the slightest," was the immediate reply, "A little off bearing."

Ricky made the next few steps up to him, the ground hard beneath his feet as the winter frosts began to set in. It was still early enough that frigid dew clung to the blades of the grasses nearby and the trees were stark with leaves barely clinging on.

"Great, you know I have school in three hours," he reminded him.

"School starts in one," Mark corrected.

"Yeah, but PE doesn't count," he tried to joke, "I get enough exercising beheading, thank you very much."

*And trudging through woods carrying your crap*, Ricky thought to himself, but didn't say out loud. He knew he was extra sensitive this morning, had felt it from the moment he'd woken up. He hadn't so much slept as seemed to render himself unconscious in bed for less hours than it likely was on the clock. Whether it was the rush of the adrenaline, the feeling that crept into the back of his head that somehow, he was still a target, or whether it was the other, underlying gnaw at the pit of his stomach – everything felt a little off.

His brain, in particular, felt a kind of stretched he'd not really thought about before. And the exertion of their trip through the woods wasn't exactly helping his mood.

"You're a very strange guy," Mark told him, lightly, before apparently spotting something further off in the woods, "We're almost there."

Lightly, Mark stepped off in a different direction and headed towards what he'd seen. Ricky, shuffling the weight on his shoulder once more, considered for a second leaving the pack and wandering off himself. But no, they needed answers – *he* needed answers, and if he had to put up with more of this shit for a bit longer he could.

How much longer, that was a big question.

\* \* \*

Mark did not know what to expect as the light receded and the voice disappeared. Ricky had insisted on being the one to shed the blood to enter, despite his protest. He was, after all, in far better condition than Ricky appeared to be that morning – he had clearly seen it. Perhaps he had slept badly once again, perhaps it was still the jittery way he felt after his encounter. Or perhaps it was the weight of the world on his shoulders. It didn't matter.

Even something as simple as no happy birthday, something Ricky, Sara and Amy had been threatening to make a fuss of for several days already – tipped him off to the fact that things weren't

exactly quite right with his friend. But they needed answers, they needed some way forward – and so he pressed on, content to watch and wait and try to appear as normal as possible.

“Are you sure it was a bomb and not a firecracker?” he queried, as they looked around the almost untouched Hall of the Guide. Everything was at it had been at his previous visit – the small peaceful waterfall off to one side, the plain openness of the remaining space. The calming presence, he hoped would have some effect on his friend, but which he had been unable to feel – perhaps as a simple civilian.

“I literally felt the flames, it was definitely an explosion,” Ricky protested, his voice betraying that he was as surprised as Mark was. “Claire called it something. Witchy Fire, I think.”

“Witchfyre,” Mark repeated, “Well, that explains it – Witchfyre only burns organic material – which explains what happened to the bag, it was leather.”

He pointed down to the spot where his bag had once been. He had obviously abandoned it, when captured by Satana and her daft minions, and then she had turned it into a little trap for when Claire and Ricky had come by. Witchfyre, of course she’d used that – it was readily available on the black market for cheaper than the cost of Fish and Chips. Probably didn’t even shell out for the expensive ingredients that really made it boots, like newt.

“I loved that bag,” he muttered to himself, “It even had little pockets to put your things in. Help keep your annals safe from your sage.”

“I never put sage near my an...” Ricky began, the rise in his tone suggesting the misunderstanding before he finished.

“Annals, Ricky, whole different meaning.”

He took the bag from Ricky and set it down next to the scorch marks of his own previous one. Hoping it would fare better, he began to unzip and unpack the various totems and objects he needed. Though Madame Lourdes had yet to return to the local magick shop in town, her daughter had taken over the running of the shop, and he’d managed to find the ingredients he need for the summoning spell.

He only hoped there was enough magick left in the place for it to work. He was not a natural magick user – such abilities he believed were quite rare. But all people were able to use particular combinations of objects and enchanted things or draw on the magick of a place, to be able to work rudimentary spells. He would have to hope with the things he'd brought and the inherent spirit of the place itself, it would be enough.

“So, are you getting any spine tingling yet?” he asked Ricky from his crouched position, “This place is meant to be your sanctuary, after all.”

He was referring to the feeling that Ricky had described following his visit with Claire. The kind of soft hum of power he'd felt, strengthened near the waterfall. He saw Ricky glance for a second in that direction but then shake his head.

“Nothing, this place is dead.”

His voice was flat, final. He sighed, as Mark began to arrange the candles in a specific configuration, following the pattern on his hand drawn diagram.

“How long is this going to take?” Ricky asked him, on the surface sounding like a bored teen, while underneath was a current of something else Mark couldn't quite pick up.

“First I have to arrange the spell equipment just so,” he explained, “Then I need to recite a rather long incantation. Then we have to wait for any possible spirits within this place to come to speak to us.”

“You could just say it's going to take a while,” Ricky snapped.

“You know Spirit Guides don't tend to react well to negative moods,” he answered back, keeping himself calm. “We're more likely to get a response quicker if you go for a walk or something.”

“I'm the Guide...” Ricky protested.

“Right, and when Duncan shows up, I'll holler,” Mark quipped, feeling himself irked and a little irritated by Ricky's demeanour. It was true, sometimes moods were contagious – and it was also true that it could affect the quality of the incantation. “Let me know if you find anything interesting.”

“Like a slightly rounder rock that unusual?” Ricky asked him, sarcastically. Mark raised the eyebrow of annoyance and Ricky sighed, “Fine, I’m gone.”

With two caves to pick from, Ricky wandered into the one on the left, as Mark returned back to the book at hand and tried to shake off his feeling. For a moment he could lose himself in the simple repetitive task of setting up the incantation, and after that, he would do some short breathing exercises and calm his mind.

Because at the moment, all it was doing was racing.

\* \* \*

Sara sat doing her homework and had to admit for the first time... well, that morning... she began to wonder if her teachers weren’t all a bunch of psychopaths. The images, gory and horrific in their naked display of blood and viscera were almost too much for her to bear. Things, tubes, fluids, all of it coalesced into a disgusting mixture of body horror and medical science that she felt were better suited to other – more Dahmer-esque – minds.

“I hate the kidney,” she sighed as she set her biology textbook down on the table.

“They are filled with mocking and self-loathing, aren’t they?” Amy agreed with her dryly from across the table. Of course, Amy would be on the side of the biologists. She loved this stuff. Probably slept with a diagram of a dissected pig on her wall. Sara, of course knew this was bollocks, Amy slept with a Scooby Doo poster still. The Gary Barlow poster was under her bed, so her mum couldn’t see it.

“It’s like looking at the insides of...” she screwed her face up, her mind going as blank as it had when she was considering whether a nephron was someone who fought the Power Rangers. “...y’know...”

“People?” Amy asked brightly, looking up from her laptop, seated as she was on the other side of the table.

"I could have thought of that."

"But you didn't."

A shrill noise interrupted their back and forth, causing both of them to look over at the counter. There was a brief hesitation, a moment where the strangeness of being in the library without their librarian came to them. The kind of social convention of whether or not it's acceptable to answer someone else's ringing phone competing with the innate behavioural response to do it. Sara looked across at her mate.

"I'm not moving," Amy insisted, rudely Sara would have said.

"Well, the phone isn't going to answer itself."

"You're right..." Amy agreed with her.

Considering briefly whether they could break the stalemate with a simple game of rock, paper, scissors, Sara sighed and gave in – capitulating to Amy's unreasonable demands. With a sigh she stood and headed towards the phone, which at first stopped, before immediately beginning to ring shrilly once more. As if to make Amy complicit in any social faux pas, she picked it up and trailed it back over to the table, gracefully stepping over the telephone chord as she pressed the speaker phone button.

"You've reached Madame Wang's Sex House, please call back when I don't have an appointment," Sara did her best telephone operator voice.

"Sara, it's me," came the slightly tinny but gruffly memorable voice of their resident grump. Now adult resident grump, she remembered.

"And this is Madame Wang," she joked.

"And I'm Winston Churchill," he retorted with a sigh, "Put Amy on."

"Happy Birthday Winston," she answered cheerfully, "But what makes you think Amy's here?"

"The same way I know you're not past the kidney in your books yet," he answered, the right note of irritated exasperation entering his tone. "Just put her on."

Sara frowned, looking at the room around them, wondering if he'd had installed CCTV cameras or something. Was Jeremy Beedle about to pop out from somewhere? If so, she'd smack the crap out of him, she hated the little creep.

"Are you here?" she whispered, leaning down into the phone.

"Sara!"

"I'm here, Mark," Amy finally piped up with a shared smile with Sara, who decided to make faces at the phone. *Respect your elders my arse*, she thought. "What's up?"

"Ricky was attacked last night," he explained.

"By what this time?" Amy asked, "Vampyr's? Demons? Some other random force of darkness?"

"By gunmen in black jeeps," he answered, before quickly running them through the story as Ricky had relayed it to him. "I think he said it was the one out by the East Church Road. One of the cars was crashed into the building. Could you grab any paint samples or glass or anything there and see what you can find?"

"Does he think you're some kind of CSI-guy?" she asked Amy, wondering whether Mark had a practical understanding of the limits of a teenager's power – even if that teenager was the wonderchild of Einstein and... some other science guy.

"Take Madame Sex-Slave with you," Mark continued over the phone, before adding with a sarcastic drawl, "The more half-brains the better."

"Mark, where are you?" she asked him, sweetly.

"I've taken Ricky to the Hall of the Guide," he explained, "We're trying to get some answers. Can't believe a Nokia signal gets through a pocket dimension, but that's something at least."

"Well, you might want to settle down and build a condo in there," she suggested, "Because if and when you get back, you and I are going to have a little talk. With nad-twisting."

"Just do it."

With that, the rather rude 'old man' hung up the phone and left them too hanging. She gave Amy a look.

"Your possible-never-boyfriend needs manners."

\* \* \*

They were caves, not much more to say. He wandered for a little bit, turning and twisting his way through them with the lazy gait of someone not wanting to go anywhere in particular. They were dark and dank, he could hear water relentlessly dripping off in the world. There was no sense where they were beyond the Hall of the Guide. In fact, was he still in the same 'realm' (as Mark had termed it) where the Hall was? Or was he wandering back in the Calendar caves?

There were no external clues, no sliver of sunlight or scent of flowers and the outside world to place him. He could be buried deep beneath a desert sky, or in the lush green forests of Scandinavia. Caves were simply as they were, eternal and only changing slowly, one drip of the rainwater at a time.

It had been half an hour, surely – that must have been more than enough time for whatever summoning ritual (which again, Mark had tried to explain to him) to take place. Ricky had not been present for many of them, that kind of work was stuff best left to the boffins and the brains (and frankly those who had patience), so he wasn't entirely sure.

All he knew was that he was bored. And despite the cool air of the cave giving a little soothing sensation in his temples, he still couldn't quite shake the stretched and tired feeling he'd had since waking up. Well, if he was honest with himself, the feeling he'd had for days now – and part of him felt he'd been stumbling into that feeling since the day, he'd found out the truth about the supernatural.

What he wouldn't give for something to shake him out of it, to bring him back to feeling like himself again.

He reached the end of one particular cave, seeing suddenly beyond it into a larger, more cavernous space beyond. He could see in the narrow flash of his beam, it was several metres across and the torrent of another waterfall in front of him was stronger than he'd seen so far. It gushed, fresh and clean, and so loud that for a moment he almost didn't catch it.

The sound of footsteps, the sound of hushed voices. Coming from the direction in which he'd just walked. His heart leapt in his chest, a sense of panic and paranoia and danger overcoming him instantly. Who was down here? There was only him and Mark – and he should have been back at the Hall. Did someone else know they were coming?

The steps grew closer, footsteps scraping over rock and knocking loose stones, the voices rising in unguarded discussion. He looked at the gap in front of him, then flicked behind and thought he saw the beam of another torch. Looking back, there was a ledge and with the reckless carelessness of someone who didn't want to find himself facing the unknown, he slipped down quickly and quietly onto it.

It was narrow, he barely had the strength to hold onto it with both hands, digging into the slick and wet rock as he waited for the sounds to stop. They were coming, that was clear – but with the water behind him, he couldn't judge how close.

"He has no idea?" one muffled voice came to him. It sounded older, a man, perhaps – but he couldn't place it.

"No, I have him running around in circles," the other, similarly muffled voice replied. It sounded oddly familiar, if distorted between the caves and the waterfall behind him. "None of them have a clue."

"Are you sure we can do this?"

"I'm telling you, the Guide will be dead before the day is out," the second voice insisted, in that strange wavery way. Ricky froze, realising his plan to hide had been the best one. But the voice, who did it belong to? It ached in his mind.

"Good, get onto business," the first voice insisted, "Report to me when it's done."

With their business concluded and giving no indication that either of them had seen him, he heard footsteps beginning to recede into the distance. They could be faking him out, they could be trying to draw him out of hiding. There weren't that many twists and turns in the cave, if they knew Mark was in the Hall, then they had to know he was out here.

But then again, if they'd passed through the Hall wouldn't Mark have seen them?

He waited until he heard the footsteps no more, then counted slowly under his breath another full minute before hauling himself back up off of the ledge and onto the relative safety of the main cave floor. For a moment he paused, his breathing feeling off, his strength feeling a little faded. His head swam with the possibilities, even as he tried to brush the grit and the dirt from his hands.

That was it, the thought which had floored him. If they were from the Hall, if they knew him by name and were threatening him – what had become of Mark. Or... if he returned to the Hall and found Mark there, doing his incantation...

He steeled himself, the thought sitting in his mind like a splinter. Mark. Secrets. The Covenant. He didn't like the thoughts, he didn't like them at all. But somehow, in the darkness of the cave, there alone and having heard what he'd just heard, it made a sick kind of sense. The only kind of sense.

He headed back.

\* \* \*

"I think we're almost there," Mark called out as he heard the footsteps behind him. The circle around him, lit by seven black candles and with a bowl of the offering mixture in the centre, was beginning to smoke. It drifted in a lazy circle around the candles, creating the effect he desired. He'd already finished doing the chanting and was quite glad not to have to continue on – he was never quite sure he was sounding out the words right in Aramaic anyway.

There was no reply, but as he turned to look at his friend he frowned.

“Are you okay?” he asked, “You look a little... flushed.”

He didn't quite have another word for it. Ricky was wearing black, having elected not to put on his school uniform for the trip, and so it was hard to tell but patches of his front appeared damp. His eyes remained sunken and tired but there was something else in them, something a little off, a little frantic. He couldn't help but also notice the scuffed nature of his trainers, the dirt on them. It was as if Ricky had been spelunking rather than simply going for a wander.

“I'm fine,” Ricky told him simply, flatly, as he glanced around the hall. “Have you been here the whole time?”

“Unfortunately, the spell needs constant revision and repetition,” Mark admitted, shifting on the circle a little to prevent his bum going numb. “Although I can teach you the basics if I need a bathroom break.” Mark had no intention of doing so, the spell required some focus and Ricky's pronunciation of any language, let alone dead ones, was not going to cut muster. Especially if he was as sleep deprived as Mark feared, “Why?”

“Nothing.”

He filed it away, with a list of the other things which needed to be filed away and returned back to what he was doing. Ricky paced a little, relieving some pent up frustration no doubt.

“When's that thing going to be done?” Ricky snapped at him. Mark frowned at him.

“When the spirits are ready to speak,” he suggested, “Or when I have to refresh the sage.”

Ricky stepped forward, reached down into his bag and flung the small baggie of remaining herb mixture into the pot at the centre of the spell circle. There was, expectedly, a flash of smoke and a loud bang – followed by a large plume drifting up from the now extinguished candles. Mark went to chastise him, but the look on Ricky's face gave him pause.

“Well, that's all the sage,” Ricky shrugged, sarcastically, “Guess we're done.”

The look on his face was one Mark never imagined, it was a cold and cruel look. A snarl almost forming. Sure, Ricky was tired, but the look was something beyond that, something angry and

frustrated and... well, wasn't it all the things Ricky had been telling him he was fearing in himself for weeks? And was it not Mark's fault for not listening. Or for hearing, without listening.

"I am here."

The voice belonged to neither of them, nor spoke from some short distance away. Broken out of their momentary tableau, Ricky and Mark turned simultaneously to see that they were indeed no longer alone. Over by the waterfall, which they could still see somewhat through the semi-translucent form – was a figure.

He was not complete, this was the first thing Mark noticed. A male, approximately their age or even a few years older. But only from the waist up. He... well, floated was probably the most appropriate word... above the ground at the approximate height for someone who was say in the early five feet and so-many inches, but with no legs beneath him to support him. He wore tunics, the likes of which were hides most likely and other such older brands. It would take Mark an age to date all the man's clothing, but he'd guess at least a millennia stood between them.

"The Guide can seek answers from this place, if the answers are what he seeks," the figure spoke. The accent seemed a little thick, old fashioned. English, sure, but with an unusual dialect that sounded not quite from one particular modern day equivalent, but instead an amalgamation. Fascinating.

"What the hell is happening to me?" Ricky stepped forward, though the figure did not move or turn its gaze. Aggressive in his stance, Mark was about to tell him to cool it a little – the guy was there to help, when the figure answered,

"As the Guide, your answers can be found here."

So, the figure recognised Ricky as the Guide, that was good. But why did it not turn to him? Could it not see him?

"Then what the hell is happening to me?"

"You are the Guide."

"What does that mean?" Ricky demanded, frustrated.

“You are the Guide.”

Mark shuffled his feet beneath him and stood, trying his best to fight the pins and needles that screamed at him for spending too long on a cold hard surface, and made a few steps closer to them. The figure did not move.

“Ricky...” Mark began, at which point the figure spoke again.

“You are not the Guide.”

Though he did not turn to him, his words were true. So somehow, it could sense them... but also not. He decided to venture a guess,

“I think we just got the answering machine,” he suggested.

Ricky frowned at him, the same scowl as before, then stepped forward and waved his hand through the apparition. It did not move, simply continued to stare blankly towards them as though they weren't even there – unseeing ancient eyes.

“So, all that and nobody's home?” Ricky scoffed. He growled beneath his breath, “Waste of fucking time.”

He turned and headed back towards the caves. With a last reluctant look at the seemingly looping, automatic figure, Mark knelt and swept his things unceremoniously into his bag – leaving the still smouldering bowl behind to finish off – he'd collect it at another time. With the now slightly lighter bag, he was able to catch up with the storming figure.

“Ricky, wait up,” he told him. He'd reached him by the time the flash of light indicated they were actually standing back in Calendar caves. He could hear from the nearby entrance the tweet of the morning birds, “It's not all bad.”

“It was a waste of time,” Ricky told him through gritted teeth, “Let's just get out of here.”

“There's a more direct way to find out who's after you,” he suggested, realising that perhaps his brother's obsession with Jennifer Garner could come in handy for a change.

“Oh, and what's that?”

“To let them catch up to you,” he suggested, “And then we turn the tables on them.”

“You want to set a trap?” Ricky asked him, pausing as they reached the entrance of the cave and they could finally see each other in bright morning daylight. He studied his face, Ricky’s look a wash of confusion and frustration.

“Tonight, yes,” he agreed, “Walk home tonight, take your time but don’t *look* like you’re taking your time. Then just... have a normal night and go to bed. I’ll surveil from nearby, you’ll be pretending to chill out and sleep. The moment they show up, we take them down and get one of them to tell us who they are.”

Ricky considered a long moment, Mark wondering if perhaps he realised the suggestion was also an excuse to get Ricky to chill out and have some sleep – maybe catch up on a bit of the debt. Maybe become a little more of himself and a little less of... whatever he was being at the moment.

“That’s actually a good plan,” Ricky agreed slowly, “Sounds very... trappy.”

With that he turned and sped up the pace, Mark frowning at the words. Something bothered him, something at the back of his mind. Had he stopped to think a moment longer, or had Ricky’s look been a little clearer, maybe things would have turned out differently.

But alas, some things are meant to go the way they do.

\* \* \*

The late afternoon light drifted across the concrete small industrial park, as Amy looked up at the large shutters which formed the front of the car place. Walker’s Autos it proudly proclaimed, a proclamation she was fairly certain sounded oxymoronic. She might make the joke later, maybe around Mark who would be more apt to appreciate it than Sara, who was finishing up half-flirting with the mechanic in the office.

She frowned as she studied the front. According to Mark’s description a car had been driven into it, but you’d never be able to tell. The shutter appeared perfectly fine, no dents, no bending or

bowing in the bottom. There didn't even appear to be any flecks of paint or anything brushing indicating where the stress of the impact had taken place – or where it had been hastily repaired.

"Let's walk," Sara's voice popped into her ear. She frowned, turning to see Sara had left the small reception area and was now tilting her head in the direction of the main road.

"What?" she asked, confused after being shaken out of her thoughts.

"It's what they always do in those cop shows," Sara insisted, "Now stop acting like a weirdo and walk with me. I think the Who is playing on their reception radio, so it's perfect."

Amy rolled her eyes and would be extremely glad when Sara's latest obsession with cop shows came to an end. She kept referring to things like 'perps' and 'sus' like it was going out of style. And the science... oh God the horrible science she came out with.

"According to the guy there, when they opened up this morning there was nothing," Sara explained, as they walked up the embankment and got onto the main road. It was beginning to chill, even though they were still in the sun and so they linked arm in arm as they walked. "No glass, no damage, no paint scrapes. It was like nothing ever happened."

"How'd you broach that subject?" she asked her, to which Sara responded with her usual shrug.

"I said my mum backed her car into the door," Sara explained, "Asked if there was any damage. I'm very clever that way."

"I took a look at the door myself, there was nothing," she admitted, feeling something gnawing away at the pit of my stomach. "I'll call Mark."

Removing one mitten, she fished through her pocket, pulled out her Nokia and dialled his number. He picked up on the second ring, a slight whistle of wind through the phone indicating he too was outdoors.

"Amy, thanks for giving me a heart attack," he joked. The connection sounded far better than their last call, he was likely close by.

"You wanted a report?"

“Sure, what did you find?”

“Nothing,” she admitted, “Sara spoke to the guys inside who said there was nothing when they opened up and I checked the shutter from outside. No dents, scrapes or any sign that anything happened.”

“That doesn’t sound right...” She could almost hear his frown through the phone.

“Either Ricky’s telling fibs... ” she offered, half-heartedly, knowing it was not the kind of thing he would do.

“No, he was shook up when I saw him,” Mark countered, “Something happened for sure.”

“Or we’re dealing with someone who has the power to make it look like nothing happened,” she finished the alternative thought. She could hear Mark thinking for a moment, before his usual sigh.

“Brilliant,” he muttered, “We’re into Robert Ludlum territory.”

“Is there anything else you need us to do?” she asked. Sara had begun to shuffle a little patiently in place and rubbed her hands together as she waited for her to finish. Of course, if she’d bothered with mittens...

“Unless you want to hit every conspiracy theory geek website you can find,” he offered, “Find out just which fabled organisations may have the power to clean up a scene like that with such accuracy... there’s not much we can do.”

To be fair, Amy who was very well versed with how quickly the internet could spit out answers to do with the unknown conspiracies of the world, figured he’d probably not made half a bad suggestion. Even if she got a headache already from the who killed Kennedy rabbit holes she’d stumble down.

“Sara and I’ll rule out the CIA,” Amy offered, “See you tomorrow.”

He muttered his goodbyes and went back to whatever he was doing, as she hung up and regarded her friend, who by now was well used to her ‘we need to research’ face.

“Okay, but food first, please.”

\* \* \*

Mark shuffled a bit on his park bench and tried to refocus his attention. Ricky's street was not particularly wide and he did have a parked car he could sit in, so he'd settled for dressing up in his big puffer jacket, taking a thermos of coffee and sitting on the bench in the small memorial park (really more of a glorified garden with benches) on the opposite side of the street and a few rows up from the Kent household.

From there, he sat in shade, beneath the thick oak trees surrounding him, but was able to get a good look straight to the front door. Which is exactly how he'd been for the previous few hours. Ricky walked home from school, as Mark had trailed him from a long distance. He saw no sign of other people, no black jeeps acting suspiciously, not even an errant dog peeing on a lamppost. Just normalcy.

Then he'd set up camp, poured himself a coffee and waited. From where he was, there was only the vague hint of movements through the thin net curtains as Ricky moved about the house. A figure in the front room, then upstairs, and then back downstairs. As the light faded from the night sky and became darker, he could see the glow of the television in the living room. And still, nothing happened – not that he had expected anything to.

The shrill ring of his phone brought him back from his thoughts, as he realised, he probably should have turned it off or put it to silent. He sat up straighter on the bench, saw who it was and immediately felt his stomach gnaw a little more.

"Mark," his Uncle spoke by way of greeting, voice brusque and businesslike. "Were you sleeping?"

Mark, who had been fairly certain that he might have only been dozing – still not a great thing to do on a stakeout – felt defensive but fought to smooth it out of his voice before he replied.

"No, just working, am on a coffee run," he explained.

“Mark, it’s your birthday,” Uncle John reminded him, sternly.

“I know, I’ll be home soon,” Mark assured him, intending to be no such thing. Then his Uncle’s tone shifted.

“Your Aunt and I have made some plans,” his uncle explained, “How long will you be? It’s a big day, you know.”

His Uncle, who for the life of him had probably only marked the Calendar with Mark’s birthday as a way to ensure he knew the proper passage of time, had never once planned for a celebration. Even his own birthday was a card over the dinner table and a firm handshake.

“I’ll be back before nine,” Mark told him, dismissively.

“Very well,” was the curt reply, “Stay safe.”

Again, not a term his uncle ever used to sign off. Then the line went dead and Mark found himself shrugging off the strange feeling. Was there something different about him turning eighteen? Did adults now get a birthday card and a handshake?

As he looked up, he saw movement – only for him to realise this was Rob heading to work. The older brother, who in the emerging streetlight looked remarkably like his younger brother from this distance, shrugged on his embroidered security jacket and headed off towards his car. When he was gone, Mark noticed the light had knocked out in the living room, and spied Ricky standing upstairs in what he presumed was his bedroom. A moment later, the curtains closed and the lights clicked off.

Mark frowned at his watch.

“Right, because you usually go to bed at six, idiot,” he muttered to no one but a nearby disinterested stray cat. Still, given how tired Ricky had looked perhaps it would only do him good. But as he sat and he waited and the day turned into even colder night, Mark began to wonder.

The sounds that drew him that night came around eight o’clock, as his watch told him. He awoke, stiff from having fallen into another slumber – and suddenly much too aware of his surroundings. From inside the house there was a smash, a crash and a shout. The front door was

closed, Mark himself fighting sleep from his eyes as he tried to figure where the sound was coming from.

The light flashed on in Ricky's bedroom, followed by an almighty crashing sound before the light flickered out once more. Soft light, perhaps a lamp. He stood, stumbling slightly on legs that had begun to fall asleep, and tried to make his way for the door. More shouting, more screams.

He rushed to the front door as the sounds of loud thuds bounded from the other side. He rushed up the front steps, right to the door and found it unlocked with ease. When he opened, he saw the crumpled form of Ricky lying at the bottom of the stairs – as though having fallen down them. Dressed in his pyjama pants and a t-shirt, he looked frazzled as he spun in place at the sound of him.

"Bastard!" Ricky spat, as he moaned and groaned on the floor. He turned himself over, climbing to his feet as Mark rushed forward to him, trying to kneel by. Ricky knocked him away with a sweep of his hands, using the wall to steady himself. "Who are they?! What are you doing to me?"

"Ricky? What happened?" he tried to ask, but Ricky did not appear to hear him. He was confused, wild, his eyes roving around as if looking for enemies. Then his gaze caught him, a look of pure murderous hatred.

"You know what fucking happened!" Ricky screamed as he lunged at him. The first blow to his face hit like a hammer, and Mark found himself falling backwards, stunned as much from the sudden swift change than from the blow itself. He landed hard on the rough carpet of the entryway, as Ricky's shadow loomed over him.

He felt two more thumps to the face, both driving down like pistons and suddenly things began to grow very confused indeed. The guttural sounds coming from Ricky, some twist of pain and anger and delirium were clear. He held on long enough to see Ricky look up as if seeing something out on the street, and the last thought he had was Ricky letting him go, getting to his feet and running barefoot out into the night.

No other sounds came to him, as wetness trickled down the side of his face and Mark fell into the darkness of unconsciousness. Alone.

\* \* \*

The man in black was used to things going sideways, but this was turning into a clusterfuck. The instructions had been simple, as they had been all the previous nights. Watch on the cameras. Wait for sleep. Move in, inject, leave.

He felt the bones systematically in his wrist as the van came around the corner. No bones were broken, though he could feel the swelling of a bad sprain. The boy had been waiting for them. They had grown complacent. And perhaps, command had grown too insular with their information. He fought like a demon, not some young teen.

Three of them had entered and slipped through the back door once the chaos had begun. They left the boy at the foot of the stairs, while the van surveyed his movement from outside. Attacking his friend, leaving him unconscious was their one stroke of good luck. It meant the mission was not compromised, they were not seen.

It only took them five minutes to locate the young man. The small amount of the liquid they'd managed to administer was having its intended effect. It was slowing his reflexes, dulling his mind and very likely feeding into his unconscious building paranoia. He would more malleable now – and in fact, as they caught up to him a street away, looking bug-eyed around at the world around them, he was fully within it.

It took four of them to grab him, one to administer the full shot – and within seconds he was unconscious once more. He was thrown into the back of the van, and the mission was successfully completed – if a little different than the one, they'd originally had planned. As per his instructions, the man in black, pulled out his phone and dialled the only number pre-programmed in for him. Command.

“It’s done.”

Two simple words, to confirm completion. The man on the other end, the only other member of the Covenant he’d ever spoken too directly and his direct superior, answered. John Matthews, a cold humourless smile on his face, responded,

“Good.”

**Act III**

The world was swishing past him in lightning motion. His eyes lolled in his head. He never had thought what the word 'lolloped' would actually feel like until he felt it. He didn't like it. It was like standing on a boat while being shaken by waves. But he wasn't in a boat, he was in a van. The smell of engine oil, dust and the close proximity of people was in his nose.

He was restrained, his hands bound to the floor of the van through loops of a leatherlike material – straps. Shadows moved above him, in darkness, swaying, talking, ignoring him completely as he fought to return back to consciousness. First there was two, then three, then two. He settled that there were two above him in the back and two more he could hear coming from the front.

The van swayed, the men held on and it turned another corner. As his brain continued to move, he felt the van screech to a stop. Arrested momentum, but it felt for a second as though his spirit continued through his skull. It throbbed, preparing to burst, then sloshed back into place like water in the glass.

"We're at the rendezvous point," one from up front said. He heard the unmistakable sound of a latch, and finally he knew their attention was about to come back to him. The cold floor of the van cemented him somewhat and he realised he could move a little.

A little, which would soon become a problem for them.

Ricky coiled his right leg, the stronger of the two and thrust upwards with every inch of energy. Obviously, these guys were not used to dealing with the super-human strength crowd, the restraint ripped easily against him, and he managed to kick in the stomach the one to his left. He doubled over, grunting in pain and before the other could respond he kicked a second shot to the head – right to the temple. Even in bare feet it knocked him out cold.

The second went to grab for him but by this point, Ricky pulled forward with both of his arms, ripping free from the restraints around his hands – though one hung loosely from his left wrist. He rolled backwards to his feet and rushed forward, slamming his balaclava'd head into the side of

the van which rocked with the force. He'd end up with some severe head pain in the morning, perhaps a concussion, but nothing further.

Up front, the driver was struggling to undo his seatbelt, while the passenger had already exited the van. Ricky knelt, pausing and waiting for the inevitable sound of footsteps outside. Even through the ringing in his ears, he felt it – sensed it. The third man moving around the back of the vehicle. Coming round the corner.

He rushed for the back doors, which sprung open when he slammed against them with remarkable ease. Perhaps they were unlocked. He felt the reassuring thud of contact as the right one slammed against the passenger – and cold night air rushed inside. He jumped out from the back, seeing the gun skittering from the man's hands and rushed for it.

He nearly collapsed onto his face as he race, his head swimming with a kind of dizziness he wasn't used to. He scooped up the gun, slipped it into position and brought it down on the skull of the man who was scrambling back to get to his feet. Slipping around the side of the vehicle, he saw the driver's door half open and the man getting out.

The one operative without a balaclava, his face showing a young-ish man, crew-cut, shaved face, stern eyes – the whole nine yards. He was withdrawing his own weapon as he stepped from the vehicle, but Ricky got there first – raising the barrel of the borrowed gun in front of him. It was then he saw finally where they were – clearly on the South Side and amongst the giant hulks of run down and likely abandoned warehouse buildings. No lights were on, a desolate place.

"Drop it," Ricky snapped at the man, seeing the barrel of the gun double before his vision. He blinked twice and things went back to normal.

To his credit, the driver didn't have a death wish and clearly was taking him seriously. He dropped the handgun and kicked it away with one boot, while Ricky continued to regard him. He listened for sounds (above the ringing) of movement – the others were out cold.

"How many more of you are out there?" Ricky demanded. The man blinked twice.

"None."

Ricky pulled the hammer on the gun, imitating a thousand movies. It clicked menacingly, and he recognised that sound. He had never before pointed a gun in his life, but it was remarkable how similar it was – though very different when your brain felt like it was on fire. The man's answer had been too quick, now he heard the hint of panic crack in his voice.

"I mean it, we're the only group tonight."

Ricky allowed his eyes to flick over to the nearest building, the one with the door half-hanging off of the hinges. He indicated with the gun, flicking it in the direction of the door.

"We're going in there," Ricky told the man, "And you're going to show me what you brought me here for."

"It's a meeting," the man told him quickly, the shake continuing in his voice, "That's all, we were meant to bring you to the meeting."

Ricky took a step forward, holding the barrel of the gun closer to the man's chin. His hands were still in the air, he looked terrified. Ricky could barely process it, the sense of fear the man must feel, mixing with the rage he felt. Or were they separate things?

"Right, well lets go meet and greet."

He waved the barrel again and this time the guy began to move, slowly and deliberately with his hands in the air like some kind of hostage. Of course, he was a hostage, this whole thing was one stupid hostage situation. A thought occurred to Ricky, peeking through the buzzing.

"You have a phone?"

"In my pocket."

"Take it out, slowly, and give it to me."

The man did as instructed, holding the simple Nokia – likely a burner phone – in his hand. Ricky snatched it and stepped back another foot or two, before resuming their walk into the warehouse. As the door loomed in front of them, Sara answered on the third ring. At least... it sounded like Sara... her voice was strange and distorted.

"Sara, it's me," he told her, "They're after me."

The words that came back seem garbled, they didn't seem to make sense. Ricky frowned, confused.

"You know who!" he answered, "Whoever the fuck Mark is working for."

Despite the cold air and his pyjamas, he felt an intense heat burning in his heat, sweat began to roll down his temple.

"They've... they've given me something," he said once more into the phone, talking now without knowing if she could even hear. Her voice was there but it was different somehow, "IT's like there's flies in my head, they're buzzing." He cut off, speaking to the man in front of him, "What the fuck did you put in me?"

"I don't know," the man said calmly, evenly. Ricky didn't believe him. He stepped next to the man, kicked the rusted door from its frame and indicated for him to head in. When the man had passed him, he placed the side of the gun against his head, the painful buzzing reaching a horrible high pitch.

"Can't talk, Sara," he whispered into the phone, "They might be able to track this. I can't do this."

With that he slammed the phone into wall and watched as the pieces tinkled to the floor. While his brain didn't clear completely, the flies continued to buzz and the ears continued to ring, he felt better for a moment. Only briefly – as he pushed further into the warehouse with his captive.

The space was cavernous, all things of use and note long since removed – or stolen – from the interior. Above them, moonlight broke through the cracked glass shards of the glass roof, beams exposed and jutting through. On the ground the accumulated dust and detritus of time, and broken glass he just barely felt crunching against his numb bare feet. The one thing he didn't see – was evidence of anyone else.

"It's empty," he snapped, the pulse ripping through his temple.

"They're not here yet," the driver half-snapped back, some of his fear clearly subsiding. The gall of it irked Ricky even more.

“Or you’re lying to me,” he insisted.

“I’m not, I swear – “

He couldn’t take the chance. Ricky brought the butt of the gun down onto the back of the man’s head, and he crumpled into an unconscious heap at his feet, there amongst the forgotten remnants of whatever had been there before.

Standing there, half in darkness and half in moonlight, Ricky’s head began to swim once more. He swayed on his feet, and he tried to hold himself upright, but whatever ghosts were buzzing in his mind. They weren’t going to let him.

He didn’t know what to do.

\* \* \*

Sara rushed along the street, bracing against the cold but not bothered. The call from Ricky had been frantic, confusing – from an unknown number. He’d been talking about... what exactly – and then something about Mark? She knew there was only one thing to do, and despite her mother’s disapproving look, she’d grabbed her coat and rushed for the door.

Ricky didn’t live far away – three streets over. She stuck to the main roads, knowing more than most how dark a ginnel could truly be in this bloody town, and found herself there about ten minutes after the call. She could see from a distance that the small terraced house stood empty – none of the lights were on, even though those around it had Tv light filtering through their blinds and curtains in living rooms and bedrooms.

She slowed her pace, catching her breath as she reached the small gate and pushed it open with a creek. The front door stood open, darkness only inside the hall, but it was propped at a strange angle. Normally the door had hinges strong enough to close itself, she’d been through it enough time to feel it’s slight snap at it did. But something was blocking it. Something on the ground, something big.

As she began to move up the short path she finally saw the shape – a body lying in the way of the door blocking it. But the face, bruised and slightly bloody, was not who had called her. Was not Ricky.

“Mark!” she called out, rushing over and hearing him thankfully groan.

“Ow,” he moaned, as he began to come around. She knelt in the doorway, the draft excluder biting into her shins as she tried to check him. He seemed to have a large bruise forming under one eye, a busted lip with blood dripping from it and another larger bump forming on his temple. But he was groaning, and as she looked around in the scant streetlight, she couldn’t see any big pools of blood.

“What the hell happened here?” she asked him, as despite her attempts to keep him in place, he managed to get himself into a sitting position in the doorway – bracing his foot against the front door as he leaned back against the hallway wall.

“What are you doing here?” he asked her with a wince.

“I asked first.”

“Ricky and I were setting a trap for whoever was after him,” he explained, using one hand to gently probe the bruises on his face. “I was outside, and I heard smashing noises from inside the house, find Ricky at the bottom of the stairs, and the place traced.” He waved around to further inside the house where she could see the remains of a broken lamp and not much further into the darkness. “When I got here, he pounced on me, started hitting me. He thinks I’m working with whoever did this.”

“Are you?” she asked, quickly and sternly. While she didn’t believe it, she also knew that Ricky would not have done such a thing to a friend without a reason. And she needed him to say it.

“You don’t know me very well, do you?” Mark responded to her.

“I don’t think I know him anymore,” she admitted, “He called me, told me you were working with some people who were trying to kill him. But...” She hesitated, feeling unsure whether she should say the parts she was dreading out loud.

“But what?” he prompted.

“I think something’s wrong with him,” she admitted, biting the bottom of her lip. “He said they’d drugged him, his head was full of flies or something. It was like he couldn’t hear me or something, he sounded totally out of it.”

“I think he is,” Mark answered her. He started struggling to help up, so she gave him a hand and after a moment they stepped forward into the night, with the door closing shut behind him. “I think someone’s playing a sick game with him. Someone powerful.” He sighed, as she heard his knees click in that old man way from stiffness, as he began to move, “Wait for me at the Library.”

“Where are you going?” she demanded, feeling annoyance rising in her.

“I need some answers,” he told her, as he began to head for down the short path and to the gate. There he paused, just a moment, long enough for her to almost see the weight of the world on his shoulders, as he added, “I’m going home.”

\* \* \*

He had been wrong about the warehouse. It wasn’t completely empty. There’d been one chair, which he’d placed in the middle of the room. There’d been rope. Working quickly, he’d tied the man onto the chair, while remaining unconscious. The other three out in the van, wary of them waking up, he’d hog tied, thrown in the back of the van and slammed the door. No one would be by to sneak up on him.

He was now alone with the only man who’d started talking. To be fair the only man he’d left conscious – for the most part. Blood trickled from the back of his head where he’d been hit, and he was asleep for some time. Maybe half an hour – but time felt weird. Stretched. As if every moment was taking a century, and the droning buzzing ringing continued.

It made it hard to think. But not hard to act.

He waited, at first hunched and then knelt, the ground biting into his feet and shins through the thin fabric of his pyjama bottoms – but he blotted it out. He needed clarity, he needed focus. He tried to breathe, but his heart continued to thunder in his chest.

Then, movement. Slight. A change in the captive's breath. The man was coming round but attempting to make it look like he wasn't coming round.

"Wake up," Ricky told him, his voice sounding remarkably loud in the empty space. "We don't have all night."

Knowing his deception wasn't fooling anyone, the man's eyes widened and he sat up more in his chair – as much as his bonds would allow. His gaze returned to Ricky, but in them he could see a new defiance. As if the brief moment of reboot had brought him back his balls or something.

"It's time for you to give me some truth," Ricky told him, trying his best to keep his focus on the man as the flies circled.

"I already told you," the man told him evenly, "We were to meet a man here. He was going to take you off our hands, I don't know what he wanted beyond that."

"See, here is where I'm having the problem," Ricky retorted, "You work for someone you don't even know? I don't buy that."

The man, who was barely ten years his senior, chuckled grimly and spat out a wad of blood. With it, Ricky saw a white thing he wondered might be a tooth. He didn't move his gaze to look, but the guy sneered at him all the same.

"You don't know anything, you're a child."

"A child with a gun," Ricky reminded him, waving said device in his hands. It was remarkable how fast he had gotten used to holding one. Any weapon would do he supposed, even if he usually preferred a sword. Guns were great in movies, but in real life they were turning out to be just a useful bargaining tool. "Makes all the difference."

"I work for whoever hires me," the driver told him with a shrug, "We do whatever they want as long as they have the money."

“And the point?” Ricky asked him, “I mean, never think to question why kidnap a fifteen year old kid?”

“Because you’re not just a ‘fifteen year old kid,’” the driver spat back at him, another small trace of blood running down his lip as if to punctuate a point. So, they had been told something about him. Not enough to up their precautions, but enough to know that they weren’t just dealing with a kid. That meant something, even if he couldn’t quite think of what at the time. He continued, “You’re dangerous and you know it.”

“And that’s why they want me?” Ricky snapped, “Because I’m dangerous? You’re saying they’re the good guys? Or am I just dangerous to *them*? What the hell do they want with me?” Questions wanted to continue to fly from his lips, his voice quickening as he went, he felt the buzzing intensifying.

“I don’t know,” the driver shrugged, “I’m not paid to know.”

Ricky stood, fighting the sway as he moved closer towards the man. His blood was beginning to boil, he couldn’t hold back the anger. He felt menace slipping from his pores but couldn’t hold it back. He could almost see it like a cloud around him.

“Tell me, who hired you?” he demanded.

“I don’t know the people, like I said, I’m not paid to know.”

“Who hired you?” he yelled, raising the gun and pointing the business end right at the man. His eyes widened as part of the fear came back into them. Not all, not enough, but he could see the edge Ricky was teetering towards. And he didn’t think it was a bluff.

“They call themselves the Covenant!” he snapped back, as Ricky’s world began to fall apart.

There it was, plain as day – as the hairs on the man’s head. The Covenant. Mark. His family. Everything he feared, everything he’d struggled with, worried about, came crashing down.

“The Covenant?” he repeated, quietly, the gun pointing down towards the floor.

“That’s right,” the driver responded, breathing heavily. “The fucking Covenant.”

Adrenaline wanted to flush through him, but couldn't, as Ricky's world continued to fall further and further apart.

\* \* \*

Evenings in the Matthews household were as predictable as winter in Antarctica. It was eight o'clock by the time Mark walked through the front door. Dinner had been served and eaten promptly at seven. If he wanted anything, there would be leftovers on a plate in the fridge. He did not feel like eating, the worm in his stomach which was churning and turning and eating him inside out, wouldn't let him.

"You home for good now?" his Uncle asked him from the living room, as he stood in the hallway gathering himself. He would be sat in his favourite armchair. They did not have a television, instead they would be reading quietly. His Uncle, some leatherbound volume of old history, while his aunt would be across the room in her own comfier chair, either doing her cross-stitch by the purpose bought lamplight behind her or reading her own book. She liked the classics, fiction. Perhaps some Bronte.

Perhaps the fucking thirty nine steps.

"For now," Mark answered as he stepped into the room, all his metaphorical armour up and ready. He paused in the doorway to the living room, their lounge – he'd heard his aunt refer to it once as a parlour. That was exactly how it felt, detached, out of time. He heard her gasp, he hadn't bothered wiping the blood from his face or doing anything about the bruises. He was as he had left Ricky's, confused and hurt.

"Mark, what happened to you?" she asked, going to move but he waved her back. She stood from her chair, but did not move towards him, concern on her face. More than he'd gotten before. He instead turned his gaze towards his Uncle, who'd lowered his book to his knee but nothing more. He regarded him with an even expression.

"I know about the Covenant," he told him, "And I know about you. Now I want your help."

Had he expected an explosion? Perhaps. His Uncle had been rare to shout, preferring instead slow, methodical withdrawal of any kind of affirmation or support. He did not shout, as a rule, he hardened. But he wondered if this, this moment would be the tipping point. Instead, John Matthews put his bookmark carefully into place, and slipped the tome onto the stand beside him, all done carefully before returning his gaze back to Mark.

"We have needed to talk for some time," he admitted, as though they were discussing his choice of university. "But we held off until now because... well, now is the time. I can put it no better way. You're eighteen, you have come of age."

"Good," Mark answered bluntly, "So give me the answers I need to do what must be done."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," his uncle condescended him over the golden rims of his glasses.

"Then tell me."

"The Covenant has existed in Calendar for hundreds of years," he began, the driest of lecturers. "It is a coalition of men, who are somewhat enlightened to the state of affairs and the existence of the underworld. Of demons, in all shapes and sizes."

"You know, but you do nothing?" Mark surmised, the question more rhetorical. It had been as he feared.

"We watch," his Uncle returned to him, pursing his lips together. He was getting annoyed, but he was not yet defensive, "We collect information. We observe the world as it *is*, but we do not interfere. To interfere is to change the natural order of things. We keep watch. That is *all* we do."

"And meanwhile people die?" he asked.

"They would have died with or without our interference," his uncle corrected him, "You're a smart man, you know that."

His Uncle surprised him then, by rising from his chair. His voice took on a proud quality, as though he was speaking of something far greater than the insidious inaction Mark had so far seen from them.

“My father was a member,” he continued, “As was his father before him. The Covenant exists through bloodlines. The truth is kept from the children until they reach adulthood, until their eighteenth birthday. And then they are brought into the fold... “

Mark realised what he was saying and the idea struck him as so incredibly incomprehensible that for moment he actually scoffed, a tone he had never taken with his uncle before.

“Are you telling me you want me to join you?”

“I’m telling you that you have a choice,” his Uncle snipped, “You have a choice to become a member of the Covenant, to abide by the rule of non-interference. You leave your friend, the Guide – “ He caught his Aunt’s eyes flicker at that, she didn’t know his Uncle knew – she had kept it from him after all. “ – to his fate, whatever it may be... and you join us.”

All choices had another side, so Mark found himself asking the obvious question.

“And if I don’t?” he challenged, “If I don’t want to stand on the sidelines and watch?”

“Then we will do whatever we can to stop you from interfering,” his Uncle told him simply. “You are Covenant by blood and bound by the rules, no matter what your choice. You chose only consequences.”

“So, there is no choice?” Mark laughed, bitterly, “Unless the only other option is death?”

“I never said death,” his Uncle answered, coolly.

“Well, blood or not, I believe it’s time to tell you where to shove it, *John*,” Mark told him. He turned and headed for the door, done with all of it, the lies, the secrecy, the bullshit that his Uncle clearly had bought into.

For the first time, he heard his Uncle lose his calm and raise his voice – his words floating after him through the door.

“You interfere and you will be dealt with!”

He ignored him and went out to do whatever he could to help his friends. It was all he could do.

Whatever the consequences.

\* \* \*

"I can't believe this!" Sara paced at the end of the table, as Mark held his head in his hands. She was fuming, after everything they'd been through – and now this. The tale which Mark had spun her, there in the darkened library, was right out of a bad movie with Matt Damon. She shuddered, Matt-bloody-Damon? "How come you never told me your family works for the goddamn supernatural CIA?"

"I didn't think it mattered," Mark muttered. She could have slapped him right then.

"Doesn't matter?" she echoed, "Mark, you've as much told me they're going to kill us all if we interfere with whatever they're doing to Ricky. Because I hardly think this is a time to say there's two secret paramilitary organisations, wouldn't you say?"

"No, Sara, they're not," he corrected her, "They're going to stop me. You can do whatever you like, because you're not related to them."

She grunted in frustration, wringing her hands. She wished there was something he could do, some way they could find out where he was. The thought of him out there, alone and bleeding and hurt and... God, she didn't even know what and there was left after that. And all this time, Mark and his sodding secrets? It was too much.

"I wish we knew where he was," she verbalised.

"If he's near a phone, he'll contact us."

"No, he won't," she snapped at him, "Because he knows you're connected to the Sopranos from Hell, he thinks you're behind all this. And in a way, he's right."

Mark glared at her, but she wasn't going to be intimidated.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“Come on, Mark, you dragged him into this world,” she explained, “You have him go fighting on missions for you like some goddamn crusading knight. He’s fifteen for fuck’s sake.” Okay, so it was a little harsh, but she didn’t think it was wrong what she was saying. Mark looked at her with a kind of weary resignation. Sure, he was pissed at her, but he also knew there was some nugget of truth in what she was saying. Hopefully.

“I did not drag him into this world,” he answered coolly, “He dragged me. You weren’t there in the beginning, you don’t know what it took. But I would go through all that shit again, all the horror and the bloodshed, and all of this... because it needed to be done. I don’t claim to know what his destiny is, or what the Guide means, but the world needs champions like him. And I would give anything, my life and my soul, to make sure it has him. No matter what happens, you will *never* understand that.”

They locked in mutual glares that remained until the shrill sound of the phone cut through them both. It was Mark, though sitting, who stood and answered it – as if it weren’t past midnight in a school library. As though it was a call from a sodding supplier.

“Ricky?” he asked into the receiver, before pressing the speaker button so she could hear.

God help her, he sounded distraught. Confused. His breath was ragged, coming in waves, yet beneath it was a cold intent. A steel that she’d not heard before.

“I’ve got one of your people.”

“Where are you?” Mark asked.

“I will kill him if you don’t come,” Ricky continued, not listening, not paying attention. “If you don’t come to the warehouse and tell me why you want me.”

“I swear to you...” Mark pleaded, but Ricky cut him off.

“Enough swearing,” Ricky snapped, “South Side. Auto Mechanics. You have fifteen minutes before I start firing. And it won’t all be kneecaps.”

The dial tone switched to a relentless beep as Mark pushed a button to end it. The hang up was clear, the message was clear – and the voice on the phone had been Ricky in body, but so obviously not in mind. She felt helpless, like the world was crashing down around them, as Mark turned around and looked at her.

“He is my friend, Sara, perhaps my only,” Mark told her, calmly. “Whether you believe it not, I want to go there and bring him back.” She didn’t know what to think, what to believe as she looked into his eyes – appearing incredibly honest. She would have to take a leap. So, she told him,

“Then we do it together.”

\* \* \*

Time was ticking and he felt the relentless march of it in his brain. He’d long since stopped feeling the stinging bite in his soles and toes as he paced back and forth in front of the man – who kept eying the weapon in his hands nervously. The man who had told him about the Covenant. The one who was his captive.

Jeez, when had things got so messed up?

The bang at the door came loud and swift, even though he didn’t remember placing it back. Just like he didn’t remember the phone working. He’d smashed it right? He felt the bits tinkle in his hands outside, but it had been there in front of him when he needed it. Did he smash it? Or was it another phone? Had he picked it up off one of the unconscious men?

“It’s use, Ricky, don’t worry,” he heard Sara call out. Her voice, clear and fresh and not like it had been on the phone. It was like a balm, something to soothe him. She was here, it was going to be okay.

The hand with the gun was pointing towards the door. The captive had heard it too, he looked as if hopeful – as if someone else was coming to rescue him. But he was the only team out,

right? That's what he'd said. Or did he say that? As he looked, Sara stepped through the door – and then him. Then the traitor.

“Why'd you bring her here, Mark?” he addressed the boy who used to be his friend. He lowered the gun, reluctantly. Neither of them were armed – but what would be there behind him? “Do you think I won't kill your man if she's here?”

“He's not my man,” Mark responded quietly, “I've never met him before in my life.”

“Lying is easy, comedy is hard,” Ricky quipped, raising the gun once more at Mark who instinctively raised his hands. Then something unexpected happened, something that surprised him more than the buzzing in his head. Sara stepped in front of him.

“You shoot Mark, you shoot me.”

“Fine.”

He didn't elaborate as to what he meant, but he filed it away. Somewhere underneath the drone, he noted it, but lowered the gun he did and turned back towards their captive. Behind him, he heard Sara and Mark coming closer. He kept his senses on Mark particularly, through the haze he could tell where he was. He wasn't going to be surprised. He wasn't going to be hurt. Not again.

“I told you they were after me,” Ricky reaffirmed, “I wasn't lying, it's the Covenant, Mark.” He looked up at him, standing there a few feet away and looking past Ricky to the man tied to the chair. He could see him too, of course he could. “Your people.”

Sara shot Mark a look, he caught it, but Mark said nothing for the longest moment.

“Are you telling the truth?” Mark addressed the man in front of him, who barely registered a response. More forcefully he added, “Who is your contact?”

“I've never met him,” the man replied with a shrug. Then Mark moved his eyes over to Ricky and he couldn't tell what the look was supposed to be. What was this performance for? He knew the truth, he knew what Mark had done.

“Fine, Ricky, you want to make him talk?” Mark asked him. What game was this? “Shoot him.”

Ricky frowned, the thought piercing through something, screaming at the back of his mind. Like a little voice that couldn't be heard over the ringing. What did he say? But Mark had already turned back to the Operative, his face blank.

"In the leg for starters," Mark suggested.

Ricky shot, the sound reverberating like a cacophony in the empty space. The man screamed, Sara gasped, blood flowed from his wound. Mark stood where he was. Illumination shot in from outside. Sara moved towards the windows, most of them too cloudy to see through and peeked through the grime to what was outside.

He didn't need her to tell him. The cavalry had arrived. The other people. The 'teams' of which there were apparently none. The ones who must have come with Mark.

"Um, it looks like the end of a *Die Hard* movie out there," Sara pointed out, but her voice was meaningless in the din. It didn't matter who was there, what it was for – it was all going to come to an end soon anyway. And the explanation was painfully clear.

"You brought them here!" he yelled at Mark, turning to him, but Mark simply shook his head – a look of cold, calculating blankness on his face.

"No, I didn't."

Before Ricky could push him further, Mark stepped forward. Not towards Ricky, towards the man, and with a swift kick knocked the man tied to the chair to the ground, chair and all. He jammed one thumb into the man's kneecap, the place where the blood was still flowing and the scream began more guttural.

"Who is your Covenant contact?" Mark asked of him, as if he was enquiring about the time.

"John Matthews!"

The man's cry was fear and anger and pain all rolled into one. The name buzzed out into the world, piercing through. Mark's Uncle. The man he'd never met, but who by presence alone he felt like he knew.

“Your Uncle is doing this?” Ricky asked, the buzzing ramped up in his ears. It was drowning out his thoughts, he could feel it. He didn’t know what to say, what to do. Mark looked surprised. Why would he look surprised? He knew? Right?

“No, Ricky... “ Sara’s voice came to him from the side. He turned, feeling his head sway and his vision double a few times. Sara was smiling, cold and cruel, a sneer. But she was his friend? But she brought *him* here. *Them* here. The horror of its simplicity became so real when she raised her own gun, the barrel a dark eye that glared at him.

*Ricky, are you okay?*

He blinked, there was no gun, Sara was scared. He blinked, and she stepped forward – her intentions menacingly clear.

“I love you, Ricky, that’s why I have to kill you.”

He raised his gun back, horrified. She didn’t move, but did she step back? Blink. No, she pressed forward, she wasn’t scared of him. She was going to do it.

*Ricky? What are you doing?!*

*Ricky, no!*

“It’s time to die...”

Her finger pressed on the trigger, he heard the explosion rip through his ears as his own went off in his hands. He didn’t press it, did he? No, he couldn’t have, but he heard the second bang, loud and screaming in his ears.

He was suddenly on the ground, the cold concrete biting into the back of his head, seeing stars and hearing the buzzing, oh the buzzing. Mark was on top of him, was trying to hold him down as he flailed, helpless and confused.

Sara, stood, looking down at him. Her hand went to her stomach and came away bloody. It was only then when she teetered and suddenly crashed to the floor.

“Oh God, Sara...” he whispered, throwing Mark off him and scrambling over to her. Where was the gun? What... where...

“What the hell did you do?!” Mark screamed at him.

He didn't know.

\* \* \*

A soft fog curled through the Hall, unseen because no eyes were there to see it. The lamplights continued to burn, as they would for all eternity. Here in the Hall of the Guide, there was no day, no night, no time. There just... was.

Struggling, pushing, attempting to break through had been hard. The ritual was interrupted, the process the boys had started had not yet had a chance to reach its peak. Not while they had been there, not until afterwards. But they had broken a hole in the dam, they had started it – and while they had believed it a failure, it had not been.

The projection had been temporary, had been looped, had been the only way he could communicate without being able to speak from where he was. The figure, the grey and ghostly figure had remained after they had left. Begging them not to go without words, but it did not work.

Finally, finally, he was free. He was charged – and with a sudden flash the eyes that seemed dead to the boys became lively once more. They searched with intent, they looked around the empty space. The Hall was empty now, but he knew where the Guide had gone. He could sense it, it had been building.

The apparition, the man who they had summoned, finally could move.

And from the Hall of the Guide, he flew in ways only spirit forms could – and made a beeline for where he sensed the Guide.

For time was now critically short.

**Act IV**

“What the hell is that?!”

Mark heard the scream outside, but he was trying too hard not to give into his own. Ricky, confused, spiralling next to him; Mark found himself kneeling next to Sara as the world seemed to escalate into chaos outside.

At first there was the cry of surprise, then the sound of an explosion. Light flashed muted through the grim grey of the grime on the windows. Something, perhaps one of their vehicles, perhaps one of the engines, had gone up in flames. He heard the crunch and scream of metal as it landed hard upon the ground underneath, and the tinkling of glass.

Sara, in front of him, panting and breathing hard. Trying to hold on. He pressed one hand to her wound, feeling the pulse of life flowing from her. It was an artery that had been hit. He didn't know how major, but already his hands were slick with blood. She looked at him, confused and hurt and not knowing why Ricky did what he did.

He knew, then. The Covenant. But something had come for them. He heard the screams of the men outside, scattered gunfire. A second explosion, a third. How many vehicles were there? How many men? He couldn't see, but it sounded as if a war was raining down. Bits of shrapnel hit the windows, and some tinkled through but still he couldn't see.

Ricky paced, the gun long since gone off to one side as tears slid down his face. The boy, his feet bleeding, continued to pace back and forth, telling himself she was going to kill him, telling himself he couldn't do it otherwise. Mark felt like telling him to shut the hell up, they needed an ambulance – but hell itself seemed to be raining all around them.

The sounds outside muted as Mark was blasted by a gust of soft wind. His hair flew around his head as he turned to the source. The door remained wedged where they had left it, but something had instead come through the wall. It took him a moment, and recognition kicked in.

“What the hell?”

Before him, floating above the ground the same way as he had before, was the apparition they had seen within the Hall of the Guide. The same man, his look now no longer blank and glitching, but instead alert and alive with intent. And was there a glow? He thought so, a soft luminescence that told him he was not of this world.

As if the lack of a lower half didn't tip him off.

"Not an answering machine," the apparition told him.

He flew towards Ricky, moving with a gliding motion that looked nothing like someone walking or running. He simply moved, and within a flash of the eyes, was holding Ricky around the throat. Not hard enough to choke, but enough to raise him from the ground.

For a second Ricky and the apparition locked eyes, and then without warning the being disappeared, and Ricky crumpled to the ground, unconscious or dead – Mark did not know. He held onto dear life to Sara's wound, feeling sticky, warm and clotting blood beneath his hand and he prayed it was the former.

He couldn't lose everything in one night. He just couldn't.

Not again.

\* \* \*

The world in front of him was grey, but quiet. As Ricky's eyes opened, he could feel solid ground beneath him. And there was, solid and recognisable and no longer spinning. It was, God help him, it was as if for the first time in forever he was able to think and be himself. He was Ricky Kent. But what else was he? And *where* was he?

The ground beneath his hands and feet as he pushed himself onto all fours, appeared to be a cloud. But it was solid, hard ground. Underneath his hands, as if frozen in marble, was what appeared to be fog. Swirls of grey unmoving, frozen in time. As he cast his eyes forward, he saw that around him was the same thick grey fog, only this was moving.

Slowly, but surely, he managed to get himself to his feet and attempted to peer through the fog around him. There was nothing. No further sense of place or purpose. He could have still been standing in the warehouse, surrounded by the soupy fog, or in a deserted field – except for the ground beneath him. The same dull, but still, world.

“Well, it seems like I got here just in the nick of time,” he heard a voice, oddly familiar to him, ring out. Only, this wasn’t as flat and toneless as last time, this was more alive somehow. He turned his head, free of the dizzying sense of confusion as he spun so quickly before and saw the man standing there. The one from the Hall. The spirit who Mark had joked was an answering machine.

“My head’s clear,” was Ricky’s first words, as he looked at the man and finally pinned down the two things that were different. First, his eyes were alive and bright with consciousness, and second – he had his legs. He was a whole human being. Still looked like he was dressing for a Braveheart convention, but he was complete. A thought occurred to him, chilled him as he realised he was still in his pyjamas, “Am I dead?”

“In a manner of speaking,” the man answered, with a slight shrug.

“You killed me?!” he asked, incredulous. What the actual f-

“I didn’t kill you,” the man corrected him, as though he was explaining the weather, “I tore your spirit from your body and brought it into the Ether.” He indicated to the swirling fog around him, which Ricky took to be the ‘Ether’. “It’ll cure the drug that’s been pumped into your system, trust me. We just have to wait here for a few minutes to let your basic hardware reboot.”

Ricky felt his world spinning again, but this time it was not a physical sensation. Instead, he felt disoriented by the strange juxtaposition of the man’s attire and the way he spoke. Ricky judged him from ye olde times (Mark had said circa last millennium in the caves), was in his mid-twenties and yet... he knew about computers?

“How do you know all this?” Ricky asked him, confused, “What the hell is the Ether?”

“That’s not important,” the man dismissed with a wave of his hand. “What’s important is that what happened isn’t your fault.” He shrugged again as if it was nothing, “But don’t worry, you’ll feel guilty anyway.”

“Sure, I just shot my best friend!” Ricky answered him bitterly. He expected some kind of reaction, but the response was as plainly non-committal as everything else,

“We’ll deal with that when we go back,” the man dismissed, before politely adding, “Now, I take it you had some questions for me? Might as well kill some time.” He paused, “Poor choice of words.”

“I’m a spirit talking to a Ghost?” Ricky tried to sum up.

“Oh, come on, Ricky,” the man’s eyes sparkled with a kind of good humour. He didn’t know what about the whole situation was meant to be funny. “There are other worlds than yours, y’know.”

“You’re a Guide?”

“Formerly,” the man agreed. A large swirl of fog moved as if something passed through it. Ricky turned to look, but whatever it was had already passed. The man did not respond.

“What am I?” Ricky blurted out, “What am I supposed to do?”

A look crossed over the man’s features, it softened him and Ricky started to wonder just how old this guy really was – in more ways than one. It was then he realised he’d never asked his name, though he hardly thought his bluntness was the top priority given the circumstances. The man smiled, as if the thought was plucked from his mind.

“My name is William,” he offered, before continuing, “I was born 984 AD by your standards. When I was fifteen, it was like... suddenly I had the strength of ten men. I farmed the fields were I was born with more skill and stamina than anyone else...” He paused, and the tale began to grow more familiar, “But then I began to have dreams... of blood, and fire... and that’s when the demon came. A powerful creature the likes of which I didn’t even know existed. It tried to wipe out the people of my village and unleash the End of Days.”

“How?” Ricky frowned.

“There are lines of paramystical energy that run across the face of the Earth,” William explained. Ricky thought Mark had tried to explain something similar to him but had to admit it had gone over his head, “Occasionally they cross over. My village happened to be at a particularly powerful crossing. The Beast wanted to harness this to open a portal to a demonic realm, to lay waste to the Earth. I stopped it. It cost me my life, but I stopped it.”

“Go team,” he replied, quietly. The thoughts raced through his mind. An apocalypse, a demon, portals to other world. His head felt full once more, but in a different way than before. It was as though a chill was spreading across him, a goose walking over his grave as he spoke to this man who seemed to remind him of both his past and his future at the same time.

“Until you, there hasn’t been another Guide since me,” William explained, “You were activated because once again forces which tried to destroy the world in my time are back. You will face many trials before they arrive but arrive they will and fight you must. You are a warrior for the light.” As his heavy words hung in the air, he waved dismissively, “The whole I am Maximus, warrior crap.”

“You speak very well for a thousand year old ghost,” Ricky pointed out, confused and addressing the unease head-on. William smiled, and for some reason Ricky found it endearing rather than annoying. He couldn’t explain why, he just instinctively felt like he trusted the guy.

“Well, since I died, I’ve been travelling the lands of the dead, such as this,” he explained, “Trying to help people move on from her to Beyond – whatever may lie over there. And I’ve been waiting for another Guide, keeping my ear to the ground.” He actually looked a little sheepish as he continued, “I would have come to see you sooner, but manifesting in the real world takes a whole heck of a lot of power. I had to charge up. I suppose I’ve picked up a few things in my holding time. And during Russel Crowe’s NDE.”

The possibilities ran through his mind faster than he could grasp them. It felt finally like he was getting some answers. And they were hopeful. They were terrifying. He had a future, and

possibly the end of one. But as he felt warmth and truth coming from this guy, he also began to realise – did this mean he was good?

“So, we’re here to save the world,” he summarised, “But what *are* we?”

“Our origins?” William clarified the question and Ricky nodded, “I never found that out myself. I think it is something to do with blood and cosmology. You and I are related, however distant. But... I haven’t found all the answers even in my time of searching. I suppose I might never.” He levelled his gaze at Ricky once more, as he said something which pierced through Ricky more than anything else, “What you *are* isn’t important, it’s what you’re going to *do*.”

“If Sara dies, what can I do?” he asked, the scary part out loud.

“You’re in love?” William asked gently.

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Well, you seem to have one advantage over me, so far,” William offered, “You have friends.”

“Not if we don’t get back to the real world,” Ricky reminded him.

“Mortal Realm, not ‘real world’,” William corrected him, before sighing and looking at his wrist. Ricky frowned, the man was wearing a watch, as anachronistic as that seemed and he seemed to sigh. Was there even time in this... place? “Very well, I suppose that should be enough to get you over the worst of it.”

He clicked his fingers and the grey world disappeared.

\* \* \*

“Mark?” Sara’s voice was barely above a whisper, as he kneeled beside her. Ricky hadn’t moved, outside was deadly calm, and Mark didn’t know what to do. Her lips were pale, a tinge of blue to them, her breathing shallow as she looked up at him.

“Yeah?” he asked, trying to hold back tears, trying not to let the fatigue and the inevitability of what was about to happen take over him. He held pressure on, even though it had stopped. The

bleeding outside had stopped, but her pale face and his own frozen fear told him it was not a good thing.

"I never finished yelling at you," she pointed out, a small tired smile coming to her face.

"Well, you'll get your chance," he told her.

"Liar."

With a sudden gasp Ricky lifted from the ground into a sitting position, as though a drowner gasping for air. He looked around him and in a voice that was the clearest approximation of his own, brighter than Mark had heard in days, muttered,

"Holy hell that was weird."

Before Mark could say anything, before he could move, a figure floated next to him. *The* figure, the apparition had likewise re-appeared, and up close Mark saw even more how unrealistically real he seemed. He couldn't help but look down at the space where his legs should have been as the man's voice came to him,

"Please, Mark, is it?" the man asked him politely. He nodded, slowly, feeling as if he was stuck in a surreal dream. "Step back."

He lowered his gaze to Ricky, who stood and nodded. He didn't know why, but all his instincts told him to trust, and so he backed off, clotting blood drying on his hands as he stepped back and the apparition moved in.

The apparition moved closer to her, almost as if he was kneeling, though with no leg support Mark could not tell what was going on. As he and his friend watched on, the being held one hand over Sara's wound and incredibly, it began to knit itself together as the warm ethereal light he was surrounded by. Within moments, it was gone – the only evidence the hole in her clothing to indicate where the bullet had ripped through. She too, sat up gasping like she was an extra on *Baywatch*.

"Wow, that tickled," were her first words as she checked out her now non-wound. Her second words were directed at Ricky, as she narrowed her eyes, "Have you stopped being evil?"

"Hey, I'm sorry, I was drugged," Ricky held up his hands.

“Right,” she agreed, “I might take some aspirin and come at you with a knife. See how you like it.”

Mark couldn't help it, he laughed. Even stood there, with blood on his hands, the sound bubbled out of him. Tinged with a kind of nervous exhaustion, but real none the less. The fact that both Ricky and Sara smiled told him it was alright. Things weren't all over, but there was a sense of relief none the less.

The being floated up to his normal height and regarded the trio.

“I must leave you to it now,” he proclaimed. “It took a lot of energy to get rid of your friends outside, heal her and take you to the Ether. It's rather depleted my batteries, so speak. I won't be able to manifest in the Mortal Realm again for some time. Of course, things work a little better in the Hall, so should you need me – you know where I can be found.”

“Do I have to do that long spell again?” Ricky asked, as Mark tried to keep from reminding him that other than a crazed paranoid walk through the caves, it was he who'd done most of the incanting. The being nodded.

“Yes, you will,” he answered, but then he smiled in a way that brightened the room up further. “But at least you've got friends there to keep you company.”

A look clouded across Ricky's face, as something occurred to him. Obviously, he knew more than Mark, for he seemed already familiar with the being. But that was a story for another time, he was sure.

“Maybe I'm not alone, but I know someone who is,” Ricky put forward, “Claire. Claire Kramer. A vamp known as Sundune knocked her into one of the Hell Dimensions in his place. She's alone, and we need to find her.”

“That's no easy ask,” the being answered.

“Please?”

He nodded, “As soon as I am able to travel, I will search for your friend.”

Ricky said his thanks and as Mark watched on, he began to fade until all there was the three of them once more. Mark helped Sara to her feet and as Ricky turned to them, he saw his friend's knees beginning to buckle.

"Okay, so maybe not *all* the drugs are gone," Ricky muttered, as both Mark and a surprisingly spry Sara stepped forward. "Can we get out of here before the bad guys wake up?"

Yes, Mark thought they could do that, and together the three of them helped one another back into the night. In some cases, to home. But as Mark thought deeply, his night he knew was still not over.

\* \* \*

"Get some rest, mate," she heard from up the stairs in the stillness and quiet of the Kent household. She sat in the living room, Mark having helped Ricky upstairs to bed. When he came down, she saw him looking as exhausted as she felt, shoulders slumped and resigned.

"He's asleep and well now," he told her, sitting on the chair adjacent to where she sat on the sofa. She knew they needed to go, her mother would likely be ready with commentary about her lateness before too long, despite the text about sleeping over at Amy's. But she also knew she was knackered and sitting down, taking a breather seemed necessary.

And there was more they needed to discuss, it hung between the two of them in the silence.

"Do we need to talk about what happened?" she asked him, but it came more as a statement than a question and they both knew it.

"Suffice to say, I don't think I'm going to enjoy going home tonight," Mark sighed. His eyes were off in some otherwhere.

"Your Uncle tried to kill your best friend," she agreed.

"I'm well aware of the fact."

"He got me shot."

“You got better though, remember that,” he joked weakly, but without much humour behind it. Her thoughts pivoted, up to the boy upstairs whom she’d loved since before she could remember. Not in *that* way, she always reminded herself, but like the other half of her soul.

“What is Ricky?” she asked, neither of them having had the heart to ask him about his experiences with the ghost-man before he departed. There was so much talking which would be needed tomorrow, but that night they needed to let him rest. “What happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” Mark admitted, but he fell into a silence that felt filled with something deeper. She waited, as he leaned forward in the chair, arms on his knees. He wrestled with something she could see it on his face. “I will be honest with you, for a moment there, I didn’t know if he was being drugged or controlled... or if there was something innate inside him struggling to get out.”

“What do you know?” she pressed, needing more.

“I went to see a woman about the Guide,” he explained, “We both wanted to get Ricky some answers – he and Claire sought information from the streets, I went to speak to a seer. But when I did, when I asked about the Guide, her incantation seemed to... change. Her spell went weird, she collapsed.” He swallowed thickly, as she saw the weight she’d seen before grow in its intensity. “I went to see her in the hospital the next day and the spell, whatever she’d seen, it had blinded her. She kept saying ‘beware the darkest soul’. It felt like a warning.”

“You think she meant Ricky?” she asked. The air felt heavy around them, but then she supposed the middle of the night was such a time for these types of conversations. Whispers in the dark, of dangerous thing. It was evident on his face, his confusion. His uncertainty.

“I don’t know what to think,” he admitted, “I don’t know what the Guide really is. What it means. Neither do you.”

“I know who my friend is,” she told him, feeling it come out harsher than she’d intended. Well, she had been shot that night after all. “I know the kind of person he is, and I know he would never do anything wrong, anything evil... unless... “

“Unless he was drugged?” Mark offered, and a part of her hated him in that moment. Not because he was wrong, but because there was a cruel truth in his answer that challenged what she believed. That made her understand that it was a belief, not a truth – and that there was a clear distinction between them.

“I will never accept that my friend could be evil,” she told him, looking him straight in the eye. “No matter what.”

“Then I suppose that’s that.”

Neither of them knew of anything more to say, so Mark stood, and headed towards the door.

“I guess it’s time to go home.”

Sara, who decided to stay a little longer, to sit with her feelings and to ensure no more creeping sounds in the night, leaned back into the sofa.

“Say ‘fuck you’ to your Uncle for me.”

\* \* \*

As Mark walked the short gravel pathway to the front door of their detached home, and it was now *their* home, he no longer felt it of his own – he knew they were not asleep. First, the lights downstairs were bright, and only one lamplight was lit in their bedroom upstairs. The flicker of curtains was the second indication, someone was watching. Mark entered without flair and stepped into the living room.

“You disappoint me, Mark,” his Uncle spoke from his spot by the window. He had not dressed for bed, had not changed. Of course not, he had likely been waiting for a full report from his men had he not? A full report on the activities.

*Busy, for a policy of non-interference,* Mark thought to himself bitterly.

“I made the right choice.”

“The arrogance of youth,” he uncle scoffed, remaining at the window. “There is no right, no wrong – only choices.”

“Arrogance or not, what you did was wrong,” Mark told him, through gritted teeth. He thought there was nothing left to feel that evening, but he’d been wrong. There was still anger. There was still a raging sense of injustice. “It was sick. And you know why you did it. It wasn’t to do with your rules. It was about me, wasn’t it?”

His uncle turned to him, his eyes narrowing. He’d struck a nerve, and likely he guessed the nerve to hit the truth.

“When I came home, you were going to take me to the warehouse, right?” he continued. He’d been thinking about all the pieces since their first stumbling steps helping Ricky back home, the jigsaw coming together so he could see the big picture finally. “Show me a stark raving mad lunatic your drugs had made my friend, convince me of his darkness. When I saw how feral he had become, how much he hated me and you by proximity, you’d make me choose between helping the Guide and joining the Covenant. Right?” He laughed, bitterly realising, “You wanted to show me how he would turn against me, how he would try to kill me. You tried to kill an innocent kid, one who was *helping* people, in order to get me to join you. And you say there’s no such thing as morality?”

“You broke the rules first,” his Uncle told him, pursed lips and white hot rage behind his calm eyes.

“I followed what my heart said was right.”

“And you should have been using your head,” his Uncle hissed. “You have no idea of the power you’re up against.”

“You’re scared, aren’t you?” Mark realised. “You and the rest of your precious Covenant. You’re too afraid to fight the forces of darkness. Too comfy, too self-interested.”

The slap came quick and sharp, stinging his already bruised cheek, but Mark didn’t mind. He stood there, he took the blow, and he returned his gaze, no hate left for the man – only a kind of hollow pity for the creature in front of him.

“I wasn’t talking about the Covenant,” his Uncle sneered, the eyes still saying the same thing – that he knew things Mark didn’t. And while that was undoubtedly true.

“Sod your Covenant.”

He turned and walked towards the door.

“You walk out of that door... it’s over, Mark,” his Uncle called out behind him, “You’ll never come back through it.”

He looked at the man who had pretended to be family for the first eighteen years of his life and did not know how to express himself. He couldn’t come back? He didn’t intend to.

He stepped out into the night and with a single moment of resolve, closed the door quietly, without slamming. It felt like closing the door on one chapter and moving into another. What happened next, he was still free to choose.

He chose to leave.

\* \* \*

The next day passed in a dream, already they were well through it. The night was giving way into morning as Mark walked to the only place he could think of – the Library. He retreated to his office, as soft blue morning dawn light filtered through the curtains and gave everything a cold but familiar glow.

His eye had caught on the object on his desk, unfamiliar to him at first. He realised it was a gift. Simple, clear. He opened the bag and lifted from it a bottle of whisky. Turning the tag over in his hands he saw a simple message:

WELCOME TO ADULTHOOD

IT HELPS, TRUST ME.

DRAKE

Well, Covenants and Ghosts and Guides and all the supernatural things in the world couldn't compare to the strange occurrences of every day life.

The day passed in a blur. Sara, Ricky and Amy all popped into the library at different times. They focused on school, they went to lessons, they focused on getting through the day as the day needed. No one mentioned anything about his bruise, but to be fair he saw no one else that day.

They debriefed once, in the middle of the day to discuss what had happened. Ricky told them all William had said to them in the Ether, Mark had explained he figured the Covenant would now leave them alone – his ties to them severed. Sara had explained how she felt better than she had in ages and expressed wonder whether William had fixed her clicky knee in the process.

It was normal, in other words.

As his second day of being eighteen flickered by and came towards its conclusion, Mark did not know where to go. So as the school car park began to file out and the sun began to set, he sat in his office and thought quietly to himself. He flicked on the radio nearby, some soft David Gray tune floating out, talking into the quietness and stillness of the library about that tired Babylon.

At some point Ricky joined him, as Mark poured himself a little of Drake's gift. Without a word, and deciding that adult decisions were now his own, he poured a second for his friend and the boys sat in the rapidly calming day, both wearing their scars – physical and emotional for all to see. They sat in silence for a long time, the soft ticking of the cooling radiator nearby and the shimmer of the heat in front of the cold window their only movement.

"They kicked you out?" Ricky asked, after a long period of peace.

"More I walked out," Mark clarified.

"Permanently?" Ricky asked, taking a sip of the liquid and grimacing. Well, it was a good vintage and acquired taste after all. Mark kept his smile inward.

"Usually when your family tries to kill your friends, a choice has to be made," he answered, trying to keep his voice light. "And your path is the nobler one."

Ricky smiled a little at that, as they clinked glasses and let silence settle once more between them. He'd turned down the radio, but soft music continued to play through as Ricky's looked clouded once more. He asked a question, and once more Mark was reminded about how young he – and he supposed they all – were.

“What happens now?”

“Now... “ he struggled to think, “... the world continues to turn.”