

'til the End of the World

Year One

Episode IX

Where Loyalty Lies

Opening

December 2005

The trees above them were bare, with the ghost of green leaves flickering in daylight, both cold and warm. The sky overhead was blue and grey, at once and neither. Winter, summer, spring, autumn – everything in one and nothing in both.

Luke's gaze was cast down towards the ground. The grass, green, pristine, and fresh, lay beneath polished black shoes. They stood on the grass, he in his finest suit – the one his mother had bought him for his grandmother's funeral. She had said he looked so good, so grown-up, so adult. He thought that was just another way of saying he wasn't a child.

He had not been a child in a long time.

Yet, he was only sixteen; so was she. He turned to glance at his companion. Sam, her face lowered to the ground, stood beside him in a modest black dress, one he had never seen her wear before. They stood next to an open grave with no headstone. He could not see its bottom. The scene felt both familiar and new at the same time.

"Whose grave is this?" he asked her, but she shook her head.

"You already know," she told him flatly. "You just won't believe."

He averted his gaze, and when he looked again, she had pulled the veil over her face. It

concealed her eyes, which were streaked with sorrow.

"I don't understand why I keep coming here," he sighed. Again and again, to this same spot. He wouldn't stop; it was as if it wouldn't let him. It? He? What?

"Because you exist here," Sam answered him, tucking her handkerchief under the edge of the black gloves she wore. She looked up, a curious expression on her face, "Or you will, I suppose."

His right hand was wet, and as he looked down, he realised he was holding a clump of dirt. It felt sodden, wet, mixed with stones and grit and worms that squirmed beneath his grip. He threw it into the open grave, though it felt more like he was simply flinging it away from himself. Anything to get the stain off his hand, that horrible feeling of cold, yet wrong, aliveness.

Somewhere a bird cawed, a loud one by the sounds of it. Above them, the sky grew dim, and he looked up to see if there was a cloud. He couldn't see the clouds; the skies weren't grey. They were drained of colour.

"Night's coming," he said softly.

"Oh, not the night," Sam disagreed. When he looked back at her, she met his gaze, "Something far worse than that."

"The end?" he wondered.

"Maybe even worse than that," she shrugged. She turned her pale, forgotten face away from him, towards the headstone. It seemed taller now, more prominent. Where before she craned her neck down, now she could look at it evenly. Well, at the being now upon it. "We're not alone any more."

The raven. Beak curved and sharp, glistening wet in the drizzle. It looked at him; its black, soulless, beady eye bore into him with cruel efficiency. It cawed again, blood – the brightest thing in the grim, dark day – dripped from one of its eyes.

"It likes you," Sam tilted her head, as if regarding a puppy, "It wants you."

"Wants me for what?" he asked, panic rising in his chest. He had seen the Raven before. It came for him before, with claws and sharp beaks in a grave just like this one. "Why?"

"It's coming," she sighed.

The sky darkened to deep black, no stars visible above – as if a cloth had been laid over the roof of the world's cage. As he looked once more at the gravestone, on which this rotting, living, unalive raven continued to shuffle and pace, he could finally read one word carved upon the stone. Only one, mind you, but it was engraved for eternity for all to see.

Beside him, Sam, his lover, his guide, his tormentor, raised one pale finger – the nail curved and blood red.

CROSS

The only word upon the grave.

Once more, for the third time in as many weeks, Luke found himself waking up in his bedroom – alone and in the dark. Faint streetlight streamed through his gossamer-thin curtains, reminding him that the outside world still existed. With cold sweat beading on his forehead, he could only think.

What else was out there?

* * *

The picnic spot was stunning, it had to be said. The rolling hills drifting away from the last of the sunlight into the darkness of the valleys below. On this side, where the moors opened up to wider expanses of unspoiled beauty, behind him there were only dotted farmhouses and small pools of light where people were settling down deeper into their evening.

The view looked down over the town. The south side, shapes that rose and fell in the darkness illuminated only by moonlight. The abandoned side, no longer favoured by anyone it seemed. Ah well, it was very different in the thirties, but so much was.

The thick trickle of the river he couldn't see, but could smell from there, mineral-rich and sodden with dirt carried down from the hills. Things splashed and moved within it, nighttime

creatures going about their business. The night time was awakening after all, enjoying the glory of the long winter nights, irrespective of the cold.

The twinkling of lights beyond was romantic. He could get a good view of the land, see where the shops were, the main parts of town, the takeaway spots, and the homes. He could see it all, and they couldn't see him. He was too far away, and it was too dark within this 'beauty spot' where he stood. There were no lights, only a few picnic benches, some gravel – a spot to park nearby.

Lovers' lanes, they called them, once upon a time.

Rinasi smiled to himself; some tropes never changed – nor should they. There was a kind of historical preservation in humanity's persistent desire to place itself into dangerous situations and call them romantic. Beyond where his dark eyes were illuminated by the ember glow of his cigarette, a couple had discovered that truth. They were young, roughly, he supposed – and foolish. Their blood, now warming both him and the errant drops he'd spilled, was already soaking into the wooden picnic benches.

Behind him, on the road, he heard the sounds of his men moving away. The low rumble of engines, mostly bikes, clear as they headed forward to scout. Somewhere... spacious, he'd asked for, that would do.

Picking a little tweenager from his left fang, he turned back towards the sign.

WELCOME TO CALENDAR

Twinned with Bjearn, Norway

ENJOY THE VIEW!

Pockmarked with time and disrepair, Rinasi smiled to himself; the sign was such jovially bollocks that it was almost funny. He took the remnants of his cigarette stub, crushed it to its final death upon the weather-worn remains of the lukewarm welcome, and took one last look back at the

town.

Somewhere out there were the people he was seeking. Somewhere out there was his duty. But along the way, perhaps they would find a moment for some fun.

"Home sweet home," he muttered to himself.

As he moved back to his own ride, swinging one leg over, he glanced one last time at the town spread before him. The moonlight caught him, holding him in its glow, his pale features striking. And on the side of his neck, a pool of shadow resisted the glow. A tattoo. In the shape of a bird.

Something black. Like a raven.

'til the End of the World

Episode 9

"Where Loyalty Lies"

Starring:

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

Act I

"You know, just brushing them over with a cloth isn't going to do a damn thing, Luke," a voice broke through his internal logic. The world around him snapped back into focus, as he realised that was exactly what he was doing. Standing there in the kitchen, the scent of soap filling his nostrils and his hands warm from handling heated crockery – he was attempting to dry plates and place them into the rack.

Only, it seemed by the dampness of his socks, he wasn't exactly doing a brilliant job.

"Give it a bit of elbow grease," his mother, Helen, gently chided him. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs a bit; how long had he zoned out this time? It felt like ever since these stupid dreams started, he'd been sleeping only a few hours each night – and micro-blanks were beginning to occur.

Well, at home. He'd been zoning out in Maths since Year 7.

"What makes you the expert at washing up?" he tried to joke back, giving his usual teenage sarcasm.

"I'm a mother, I know these things," she told him, sagely, completing her half of the social contract.

"Listen to your mother," his dad, Julian, grumbled behind him. He shuffled into the small kitchen and headed over to the fridge. Given they had just had dinner – in fact, the very reason why he and his mum were doing the washing up in the first place – he wasn't surprised by his mum's reaction.

"You must be joking," she exclaimed, having watched her dear husband wolf down two helpings of pasta bake without so much as a pause for breath. Heck, it wasn't like his dad was overweight or anything, but they had both hit their forties and were often grumbling about aches and pains – with his mother starting to pick up magazines about healthy living. The other day she'd bought a Rosemary Conley workout DVD, which his father had only feigned interest in when he

discovered there was Lycra involved.

"I know, but I'm starving," his dad grumbled, errantly scratching at his belly through his work shirt. He'd not even changed this time since coming in.

"Then have a beer," his mother said.

"Dear, are you encouraging me to drink?" he asked.

"Do you need to be told twice?"

Surprisingly, he did. Instead of picking out the cool cans from inside the fridge, he simply closed the door with a weary sigh.

"What's up?" she asked him. Luke detected a note of worry in his mother's voice, but since she was permanently worried about something or other, it didn't alarm him too much.

"I think I do need to be told twice," he sighed, "Y'know, I'm tired, I'm going to bed."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, come up when you feel like it," he kissed his wife on the cheek, patted Luke on his shoulder and headed past them both for the main staircase. His mum continued to watch him for a moment, her brow furrowed in that way it always did. When she glanced back at him, their eyes locking, he tried to diffuse a little bit of her worry with a joke.

"I think hell froze over."

Okay, so it wasn't exactly a Comedy Central joke, but it would do.

"Yes, thanks to those pesky flying pigs," she answered, before turning back to the sink. He caught the furrowed brow returning as she did so, beginning to scrub at the insides of the pasta dish with an added vigour. "He's been putting in the hours."

His dad, who was a bus driver by trade, had been putting in the hours. There had been a few redundancies at his work, and that meant two things – some extra shifts – and a definitive need to continue to prove yourself useful. Even Luke got it, despite his age. He never said no to an extra shift at work – even though what he got was chump change in comparison. Or at least it was to a sixteen-year-old.

"Speaking of strange things, I haven't seen Sam in a while," his mum mentioned. Rather slyly, he thought, pivoting the conversation back to something that had probably undoubtedly been on her mind for a while. It was just like her, always waiting for the perfect time to gently probe the truth out of someone.

"Yeah, we're in a strange place," he answered back.

"Has something happened between you two?" she asked quietly, but with that little touch of condescension he supposed all adults developed when they got older, "did you have a fight?"

"It's nothing."

"Honey, it's never 'just nothing'," she said. She nudged him a little with her shoulder as she continued working on the dishes. "Tell me."

"I get the sense she's lying to me a lot, and I don't know about what," he explained, carefully avoiding going into too much detail – and desperately trying not to connect the dots between his bruises a few weeks ago, the bad part of town and Sam. He didn't need to go into *that* much detail. "She keeps ignoring my calls and lying to me about where she's going, and gets mad at me for asking. She says she needs space and all, making it sound like I'm a jealous jerk."

He was surprised at how easily the words came out once he got started, even though he'd never in a million years imagined it would be his mum he'd end up talking to about girls. Then again, his dad would have made a joke by now that was probably more than a little offensive to women.

"And you think she's stopped loving you?"

"Well..."

There was the question, wasn't it?

"How long have you and Sam known each other?"

"Since forever."

"Right, I don't think she'd have suddenly stopped loving you just because you've been together for a long time," his mum told him. The way she said it, it was with that tone of certainty that always sounded so comforting. She sounded like she *could* be right. "I think she's just a usual

teenage girl rebelling against everybody. Believe me, I've been there. Give her that space, and things will right themselves. You'll see."

He had to admit, it kind of had a little smack of the truth to it. Weren't people always telling them that teenagers were rebellious little shits? Something about unformed brains or impulse control centres and such nonsense? Maybe he should ask Amy about the science. Or... on second thought, maybe not her.

"Are parents always creepily optimistic?" he asked her.

"Are children always so catastrophically pessimistic?" she answered.

They shared a smile, the sort of mother-son one he hoped would never fade. He embraced her, and they finished the rest of the dishes. He sent a quick 'thinking of you' message to Sam, didn't wait for a reply, and settled down for the night. There were no more dreams that evening, and he woke up feeling almost half-rested.

His dad, however, decided to take the day off work, and despite Luke's sarcastic remark about hell not only having frozen over but becoming Lapland, he simply waved his hand and muttered something about coming down with the flu 'or some shit'. Yeah, he was definitely putting in the hours and paying the price for it.

Things kind of became clearer for him when he wondered if that was all he was dealing with. Was this the 'petty teenage crap' that people said didn't matter when you got older? Would he someday look back at his and Sam's problems and think he'd rather have that than another shift at work?

Maybe. But for the rest of the day, he just had class. Oh, and actually a shift at work.

Maybe adults and teens weren't so different after all.

* * *

Zombies. Werewolves. Maybe Zombie werewolves. Anything, please, she would pray to

whichever deity would listen for a bit of action.

"Oh come on, it's been dead," Sara sighed, feet up on the table. Ricky and Amy were likewise gathered around it, but they were being dull and doing homework or something. Well, Amy was, her fingers clicked away at the keyboard, while Ricky seemed to be doodling. Or doing Biology homework. Or both. "I'm waiting for somebody to die, but they never do."

"Morbid, creepy and slightly mean," Amy pointed out.

"You can't tell me you're not thinking the same thing," she shot her friend a look.

"No, I for one would be happy to be actually doing school work in this library," Amy answered back. Perhaps with the deeper sense of horror, Sara knew she wasn't kidding either. She would. "You know, like it was built for." She glanced at Ricky's page and added, "The bladder goes above the urethra, otherwise you'd wee up."

Ricky frowned at the diagram for a moment, then seemed to place his pen – metaphor for sword – down in defeat.

"What about the weapons cabinet that's also a book cabinet?" he challenged Amy, and Sara shifted in her seat, a hint of bristling brightness to have someone on her side. Naturally, it would be the adrenaline-starved testosterone boy who agreed with her. "That wasn't built for learning."

Amy's eyes drifted over to the makeshift cabinet, which was a bookcase that revealed one thing when you entered a certain code and something completely different when you used the secret code. However, she had not been given the secret code.

"Can I..." Amy began.

"No, you cannot play with the crossbow," he cut her off. He didn't have to add the implicit 'not after the incident with Mark's office window'. She made a face at him regardless, so he added, "It's dangerous."

"What he means is, he doesn't want you touching his metaphors for the penis," Sara deduced in her usual fashion. "Which are the weapons, to be clear. All very thrusty things."

"No, I don't want you touching..." Ricky began, frowning in confusion as her words continued

to not make sense to him, "There's no metaphor for any... bits." Redness began to spread on his cheeks.

"You say potato, I say tuber," she commented. At that, the double doors opened, and they were greeted by the return of the Librarian. She made a show of glancing at her watch expectantly, him being nearly two hours later to the Library than he normally was. She would have to chide him for spending his time with a human female, if she didn't worry that meant he'd spend more time with them instead.

"Ah, noon approaches, and he appears." Ricky never could tell the time.

"Good morning, and how was your fight against evil last night?" Mark greeted him. Rather than acknowledge her look of disappointment, or anything really, Mark simply whacked her feet on his table with the edge of his newspaper, and she reluctantly put them back down again.

She didn't know what he was so upset about; half of the place was covered in dust.

"Spooky bin and Scooby Doo," Ricky shrugged, before having to add for Amy's benefit, "Sorry, not actual Scooby Doo, just a really big dog."

"Ro'kay," Amy sighed in disappointment.

"You know where we haven't looked for evil yet?" Sara piped up, "That spooky disused fairground..."

"Sara, we don't actually *have* a spooky disused fairground," Mark reminded her.

"Oh."

"Besides, you just get captured and held for ransom by the man in the costume," Ricky added.

"How very dare you!"

"You practically have a ransom note printed on your arse..." Amy concurred.

"That's Chinese for serenity... or nutmeg, I can't remember."

"So, no one heard of any evil this week so far, then?" Mark asked them, glancing around them. Sara had to sigh. Amy scoured the web, Mark obviously read the newspaper because he was

like eighteen going on fifty, and she talked to people. And other than the fact that the runner-up in the talent show was asking for a refund on her entry fee, there was nothing exciting happening in Calendar High School's gossip world. Grazia, it was not.

"Oh, I read an article in the Calendar Free Press online about a man who saw a talking raven," Amy told them brightly. Something at least.

"Really? What did it say?" Mark wondered.

"Well, they didn't quote it, but it appeared to be channelling Bernard Manning," she answered.

"No, the article," Mark rolled his eyes, "What did it say about who reported it?"

"Oh, it was...um... that guy who lives under the bridge on Baker Street," Amy answered, realising already her credibility was slipping away as her voice faded. Sara smiled at her friend, she really did love the loveable madhead.

"You don't mean Sherlock Hobo?" she asked, using the nickname some of the kids had. "I like him..."

"Not exactly the most reliable of witnesses," Mark suggested, "What was his last claim?"

"That one of his newspapers predicted the migration of Jaffa Cakes," she supplied, "He did have an awful lot of them..."

"I think since it's a slow week we should take some time to enjoy ourselves," Mark offered, "before we're inundated with bigoted ravens."

"Full moon, half moon, total eclipse," she chuckled to herself, feeling a sudden craving for the orange cakey biscuity treat. She cackled and drew a look from her companions. Sheepishly, she admitted, "I occupy my special realm."

Yup, one to which the rest of them were late to the party. It was good to be her.

Even on a slow week.

* * *

Okay, so what was a girl to do on a slow supernatural week? Why, school work, of course. After all, her GCSE exams were now only six months away, and there was a lot to prepare for. And even as she thought that, she wondered whether she was doing too much.

Nah, Amy thought, *it's not work if you love it*.

Okay, so there was a part of her – a part that sounded and acted like Sara and even dressed in the same little devil costume she wore last Halloween – on her shoulder telling her that she knew that she could chill and live a little. But there was also the rest of her who was very much in favour of being the very best, like no one ever was.

“Hey, Luke!” she greeted brightly, approaching the locker bank where he was storing something. “You all ready to tutor? I’m thinking today we cover personification. Whaddya reckon?” He had asked for a bit of English Lit, after apparently finding the works of Edgar Allan Poe a little dense. To be fair, she didn’t understand why they had to study all that quaffing when Sylvia Plath was on the syllabus, but hey ho.

He jumped like the dickens were in him at her voice, but when he turned and saw her, he settled a little.

She took a moment to absorb the scene. Something was definitely wrong; his uniform, though never exactly military-precise, looked a bit more dishevelled than usual. His blonde waves, which usually had that casual, just-woken-up look, now seemed more like the unintentional, just-woke-up-out-of-bed style. And the dark circles under his eyes clearly indicated that the boy was not sleeping.

“What?”

“You okay?” she asked gently, “You look a little...” What word was there for downtrodden, freaked out and jumpy? “...uh, distracted.”

“Kinda,” he answered, before shaking his head, “No. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

"Fine," he said a little more harshly.

She had to admit, things had been a little different since he had become the focus of their pyrokinetic chemistry teacher. The one who decided to burn the hell out of abusive boyfriends and got a bit confused when Sam and Luke had a row. She didn't quite know the full details of it, having only been there to bandage him up afterwards, but he'd definitely taken a few steps away from her since.

"Hey, if this has anything to do with the whole... demons thing," she ventured, "We don't have to let it affect our friendship."

And she meant it; she'd not mentioned it around him in weeks. Then again, as she began to realise, they'd barely spent any time together in the past few weeks. He'd cancelled or swapped around their sessions enough times that, yeah, come to think of it – it was bordering on almost too coincidental for coincidence.

"Could you not use that word around me?" he asked.

"Whole?"

"Demons," he snapped, though much of the harshness was lost in the sudden closing of his locker. "As a word and phenomenon, it makes me uncomfortable. In fact, I think I'm done with the whole tutoring thing. I can take it from here."

He shuffled his books in his arms, which she realised had already become clear were not the ones he needed for his upcoming classes, and she frowned at him. Yeah, she reckoned, there was no way he was going to leave from here with favourable outcomes.

"You're freaked out?"

"To be honest, a hell of a lot, yes," he agreed.

"Is there anything I can..." she began, but he cut it off.

"Look, no offence, I think you're great and all, Amy – but as long as you're only one step removed from the big other world... I don't think I can be around you," he told her, his voice betraying more frustration than unkindness, "Please don't take it personally."

She couldn't help it; she was a bit taken aback. By everything, but she was also worried about him. He didn't look like himself, he didn't sound like himself, and she doubted very much that it was the existential crisis of knowing the supernatural existed that was doing it.

"Well, I'm sorry, Luke, but I guess I have to take it a *little* personally," she answered him softly. She knew a look of disappointment was on her face, so she added, "Good luck and everything." She then turned and headed off down the corridor.

She didn't see the look on Luke's face – the one that was borderline exhausted and more than a little annoyed with himself. She just carried on her day, a little confused and a little hurt.

* * *

She studied the map of the world on the wall, with the timeline of World War II placed all over it. There was something in it, she thought, about the darkness descending over Europe at the time. The way the armies of the far right marched across the land was like a black cloud, burying everyone under its shadow.

She wondered how the people of Britain would have felt back then, knowing that the chance of a normal life was slipping away, inch by inch, mile by mile. Knowing that, when the time came – the true crucible moment between victory and defeat – it could come at the expense of everything you knew.

Sam sighed, she'd have to remember that for her History coursework.

As it was, she thought she'd had more than enough of the encroaching sense of doom. They really should have picked a different empty classroom to duck into during lunch, somewhere she and Luke could be alone and... well, talk.

Only that was the one thing neither of them was doing.

"One of us should say something before the bell goes," she said.

"Yeah..."

"We need a proper talk, y'know."

"I know."

They lapsed back into silence. Neither of them could look at one another; she could only look at that poster on the wall, leaning back against the desk. He was next to her, looking at who knew what. A spot on the floor, perhaps. The blackened scrape of the horrible school shoes on the wall. The chewing gum stuck to the inside of the bin. The hopeless future?

"I have some stuff to tell you," she said out loud, fearing the words would never come out if she didn't just do it. "Some things that will explain a lot. But I can't... I can't tell you now." There it was, the promise she'd never wanted to make. Not until it was done, and she was free of it, and it made sense for her to do so.

"What about ever?" he asked, the sarcastic, acerbic tone returning to his voice. Of course, he'd misunderstood what she meant. And he was lashing out with hurt; she couldn't blame him for that. After everything she'd put him through. After everything she'd... no, she couldn't think about it then – at that moment. It needed to be one and done. All out. All on the table.

She didn't know if she had the strength to do it more than once. And she knew they didn't have time.

"No, I mean, I don't want to tell you here," she explained, "In a classroom, like this, with the bell about to go. I want to talk properly, just you and me... and some honesty."

He looked up at her, his beautiful, gentle eyes still rimmed with dark circles and concern. But also... hope?

"That'd be nice."

"What about tonight?" she asked, "I could come over and..."

He shook his head.

"No."

"Look, Luke, I'm trying here..." she pushed.

"No, I mean, I'm working tonight," he corrected, "Closing down at the petrol station. I can't."

But... I'll be free tomorrow night."

Yes, she thought to herself, *that'd work*. In fact, if anything, it would give her one more night to get everything in order. To find the words she needed to convey the truths he wanted. To give him, perhaps them both, the closure. And to make the changes, she needed to be able to move forward. Not just with him.

With everything.

"Tomorrow night it is."

He nodded and shouldered his bag, walking in a slow and deliberate way to the front of the classroom. But he couldn't leave, she noticed, not quite yet.

"And Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Will it be over after this?"

"The lies will be," she agreed, before adding with a shrug, "As for us, I don't know..." He met her gaze. "I hope not."

He mumbled something as he turned and left the room. It was soft, nearly too quiet to hear, but she couldn't ask him to repeat it. She convinced herself of what it sounded like and understood it had to suffice – it was all she could cling to. Because what it sounded like was hope.

"Me too."

* * *

Ricky had to admit, as he looked around the place, that it was... well, clean. Much better than the apartments he and Mark had viewed. Well, apart from the third one, which had been perfect on the outside but had a body count that would make Sara say something offensive and inappropriate. This one, a ten-minute walk from the school, seemed like a pleasant one-bedroom.

Except for all the boxes.

"You've been here a week, and you still haven't unpacked?" he asked Mark, who was standing in the open kitchen area slightly around the corner in front of the open fridge. When Mark had suggested he come to see the place, he didn't realise he'd be used for his grunt work. Yeah, fight a demonic magick parasite or whatever, but helping a friend move was kind of at least a pizza party reward status.

"I thought I would give it a go, now that we finally have a slow week on our hands," Mark's voice floated to him from around the corner. Ricky frowned at the handwriting on one of the boxes and wondered whether Mark had a box of blood or books – and then wondered how the hell a Librarian could have bad handwriting.

"You realise sod's law will be after us for that?" he sighed, knowing it was just their luck that when they had a moment to breathe, something new would pop up.

Mark came back around the corner, nodding as he went. He handed Ricky a Coke from the fridge, cold condensation running down the sides.

"No whiskey?" he joked.

"The minimum wage for eighteen-year-olds means that though you can buy it, you'll realise you can't afford it," Mark shrugged. He leaned back against the mantelpiece, around what was essentially an electric fireplace that just looked a little fancy. When Ricky looked closer, he could see that the 'wood grains' were actually just plastic. But hey, whatever floated your boat. "So, what do you think?"

"I think a woman's touch and call it home," he shrugged, before adding for clarity, "Any woman besides Sara."

Mark tore the tape from the box nearest to him, the top of a stack of three nearby, and began to rifle through whatever was in them. So 'Liverpudlian Routes' must have been 'Living Room'. Ricky thought he was beginning to get the subtleties of his penmanship.

"How much of this stuff went missing?" he asked, as he began to peer at the labels on other boxes, hoping to avoid anything that looked like 'private'. He didn't want to stumble on Mark's secret

collection of vintage Victorian porn or something.

"None, thankfully," Mark sighed, placing some of the books from his box onto the mantelpiece. Old, thick, leatherbound volumes by the looks of them.

"Seriously? Your aunt and uncle left this stuff out on the lawn, and not a single box was stolen?" he wondered out loud.

"There's not a great market for books on demonology amongst the criminal community," Mark answered him with a wry smile, "Although if they'd known what some of this stuff was worth..."

Ricky decided to take a chance with a box marked 'Statelys' and used his penknife to cut the tape across the top. As he pulled open the flaps, eerily reminiscent of one of those horrible eggs in *Alien*, which his brother Rob made him watch one night, he realised that he couldn't quite grasp what he was seeing inside.

"You have erotic art?"

"That's a fertility statute."

"Right, and how fertile is the giant bellend on that thing? And why does it have boobs?"

"Different culture, Ricky, completely different world."

Mark sighed and closed the top of the box again in front of him. Ricky decided to do his best to be helpful but took the boxes he thought said 'Kittens' into the kitchen. He wasn't stopped, so he must have been getting it right. Luckily, 'open plan' meant he could carry on talking. Or teasing.

"So, speaking of fertility, I hear you have a girl friend," Ricky commented slyly – a technique he'd learnt from Sara, which she called 'segue-ing with sass'. Mark threw him a glare, but before he could respond, his landline began to ring shrilly. Crossing over to the wall, he picked it up.

"Speaking of Nikki," Mark smiled when he brought the phone to his ear. He listened for a second before responding, his eyes flickering over to Ricky, "He has begun, yes, but was saved by your ringtone."

Ricky turned his back and began safely unpacking cups, glasses, and cutlery into the various

cupboards and drawers designated for such, as behind him, he heard Mark and what he presumed was Nikki make plans for a date at the ODEON that night. He smiled to himself, which was a bit of a smirk.

He was glad that Mark, in Sara's words, 'getting some'. In his own words, he was just relieved his friend had some good news after all the crap he'd been through with his aunt and uncle. And monsters, of course, but that was normal by then. He finished one box and was starting to flatten it when Mark said his goodbyes, hung up, and then looked over at him.

"Oh, wipe that right off your face."

"Someone's in lurve..." he teased. A moment later, the phone began to ring again, and he could feel his look clouding, "Someone's *really* in love. Nikki the *Fatal Attraction* type?"

Mark answered with a curt 'hello?' and, when he heard whatever brief reply was on the other side, simply put the phone down again, with an unreadable expression, bordering on thunderous. So, not Nikki, check.

"Looks like I have to change my number already," was all he would mutter in response, and then continued about emptying boxes. Ricky sipped his Coke, made a mental note, and then did the same. He was sure it would come out later.

It always seemed to.

* * *

It always seemed to Luke that the petrol station was on its own little island. It was an illusion, of course. The Tesco was on the outskirts of town, just as the main A road began to feed into the bypass, and down a dip, meaning it was close to the river on a plot of flat land just enough to fit the store itself and the car park. Then, a road running behind it led up a gentle incline to the hill – perfectly situated between the bypass on one side and the river on the other, forming a small V.

The lights were bright on the forecourt, but beyond that, they dissolved into darkness. Traffic

slowed down; usually, by about nine o'clock, only the occasional late-night commuter filling their tank before heading home further away would stop by. Slow and steady – and sometimes people would come in for a last-minute discount sandwich, a bar of chocolate, or something similar. Typical work.

He normally worked on the shop floor during the day, surrounded by noise and people. But every now and then, he enjoyed a shift at the petrol station. It was quieter, mainly – except when they had some of those 10p off a litre promotions – and there were usually only two of them on shift.

“How much am I leaving in?” Hannah asked beside him, as she began to till up for the night.. It had just rolled 10 pm, and she was on her way, leaving him to do the last hour – all nicely locked up – on his own. After 11 pm, the 24-hour pay-at-pump facilities were left to do their work, and he could lock up the remainder of the shop for good.

He didn't know why, but the few times he'd done the late shift, only a handful of people ever came to the kiosk hatch after 10 pm. And even then, usually it was for a pack of fags.

“Just fifteen like normal,” he suggested for the float, which she diligently did, before sending the remainder in the pneumatic drill down to the main store. He had never been in the cash office, but he had always wondered how those things ended up. Was there a giant pile of them and cash in a massive vault beneath the store that his manager, Karen, could dive into like Scrooge McDuck?

She logged off her till and headed into the employee area at the back, taking the key and her coat with her.

“You gonna be alright by yourself?” she asked, as she flicked her collar.

“And which of the thousand times I've done this has made you think I need babying?” he asked, trying to sound light but hearing the gruffness and tone in his voice all the same. God, he needed a proper night's sleep when he got home. No more gravestones and ravens, and other things he could barely remember.

“We are so going to have to talk about your grumpiness next week,” she joked back, heading

for the door and locking him in. She then came round to the hatch and passed him the key, with a grin, "Night, night, grumpy bear."

He liked Hannah; she was so normal. Like, ridiculously normal. She was probably about his age, but went to Saunders High School in the next valley. He didn't know if it was a Catholic thing or whatever, but at least she felt removed from his usual daily life. Plus, she had a kind of relaxed vibe about her. Even now, as she headed off, she stuck her tongue out at him and laughed before heading down the hill on the road back home, leaving him alone on his island.

He sat down on his stool at the hatch of the window kiosk and looked out at the night. Not a car or pair of headlights in sight. He could have done with some business, to keep his mind off of things, off of the following night that now loomed ahead of him.

But unfortunately, it looked like it was going to be a quiet one.

* * *

She braced herself against the cold, zipping up her jacket a little tighter, and steeled herself for the conversation to come. Of course, he would be outside the Fish Tank bar; he always was. He and his posse. The three of them were gathering around a car. Of course, none of them would own the car, mind you, it had the battered look of having been used by many of his kind along the way.

Little and Large, his two friends, were laughing. Little's eyes were squinting as the roll-up smoke wafted into them. She detected the pungent scent of weed and suspected there was also a bit of a chemical reaction happening.

But Drazen looked as clear-eyed as ever, as the sound of her heels betrayed her presence and she walked briskly over to them. Rip off the plaster, she knew. Just go for it.

"Hey, Drazen," she called out, indicating her business was with him and neither of his lecherous goons. They still looked anyway, despite the fact that there were maybe ten years between them. A kind of sickly, predatory gaze she was all too used to. Sam threw them a withering glance

and returned her gaze to the man in charge. After all, they wouldn't act without his say-so.

"That's Mr Drazen to you, sweetie-pie," he answered back smoothly. He grinned, and she noticed a small feature she hadn't seen before – one of his teeth that he'd had capped in gold. Dear God, could the idiot have looked any more stereotypical? He already wore the Adidas knock-off tracksuit and trainers, smelt like Lynx Africa, and had slicked back his black hair with enough Brylcreem to drown all but the most stubborn lice.

She hated herself even more for having ever gotten involved with this kind of punk to begin with.

"I am not your sweet anything," she answered back, icily. "Can we talk?"

"That's what we're doing," he agreed, "All civilised like."

His eyes watched her. Unlike the doped eyes of the young and the gently foolish eyes of Large, his were alert and watching her cautiously. He didn't miss much; she wondered if he even bothered to use any of his own products. Or whether he was the clear-headed snake oil salesman, the pied piper of people's pain.

"With my attention span and your speed record, it could be a forgettable evening," she replied quickly. One of his mates chuckled, and she saw the quick, angry flash in his eyes as he shot him a look. His laughter soon faded, and Sam felt herself tense slightly. She had to fight her own urges – the ones urging her to lash out and wound with her tongue.

She had never been more conscious of where she was and who she was with than she was at that moment.

"So, can we talk?" she continued, softer but not entirely backing away.

"What do you want?" he snapped at her, much of his slick good humour – as performative as it was in the first place – gone. "I ain't got all night."

She reached into her purse and noticed how Little and Large tensed. She didn't know what the hell they thought she was going to do, but they visibly relaxed when she withdrew a wad of cash.

"You are a charity now?" he asked unkindly, snatching the bills off of her before she could

even speak.

"No charity would want to help you," she pointed out, mentally chastising herself, "It's what I owe you. Everything. We're done."

He stopped flicking through the bills and mentally computing the amount, and shot her a look with his eyes upturned.

"You think we're done?" he asked quietly.

"Course we are," she said, keeping the determination in her voice, "I'm ending our association."

"You aren't ending it until I say we're ending it," he told her coolly.

"It can't go on any longer."

"You going clean or something?"

"Or something."

He spat, a great big wad of horrible grey-green gruel which landed like a dead fly on the ground. She fought revulsion, she fought the urge to kick him in the nuts and run like fuck. Even in slight heels, she could definitely outrun the large one – and probably even the high one. Drazen, who knew?

"Now, you aren't switching dealers on me, are ya?" he asked her, his predatory look of defiance and anger plain in his eyes. "Because I value customer loyalty."

Oh, she was finished with this bullshit, done with this performance of small-town toxic masculinity. What a creep, and what a creep she was by association. She felt angry, she felt dirty, and most of all, she felt like she was finally done.

"That's none of your business," she snapped at him, "I'm going."

She whirled on her heels and turned back down the alleyway, making it only two steps before she felt the iron grip of his hand on her arm. Biting down on the pain, she tried not to show vulnerability as she felt herself spun around, face to face with him. His eyes were blazing, every trace of normalcy gone and replaced only with the cold steel of a man she finally believed could be

dangerous.

"No," he told her. "You're not."

* * *

Luke heard them long before he saw them. The sounds, rumbling like high-pitched thunder, came from somewhere over the hill. He put down the magazine he'd been reading – he'd only been flicking through the pictures anyway, with his mind elsewhere – and looked to see if they were passing by onto the bypass or coming up the hill.

There were only two things that could produce that kind of sound, based on his admittedly limited experience. One was cars with modified exhausts. He recognised the type – sporty Seat Ibiza models that were zipping around like go-karts. Or, the other kind, which he realised as he saw the single headlights winding up the hill, meant only one thing – motorbikes.

Five of them, by the looks of it, their thunderous engines rumbling as they climbed their way up the darkened pool of a road.

"What the hell?" he muttered to himself.

Heck, it didn't really mean much – and he didn't want to border on stereotypes – but they didn't usually see many bike riders at that time of night. Sometimes on a Sunday, there'd be plenty of them out on sunny days, riding between towns and along some of the country roads that offered spectacular views and good routes. But at half ten at night in December? Yeah, that was odd.

And they looked the Harley Davidson type – not that he knew much about bikes. They weren't the sporty Kawasaki kinds built for speed and performance. These were big, chrome, belly-busting models, made for leather and denim and all that stuff which was way too American for his taste. Again, not the sort of thing you'd usually find in the middle of Lancashire.

In the middle of winter.

In the middle of the bloody night.

The five spread across the centre of the forecourt, looking like black shadows in the middle of a brilliantly lit realm. The one who pulled in front stepped out, and he noticed something else – none of them were wearing helmets. None. Some had bandanas around the lower half of their faces – but no helmets. Were these guys insane? One good frost, and... well, he didn't like to think about it.

He had to wish for a quiet night, didn't he? It was the kiss of death.

The man in front, a slim and short individual who looked nothing like the stereotypical biker-gang member his mind told him of – one who was fat, bearded down to his navel, and possibly bald – began to approach. He moved smoothly and lightly, with a confident, cocky swagger. He was pale, dark-haired, sharp-featured, and wore a bandana around his neck that appeared to feature a flaming skull. Okay, so maybe he was a little stereotypical.

"Well, boys, what do we have 'ere?" the black-haired man said back to his mates, his accent a kind of generic south of England twang. He reached the kiosk hatch and peered in at him, with the most piercing gaze he'd ever seen. Never before had Luke felt quite so much like a monkey in a cage. Or a fish in a tank.

With a cat outside.

"If you want petrol, you need to go to the pump first," he spoke with practised ease into the intercom, his voice ringing out from the speakers in the forecourt, tinny and somehow pathetic even to him. Some of them hadn't turned off their rumbling engines, so much of it was lost to the night.

The black-haired man turned back to his mates and began to laugh. A horrible, dry crackle that made Luke feel cold.

"He thinks we want petrol," he pointed out.

Luke instinctively moved himself from his stool into a standing position, but it was only when the man turned that his alarm truly blared in his mind. As the man turned, his bandana shifted slightly, revealing the side of his neck. There he could see the black shape, sharply contrasting against his pale skin – the thick black outline of a raven tattoo.

Coincidence, maybe, but what happened next was not.

The black-haired man turned and struck the glass with his fist. For safety reasons, the glass was tempered – nearly bulletproof, one might say. It should not crack under normal weight. Of course, this was not normal weight, as Luke saw the man's eyes turn completely black.

What the fuck? He thought to himself.

"I guess once ain't enough," the man laughed, then struck again. Luke instinctively jumped, backing away as he did. He knew it wasn't going to break... or he hoped it wasn't going to break. But then...

"Holy shit..." he muttered to himself, as two of his friends began to join him, and together their rain of blows against the glass began to grow in intensity and frequency – and it began to cave inwards.

As he backed into the employee door, he heard the tinkle of glass on the floor, and so one hand had made it through.

"I smell fear..." the man's voice mocked him, as Luke slid through the back door into the employee area.

He clicked the lock, knowing it would be little to fuck all to help him, and looked around helplessly. The backroom was simply a corridor – with the toilet at one end, stock down shelves, and the CCTV station at the other – a computer. He had little to no options. They'd break down the toilet door faster than anything.

The fire exit loomed next to him. That was it, there was no protection inside the store anymore – he could already hear them trashing the place behind him with whoops and shouts of joy, so he rushed for it, depressing the bar and rushing out into the fresh air of the night beyond.

The door was not alarmed, so when he closed it behind him, it was as though it never happened. They continued to bang about inside, as he heard them whoop, cackle, and laugh. They were having a grand old time.

What were they? His mind tried to ask, but he knew better than to answer. He came around

the side of the building; there were only windows down one side and he tried to peer across the forecourt. One remained on his bike, idling and looking distracted as he picked something out of his teeth. As he pulled his hand back, Luke saw blood on the tips of his fingers and noticed the thick, sharp canines protruding from his upper teeth.

Maybe he should have asked Amy more about demons after all.

He had to take a chance that these things couldn't see very well in the dark, as he scurried out of the edge of the forecourt lights and made for the dark land back down to the store. It sloped downwards; he was surrounded by blessed night.

"Come on, boys," he heard the voice again, booming from the top of the hill, "We be huntin' wabbits..."

He realised, given the volume, they had left the shop – probably discovered he was no longer there. He heard the revving of their engines and understood they were coming for him. He was on foot, they were on bikes. The lane dipped down where the delivery gate was and then began to rise again, leading up to a mini-roundabout with the right lane branching off to the car park and the store, and straight ahead leading up the hill.

With his lungs already burning, there was no way he could get back up the hill and into town before they caught up with him. Standing there in the dark, he did the only thing he could – he turned and headed straight for the delivery entrance. He could swipe through, make his way around the back, try to find anyone on shift – or anyone with a phone. It would be down to a near-skeleton crew, but there should be someone. Or something.

Behind him, the engines roared, and death closed in.

Act II

He had to admit it had been quite a while since he'd been to the cinema, and his first thought was – that's a lot of adverts. It felt like they'd been sitting through more adverts than the actual film, for an almost unimaginably long time, before finally the little dancing desk lamp jumped onto the words and the film began.

The bus had been a bit too loud for conversation, but now, as he and Nikki strolled slowly down the street, hand in hand, they had a little more time to talk. Once again, this was another reason why a movie date was not necessarily always the best for romance. Of course, she had planted one on him while the Orange man was going on about his mobile phone plan.

"You can tell me the truth," she gently urged, though he sensed that this was, in some ways, a bit of a trap.

"Honestly, I liked the film," he answered back, a little dishonestly.

"Which part?"

"The bit after the dad fish found the baby fish," he answered definitively. Without breaking stride, she glared at him, her eyes narrowed.

"You mean the credits?"

"Those were some well-constructed credits," he agreed.

"I cannot believe you hated *Finding Nemo*," she sighed. He didn't quite have the heart to tell her, but he generally didn't much care for *any* movie. Probably unsurprisingly, he found the layered world-building you could get from a book far more enjoyable. Even if the amnesiac blue fish did provide some momentary humour.

"I was more interested in *Dating Nikki*," he pointed out, "the film was kind of immaterial."

"You're buttering me up, aren't you?" she suggested, with a squint of an eye.

"Of course."

"To 'seduce' me?" He noted the unofficial air quotes implied by her tone.

"Well, I guess we'd need another untrained magick man for that, wouldn't we?" he jostled.

She gave him a small slap on the arm and pretended to be offended,

"I'm not that easy," she challenged, before adding, with the clear understanding of how their first kiss came about, "Anymore." Granted, not their second, third or... well, perhaps they had both lost a bit of count by this point.

"Ah, a challenge," he agreed, "Engarde!"

Rather than roll her eyes, as others might in such circumstances — which Sara did with alarming regularity, certainly to her optometrist — Nikki simply laughed. He already found himself in love with that laugh, the brightness and warmth of it. She paused, and they stopped, even though they were approaching his apartment building. They shared a kiss beneath the street light. It was slow, it was sweet, and he savoured the moment like a fine wine.

She was intoxicating, and he never hoped to find an antidote. He didn't think he would need one. Afterwards, she leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder, content to stand there for a while despite the cold in the air he no longer felt.

"I could get used to that," she sighed.

"Me too."

"Are you going to invite me up?" He felt her head nod a little towards his apartment building door.

"Are you going to agree?" he questioned.

He could feel her think, and part of his heart galloped a little bit at the thought, but she stood a little straighter and, with a playful smile on her lips, shook her head.

"Sorry, bucko, but I'm going to make you wait a little longer," she answered, a good-natured smile on her lips. Her beautiful lips were dressed tonight in a slightly sparkly, slightly mauve-hued gloss. It suited her.

"Ah, how diabolical of you," he joked.

"Actually, I have to be up early," she sighed, the endless amounts of work never ending. "I

have to finish the report on the Jackson Wells situation for the Council Representatives. But I'll be thinking of you."

"Before, after or during?"

"All of the above."

They shared another kiss, just as slow and sweet, before she stepped away and began to fade into the night. She didn't live far, just one street over – and although he'd offered to walk her, she reminded him who was the magick user and who was the mild-mannered Librarian, agreeing that she would probably be safer than he would. He watched her go, down to the end of the street, around the corner – with a last lingering smile – before turning and heading into his apartment building.

Two flights up, and he was at his front door, still getting used to the feeling of having a front door of his own. He held a key to his Aunt and Uncle's place, of course he did, but he knew that even though he'd lived there since he was five, it was never really home. This, however small and cramped it might seem on the surface, was.

That was why, when he moved into the dark space beyond the front door, placing his keys in the bowl, he sensed that his sanctuary was not quite so pristine. Something was different, a subtle change in the air. He waited for it only a second before the lamp clicked on his coffee table – one he had not yet placed – and his Uncle was illuminated sitting in his only armchair.

With a curt nod, John Matthews looked at him.

"Mark."

* * *

She considered her options in a flash. Get hurt, fight back, or scream – and none of them filled her with any hope. She realised in that moment, as the unkempt fingernails of the creep dug into the soft flesh of her arm even through her jacket, that she'd underestimated him. She thought

she knew who he was, what control was, and she didn't.

What she did know was that he needed her, at some point – and perhaps that was the only thin veneer between civility and... this. Now she was seeing the monster beneath, the one she could pretend was only some pantomime over what was essentially just a small town scared little boy.

No, he was something worse. He was dangerous.

She decided there was only one option left, because Sam doubted she'd be heard screaming over the live band banging on inside the Fish Tank.

"Get the fuck off my arm," she told him, fighting to keep her voice firm and to meet his gaze. Strength only responded to strength, and she had been through too much shit to do anything else.

"No one speaks to me like that," he snarled at her. Behind him, Little and Large hadn't moved – but both of them were watching the display in front of them with interest. His anger was barely suppressed, and she was pushing his authority to the limit.

"I say when we end it, and I'm ending it," she snapped back, "I don't want your stuff anymore."

"Ah, but I still want your money," he smirked back at her, his grip tightening that ever so slightly more. She fought to suppress the wince that wanted to rise out of her, refusing to give him the satisfaction. "So we have something of a problem developing, right?"

"Not really," she shrugged, "You can go to hell, and I'll go where I want."

She yanked her arm backwards forcefully – the lingering grip of his touch still burning pinpricks into her flesh as she simultaneously took a few steps back. She kept her eyes fixed on him, her expression thunderous, trying to conceal the trembling inside her. She hoped there was nothing to trip over. If she ended up on the ground, he'd be on top of her. That was as clear as day in his eyes.

"Nobody says that to me in front of my boys," he reminded her. She didn't point out his 'boys' look older than hell. Maybe it was the stuff he was peddling – they definitely didn't avoid it.

"I'm sure they'll get over it."

"Yeah, but I won't," he shrugged, "Until I make an example."

"You can't do a damn thing to me, and you know it," she bristled, knowing the falseness of her words even as she said it.

"I wouldn't be so sure, princess," he answered, his voice low and calm but barely controlled, "You see, I know your dirty little secret, and I'm betting lover boy doesn't. So what's say he and I have a little chat?"

"I'm gonna tell him anyway."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I meant what's say I tell him everything about what you've been up to..." he repeated. She heard the click of something and a flash of metal, but she didn't move her eyes to it. She didn't need a roadmap; she knew what it was. She also knew she was just out of range – and that would have to be enough. "... *before* I peel his face off slowly."

Until that moment, it seemed like bravado. Like a performance, trying to bluff her way out of danger. But something about the threat, about what he said regarding Luke, and the crushing weight of everything that had brought her to this point – it was enough. She snapped and did something she had never done before in her life.

She hocked and spat into his face, glaring at him with a look that put any of his pantomime villain bullshit to shame.

"Touch him, and I'll kill you myself," she told him.

Murder flashed in his eyes, but at that moment, a small miracle occurred. The door to the bar opened, and two drunken patrons staggered out. It was enough to break his concentration, causing his small glinting weapon to vanish – and enough for her to realise it was time. She turned and ran, while behind her she heard him return to his mates – her spit probably still dripping from his face.

"Anybody find that funny?"

She was gone.

* * *

The boy was quick on his feet, I'll give him that. Rinasi and his men – well, tossers, really – had been having a jolly good time in the shop before they realised he'd slipped through the back door. The toilet was such an obvious choice, so he let one of his lads search there, as he wrenched the bar off that daft fire exit and checked around the back.

Being trapped either by the river or the steep embankment further up to the rising road out of town was not an option. Then he heard his man out front shouting and saw the figure fleeing into the backyard of the store. That was fine; they had all the time in the world. They could have run down, but Rinasi was not someone who ran. They used the bikes, moving slowly and deliberately, letting their rumbling thunder strike fear into the boy's heart.

The large delivery yard was quiet and shrouded in shadows at every corner. He could feel something lingering in the cold night air, faint currents and movements, but they were only large enough to be vermin at best. And that subtle, sweet scent of fear that hung in the air – trailing towards the back door. There – a service entrance beside it, equipped with a keycard.

He smirked to himself and strode over to it. With one hand, he ripped off the handle, and they were inside – no protests from the reader – and he wasn't about to sign up to be part of the workforce to get in. He had far more interesting things to do. After tonight's little snack, of course. The boy was just going to be the appetiser – but it looked like they were going to serve his entrée and main meal together.

You just couldn't get the service these days.

The plain, dull corridor led them into a wide, open warehouse where cages upon cages of foodstuffs and other household items were amassed. He followed the trail, the hint further in, while behind him his men began to fan out around the room. He heard a brief cry of surprise, which did not have time to turn into a scream before it became a death rattle instead. A few of the others were drawn to the feed and joined in. That's alright, there would be plenty.

And with the age of the boy in the petrol station, his blood would likely be the sweetest

anyway.

As he followed the trail, the air around him grew colder, and when he slipped beneath the plastic flaps, he found the temperature dropped even further. The cold storage section, of course. Now he was becoming curious – could it be...

“Come out, come out, wherever you all,” he called out, sing-song like, into the blue-lit storage space. Again, cages of frozen goods crowded around, and there was no sign of the boy. But he could sense something, a heat, somewhere. “I know it’s a cliché, but gotta love the classics.”

He nodded at his two men, who had pulled themselves away from their first feed and joined him in the cold room. Silently, he signalled for them to scatter and search for the boy, but everyone knew they had strict orders that he was only for him. Everyone else was regarded as collateral blood bags, as far as he was concerned.

“Hey, don’t spoil my fun,” he called out again, “That just makes me angrier.” His eyes roved around the room, searching for the slightest movement, the faint traces of cold breath in the air. “Good idea though, the whole ‘walk in freezer’ thing. Slowing the senses.”

And it was true, he could feel it. It seemed an endless irony that vamps' bodies were designed for hot weather countries, when those also happened to have the brightest sun and longest days. They were creatures of the night, yet they weren’t necessarily creatures of the cold. Sure, there was that one strange pack in Iceland – but hey, some were freaks. The thought did begin to occur to him, though, even though the boy was sixteen if he was a day.

Then again, the bitch who hunted his master hadn’t been much older the first time.

“You wouldn’t be a hunter, would you?” he thought out loud, moving towards the deeper end of the freezer. “Boy like you, you wouldn’t be making it an even more fun night for me?” Again, he loved the danger, he loved the thrill of the hunt – and this was turning out to be one of the better ones since they’d been on the road.

He turned back towards the door, having reached the end of the central free space. As he did, he saw the cages rattling, with one of his men venturing deeper into the narrow gap between

the cages. He rolled his eyes; he hadn't exactly sired the brightest. The man was clearly walking into a trap – and just as Rinasi turned, it was sprung.

One of the heaviest cages, filled with goods, raced towards the trapped idiot with nowhere left to turn or run. It slammed into him with full force; he heard the snap of bone as it crushed parts of him under its relentless pursuit. He was pinned to the ground, crooked angles and scattering away some of the other cages as he went – frozen... it looked like peas of all things... slamming into his head so he ended up in a pile of twisted metal, dripping defrosting food, and his own blood and pain.

Rinasi walked over to his men, looked down at the gasping, helpless thing, broken, and grimly smirked to himself.

"That'll cost you, boy," he sighed, using the heel of his thick black boot to put the mewling thing out of its misery. For a brief moment, the freezer filled with burning fire, the sudden damnation combustion that meant he was down to only three other allies. All of whom were likely off feeding.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of blue – the colour of the uniform – and movement, as the boy headed out of another door. Into the main store.

For the first time in a long time, Rinasi felt the hunt was *finally* on.

* * *

"Get out."

Mark's hands were clenched into fists as he tried to suppress his anger. It leaked into his tone, which was sharp and precise. His uncle, John Matthews, sat in the chair – his newly purchased chair, he might add, as if it were his own. As if he was in his study or living room, and Mark was the intruder. In his own space.

"I came to talk," his Uncle replied, completely dismissing what he'd said. So, clearly, things hadn't changed between them. Mark forced himself to unclench his fists and, instead, reopened the door behind him to better make his point.

"And I am not willing to listen," he reiterated, before adding with his characteristic sarcasm.

"We are at an impasse, so it seems."

"There's no need to be so melodramatic," his Uncle dismissed. For a man who had sat in the dark until Mark's return and was now lit only by the light of a single, dim table lamp, he hardly had the upper hand when it came to dramatic restraint.

"I told you to get out," he reminded him, "Why aren't you?"

"Because you and I have to talk."

Leaving his spot at the door but keeping it firmly open, Mark moved closer to his uncle. In truth, he wanted to check if he was alone and to get a better view of the rest of the open-plan apartment. There were no shadows of people waiting down the hall to his bedroom and bathroom, nor was there anyone in the kitchen unless they were crouched beneath the breakfast island.

"You tried to murder my friend and manipulate me. What could we possibly have to talk about?"

"This is far bigger than you and me," his uncle snapped, showing the first signs of frustration. Of course, when he couldn't condescend and coerce, he would display strength – or what he thought of it. Now, to a full-grown Mark, it just made him seem all the more pathetic. Like a man who knows his influence is on the wane. "It's bigger than your friend, or even our whole bloody family. This is about centuries of tradition."

"Have you come to kill me?" Mark asked him, knowing full well the implication had been that this was exactly what happened to those the Covenant could not control. His Uncle did not seem surprised by the accusation; instead, a kind of sadness passed over his face.

"Believe it or not, I don't want to do that."

"But you will, right?" Mark finished the thought for him, "because tradition is bigger than family."

It was the logical outcome of the argument, wasn't it? If this was such a world-ending issue he was bringing to him, and if the Covenant were half as dangerous as Mark believed them to be,

then really... maybe there was no other way than how it was about to go. Instead of answering, his Uncle stood – and for once, Mark noticed a slight slump to his shoulders.

“You are caught up in things that are happening, and yet you still do not understand how dangerous they are,” he sighed, all of his sixty years sounding within his weary voice. “Things are changing; we are no longer the only ones involved here. And we are not the worst that is out there by a long shot.”

“No, but you’re bad enough,” Mark snapped at him.

“Think that if you will.”

His uncle slowly crossed the space between them, reaching Mark and standing tall so they could look each other in the eye. They were stern eyes, but also weary. The eyes of a man so consumed by his own self-importance.

“I want you to join us, to return to the fold,” he finally revealed. “To give up this foolish quest and follow your destiny with family.”

“I won’t, so get out.”

“I will give you until tomorrow night,” his uncle continued as though he hadn’t heard him. He began to reach into his jacket, and Mark tensed until he saw the edges of a manila folder appear. He handed it to him, and Mark found himself taking it, if only out of a kind of social convention. “After that, I cannot protect you any longer.”

With that, his Uncle turned and headed for the door, not bothering to close it behind him. He left Mark alone there, by the lamplight, with the poison folder in his hands. Mark knew it was another one of his games, another power play. He knew Mark would be unable to resist opening it, to peering at what was inside. And he also knew that it wouldn’t matter what was. Whether truth or lie, it was designed to bring him back to the Covenant.

And it left him with a choice to make.

* * *

Luke knelt at the end of the aisle, waiting for the doors further away to open. He knew the store layout like the back of his hand, and although the shop floor now seemed empty with only cages left strewn around for the night crew to restock, he could still navigate through them.

Could he set off the alarm, somehow? Could he maybe try to smash open the front doors and get attention that way? And even if he did, how long before the police responded? Or, as he thought to himself grimly, how long before the *Calendar* police bothered to respond?

"Well, we have a whole store for our playing field, ain't that lovely," the black-haired one's voice reached him. The doors to the backrooms swung shut again, swishing as they closed. He saw brief shapes emerging, some of which spread out into the aisles. He had to ensure he wasn't going to be flanked, being positioned at the end of the aisle closest to the tills.

This part of the store was rather dead-end. The tills were at the front, situated on the lower floor built below the car park level. Escalators led up to the top floor where the café and pharmacy were located, but the main part of the store was downstairs. The customer service till was roughly halfway along, and that was where the phone was.

At that moment, he was crouched at the bottom of the alcohol aisle. The slow, steady sound of dripping came from there. He heard steps, slow and deliberate, approaching him; they must have sensed something. So, he did the only thing he could – he stepped into the middle, at the end of the aisle – to see what he was dealing with.

Whether the other ones were he didn't know, but one of them – a beefy guy wearing a Grateful Dead t-shirt was making its way down the aisle towards him, with a cocky slowness. It spotted him, but didn't immediately move. Behind him, the black-haired one – the one who he was almost all but convinced was the leader – stood surveying the store. Their eyes locked.

"Well, look who's come out of hiding," the black-haired man smirked.

Well, 'man'. With fangs and black eyes, Luke could only hazard a guess, but years of genre television gave him something to go with. The bulky guy in front of him moved a little further, the

edges of his thick leather boots now just at the edge of a spreading patch of wetness. How well could these guys smell? Because it was pretty much assaulting his senses.

“What are you doing this for?”

“Oh, for now, it’s about fun,” the black-haired man replied with a shrug. He seemed almost human now, while the one closest to him snarled a little, showing those gleaming canines. Yeah, he was definitely into some Anne-Rice-level shit. “And right now you’re turning out to be fun. So... you a hunter?”

“A what?” Luke asked, confused.

“An idiot, obviously.”

“That’s what she said,” Luke snarked back, as the black-haired man and his vamp both began to move forward. Bringing the click lighter from behind his hand, he knelt down to the spread puddle and touched it. Lord knows how much vodka and other nameless cheap-brand spirits went up in a flash, creating a wall of blue flame that shot straight for the bulky one at the front.

He became a pillar of fire as Luke stumbled back from the sudden whoosh of heat. He saw anger flash across the black-haired man’s face, but he didn’t yet come closer. The aisle itself turned into an inferno.

“Okay, that’s strike two,” he heard the man snarl, as he turned on his heel and began to pelt straight for the customer service desk. As he did, he prayed it would be enough time to make the call and then hide again, but he didn’t know where the other two were. He fished in his pocket, having realised at the last minute the number that had been given to him and just tucked away. Just in case, he’d said. Just in case had been a fuck load less scary when it was behind him.

“Come on, come on,” he muttered as the phone went through its usual ringing.

“Welcome to the O2 messaging service...” the jovial woman on the other end told him.

“Shit.” After the beep, he began to speak as fast as he could, “Ricky, I need your help. There’s these fucking monster madman after me. I’m in Tes...”

He heard footsteps, but couldn’t turn in time before being hit by what felt like a freight train.

He was lifted, arse over end, and landed hard on the other side of the customer service desk, the phone ripped out of his hand in the process. As he struggled to breathe, he saw one of the other creatures jump onto the desk in one go, crouching there like some kind of ninja toad.

"I hope you enjoy hearing your friend choke to death," Rinasi decided to finish his voicemail message, then hung up. "Not that he will, but I'll be sure to paint him a picture. So who were you calling? Ghostbusters?"

"Someone who's going to kick your arse," Luke snapped at him, trying to bluster, but finding himself running out of bluster.

"Who wasn't picking up? Shame that."

Luke spotted one last glimmer of hope in the bin beneath the customer service desk. Clearly a returned item that had been wrongly discarded. Thank God. The jagged edge of a wine bottle protruded from the top, and in one swift motion, Luke grabbed it, leapt to his feet, and drove it into the ankle of the crouched man on the counter.

These things could feel pain then, he realised, as the creature shrieked, lost its balance, and went crashing back into its black-haired master. With the desk between them and the sudden distraction, Luke didn't wait this time and turned tail, fleeing back into the store amongst the stacks. His mind raced for another way out.

And couldn't find one.

* * *

The bus stop she found might have been the very last one left, on a road she knew but also hardly recognised. Her adrenaline surged as she ran, and when her lungs had exhausted themselves, she sat down. That's how Sam found herself, around 11pm that night, sitting at a bus stop after the last bus had already gone past. After all, it was right beneath a streetlight, she had made it back to the nicer part of town, and residential streets like this one—just a five-minute walk from home,

marking a clear boundary.

She just needed to catch her breath, check she didn't look a mess, and then slip back into the house. Tomorrow she would tell Luke everything – and if he answered his bloody phone or a text after his shift, she could make sure he was at least warned before then. And everything would be alright. Things could... well, maybe they could never return to normal. But they could go right, alright.

Her breath began to steady. But then she heard footsteps.

"You bitch."

She didn't have time to react before he was suddenly there, eyes blazing. Drazen.

She barely managed to stand as he grabbed her by the neck and pushed her backwards against the side of the bus shelter. It was hard enough to wind, but not to cause injury, though she heard a crack in the admittedly old glass behind her. She tried to struggle, but his grip was firm. Not choking, but steady, holding her in place.

He was closer than she had ever wanted, and she felt disgusted. His fingers were cold, his breath reeked of old alcohol, cigarettes, and probably worse substances. And he was alone. No need to put on a show for the boys here; this was him and it was her. She wasn't sure if that made him less dangerous or even more so.

"You disrespected me in front of my people," he snapped at her, his words producing spittle she could feel on her cheek. She grimaced, "I can't have that."

"I'm not your fucking client," she managed to get out, his hand squeezed more – and this time she found it harder to breathe.

"Shut up, bitch," he told her, "It's my turn to talk." With his other hand, he turned her to face him. She felt the fear deep inside, so deep inside that it was like she was frozen. "I'm good at customer service because I need my rich bitch clients like you to keep on coming back for more. But the second you try to fuck me over, you realise I'm not a nice guy."

He moved his face closer, something she didn't think was possible. His nose practically touched her skin, and she could count the pores and blackheads on it with revulsion.

“Now, I could kill you right here, and nobody would notice, but y’know what? I’m not gonna, because you’re going to keep coming to me and I’m going to keep providing.” He smirked. “Now, don’t get me wrong, there will be a penalty, especially this time. Nothing too permanent, just enough to scar a little. But if you ever think of pulling this shit with me again, it’ll get real permanent, real quick. Understand me?”

She barely had the space to, but all she could do was nod. Satisfied, he let go and stepped back; it took all her will to remain standing. Her hands instinctively moved up to her throat, which was already sore and felt too warm. He smiled, creepy and predatory, as he added,

“Night then.”

He swaggered off into the darkness, as she slunk back onto the bench. There, alone, as the sky above began to threaten drizzle, she cried. There was nothing else she could do, no one else around, and her legs were shaking too much for her to walk home.

She didn’t know what else there was left to do.

* * *

Okay, so he was athletic, but even he was beginning to struggle as he ducked down yet another aisle – realising this one appeared to be cereal – and tried to remember if there was another fire exit near the bakery. His lungs were burning, and his legs were starting to feel rubbery. And he knew it wasn’t from overuse – it was from the adrenaline. He was beginning to feel sick to his stomach with it, with his pounding heart and burning lungs all telling him one simple thing – he could not keep up.

Okay, ten seconds, and go for the bakery, Luke thought to himself. A plan, no matter how unlikely to work, was something. And the bakery was only two aisles over, further away from where he’d just left the others. He couldn’t hear their footsteps, and to be fair, he couldn’t hear anything. The store alarm had finally gone off as the flames in the wine and spirits section had begun to climb

up to the offices on the second floor.

So maybe he wasn't going to win employee of the month this time around. Darn it.

A shower of tins burst from behind where he was leaning as two thick, powerful – and he noticed tattooed – hands came through on either side of him. The hands, like giant spades, pincerd inwards, and he found his throat grasped from either side. They were impossibly strong, like a vice grip, and held him in place even as a silent shadow began to move down the corridor. The black-haired man was back, regaining more of his humour when he saw his prey was pinned.

"Well, that's more like it," he grinned.

"What do you want?" Luke tried to choke out.

"I wanted to slowly torture you until you cracked and cried like a baby," the man pointed out, "But since you set off the fire alarm, I just don't have the time."

He smelled death on him as he moved, ever closer. He was still taking his time, even as the fire alarm blared, red lights flashed, and the sprinklers began. He didn't seem to mind the cold shower of water as he moved towards him, deliberately. He raised one hand, unnaturally pale, Luke now realised, and one glinting, sharp nail caught his eye.

It seemed almost like a caress, then his hand raked sharply across Luke's cheek, and he felt a tear. Red, hot blood began to drip down his face as he saw drops of it on the man's longer nails. He grinned.

"How about I just bleed you dry and leave your corpse for the boys in blue?" the man asked, as though he was questioning which route would be better to get to the town fair. "How's about that?"

His eyes fixed on Luke's own, the man lifted his thumb, the nail perhaps half an inch long and sharp, and licked at the red fluid at the tip. He seemed to shudder as he tasted it, his eyes glazing over in a way Luke's did when he discovered a really good doughnut in the box. A bizarre thought to have, but it was there.

"You taste like dark chocolate," he muttered, but then a look clouded his face, frowning, "And

something familiar..."

"You realise how creepy that is, right?" came a different voice from further down the aisle. Luke couldn't quite see, but the man turned, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw a boy his own age, dressed in black jeans and a black t-shirt. Could only really be one person. But why only one of them?

"This is who you called?" the black-haired man scoffed, "Another Boy Scout?" He turned towards him more, "I wonder what your blood tastes like, boy."

Luke heard the knife rather than saw it, felt a slight swish of the air as it moved past his face, through the gaps in the aisle, and slammed into something on the other side of him. Hands withdrew in surprise as a sudden bloom of heat burst behind him and the tins grew incredibly hot. He stumbled forward instinctively, as behind him the last dying screams of the thing that had held him rang out.

"A little less like chargrilled chicken," Ricky quipped.

Instead of fear, Luke noticed the man grin again.

"Well, well, the boy I came to see," he commented, "The little Guide way before his time. I can only imagine what that sort of power tastes like."

"Keep imagining, Jilly Goulden."

The man's hand shot out in Luke's direction, but again, with a speed he couldn't see, another knife flung through the air. This one buried itself to the hilt in the man's hand, knocking it out of his way and bringing about a rage of fury and pain.

Luke saw his opening and started to run towards Ricky, but the man grabbed him with his other, non-bleeding hand, by the collar of his blue shirt. He felt himself being dragged backwards for a moment, then suddenly the direction reversed, and he was flung with unnatural strength into Ricky. They collapsed together in a tangled mess of legs and arms.

When they managed to separate themselves and Ricky got to his feet, the man with the black hair, fangs, and blood fetish had vanished. Luke finally had to face the realisation that what he

had just encountered were vampires. Rubbing at the red sore he was likely going to develop on his neck, he looked up at Ricky, recalling what the man...pire... had called him.

“What are you?”

“Yeah, it looks like we didn’t tell you everything,” Ricky shrugged.

He held out his hand, and Luke took it.

Act III

When Ricky told him they were heading to the school library instead of their respective homes, he had to admit he found it a bit odd. He knew Ricky and his friends – Sara, Amy, and the librarian guy Mark – hung out there sometimes. In fact, it was becoming a bit of a running joke at school that they were gradually turning into a geek triumvirate or starting a commune or something.

But still, at like nearly midnight, going to school felt...well, wrong.

Ricky led him through a gap in the fence behind the school field, across to the back of the gymnasium, and towards a side door that Luke had never known existed. When he asked whether they might be on CCTV or something, Ricky informed him that their headmistress was such a cheapskate that the cameras were purely decorative.

The library was dark at first, but when Ricky turned on the table lamps, it was nearly cosy. He had made a call, probably to Mark, and then they'd taken their seats. After a moment, Luke realised he was sitting in the same spot where Amy had patched up his arm. His long shirt sleeve hid it, but he still bore a faint mark – the handprint – from where Miss Serif had grabbed him.

A reminder that the supernatural world he'd chosen to ignore was still able to reach him. And here again was another reminder.

"Who smells like burning alcohol?" Mark asked as he joined them a few moments later. He didn't look bothered by the late-night call; in fact, he had the same gently weary expression he always wore as he placed his backpack behind the counter and walked over to the table.

"That's me," Luke answered him sheepishly.

"And are you the reason three fire engines were racing for the Tesco, last I saw?" he followed up.

"That would also be me."

"Yeah, he took out two vamps in one night," Ricky pointed out next to him, sounding rather proud, actually. He flashed Luke a grin, "We have ourselves a vigilante."

"Congratulations," Mark agreed, but without much enthusiasm. "But what makes them special?"

Special? They were vampires, right? At least, that's what ordinary folks would assume. Vampires are inherently supernatural and all that, which makes them special. So why did Mark seem not exactly bored, but... well, not as surprised as vampires normally would make a person?,

"One of the vamps, the leader," Ricky told him, locking eyes, "He had black eyes."

At this, Luke detected surprise on Mark's face, a kind of mild 'oh' which spread over.

"Oh, a direct descendant of Sundune."

"Sundune?" Luke found himself interrupting. He couldn't help it; he was confused already.

"Immortal vamp," Ricky explained quickly, "Makes black-eyed vamps instead of the normal red-eyed vamps. We dusted him a while back, but there's still plenty of his cronies out there. Well, dusted, he's immortal, as I say, it's a whole big thing."

"Oh."

Okay, so there were normal and abnormal 'vamps'. That in itself would require more explanation when he wasn't so exhausted. His hands were only just ceasing to tremble from the adrenaline rush.

"Yeah, you only asked for the cliff notes," Ricky smiled at him, not unkindly.

Mark, however, was already deep in thought and didn't seem to notice Luke's growing confusion. Perhaps they'd have been able to do this better if they had had a pamphlet or something. You know 'Basics about Demons' or something. Oh God, were there demons as well?

"Well, I suppose the first thing we should try to find out is why he's here," Mark suggested.

"He said he'd come to find me."

"Ah."

"Revenge?"

"I think that's quite possible," Mark agreed. "If there's a connection to Sundune, he may appear in the literature. Are there any distinguishing characteristics that might narrow it down for

me?”

“He has a tattoo on his neck,” Ricky offered. “A bird or something.”

“A raven,” Luke told them, quietly. His skin broke out in goosebumps as he mentioned it, his temperature dropping more than just from the come-down. It was the coldness of the memory, the shiver of the grave. The feeling of tiny talons jumping up and down on a gravestone. He realised they were looking at him. “I’ve been dreaming about it. For a few weeks now. A raven. Just like when I kept dreaming about fire when Miss Serif was killing people.”

“Ah, so you’re sensitive,” Mark commented.

“Huh? Like hugs and kisses and stuff?” he screwed up his face.

“No, a Sensitive is a term,” Mark answered with a small, but good-natured smile, “It means someone who senses the supernatural around them on an unconscious level. Usually, these are contextualised as feeling a bit off, or sometimes manifest in dream symbology. I can get you some literature on the subject; it’s nothing to worry about. Many people are.”

“Oh... that explains some things,” he muttered, more to himself, “and raises a whole host of others.”

“For now, I think the best thing is for you both to go home,” Mark suggested, “get some sleep, and I should have something in the morning.”

Luke wanted to ask why he wasn’t going to sleep. Surely the supernatural world could wait for a few hours? But he didn’t want to question their rhythms and the way they worked – if this is what they did to... like... help people, then they could do that. He wasn’t about to protest the idea; he needed to lie down and forget the entire shift.

Ricky did the same, observing him a little more carefully than he preferred. He was already beginning to feel somewhat more himself physically – and apart from the scratches on his cheek and the slight sensation around his neck that hadn’t yet gone away, he was fine to walk. Even if he wouldn’t be entirely opposed to Ricky accompanying him to his door.

“So much for not getting involved,” Ricky joked lightly next to him, as they made their way to

the exit.

"Hey, they found me," Luke protested with a smile.

"Just sayin'."

* * *

Though he spent most of the night on research, Mark's attention in the early hours began to turn back to something else. Of course, he had opened the folder, as his uncle knew he would. And of course, when he saw what was in there, he was always going to act on it. Perhaps not in the way his uncle expected, but that was the price of free will.

And he had to wait until morning to do so. When he finally heard the telltale sound of a particular engine in the car park, one of the first in the very slight lightening of the sky above, he knew it was time. He put down his leatherbound tomes, picked up the folder once more, and headed for the doors of the library.

"We need to talk."

By the time he reached the reception area, Miss Drake was just sliding the key to her office into the lock. She jumped, and he heard the jingle of keys as she spun round to face him, glaring in the way only she could. However, she didn't look quite so intimidating and dangerous in this light. She resembled something else – she looked like a liar.

"Don't do that to me," she snapped at him, regaining her composure with a slight shift in posture.

"Seriously, I need to talk to you, right now," he reiterated.

She frowned at him, perhaps because their normal interactions were laced with banter and bidirectional vitriol, but in that moment, he was all serious and all business. So she finished opening the door and walked into her office without waving him in. He didn't need an invitation, so he headed into the office, closing the door behind him.

He took a moment to glance out of her window, the car park still blissfully empty of any other cars, and closed the blinds. She stopped halfway to sitting down at her desk and frowned at him. Now they were lit only by the soft light from her desk lamp.

"What the hell are you doing?" she challenged.

"I want answers."

"About what?"

"About what the hell are you doing here?" he snapped at her.

She stopped, hovering there halfway down to her seat. Her eyes didn't quite flash with recognition of something, more a kind of subtle and deep anger underneath. He saw her take a breath, perhaps she was practising her calm, perhaps it was knowing something had been found out – or uncovered. But it was enough to tell him he was on the right lines. His uncle, even if he was lying, was not entirely wrong.

"Excuse me..." she began, regaining some of her school-ma'am charm. She slowly lowered herself fully into her seat and leaned back, with a deceptively calm look on her face. "What makes you think you can talk to me like this? I mean, apart from all the other times we've talked to each other like this."

In response, he threw the manila folder onto her desk. He hadn't bothered to redact or remove anything. As she picked it up, her bright red nails sharply contrasted against the dull paper sleeve, and she was about to experience it just as he had. Of course, she probably knew what to expect. He hadn't.

"It's all in there..." he told her, as she flicked it open and her eyes began to scan across the pages, "... except why."

For a moment, he sensed it, he saw it. The widening of her eyes, the curve of her mouth, the slight tremble in one hand as she read what he had hours before. She closed it slowly, placing it back down upon her desk, and took a deep, steadying breath.

Here we go, he thought, answers.

What she said shocked him to his core.

"Mark, I honestly don't know why you're so upset," she scalded him, her voice returning to normal. "I have marked the proposed budget changes to the Library in the past two governor's meetings; you've had them for two months."

He frowned, confused at the charade she was displaying. She knew damn well that wasn't...

"The short answer is, your little book collection is costing us too much money. You treat the damn thing as if it's your own personal storage space, and it's not. You need to understand that this is a school library, not the great Alexandria palace of Pharaoh Ramses the Condom, so you are expected to stick to the rules and regulations."

As she spoke, she reached across her desk and plucked up a Post-it, followed by a pen and began to write as she continued to scald him like any other conversation. After she was done speaking, she ripped it off and held it up to the light for him to see.

"Now... will you come around to see my point of view?"

On the note, printed in her slashing – likely psychotic – handwriting was a simple phrase:

THEY ARE LISTENING. 9 PM, SOUTH SIDE BRIDGE.

He frowned as he read it, realising what she was implying. He couldn't help but look around the room nervously, as though there were bugs in the walls.

"Fine, we'll talk more about it," he groaned, trying to make his voice sound anything but petulant. Which, yes, he'd had practice with, but it was mainly an illusion. He decided to add, for good measure, "But I still think you can stick your 'proposed changes' up your well-manicured rear lawn, your highness."

With that, she breathed, and he turned on his heel and headed back out of the door. He would have to wait for answers, but her paranoia had just told him something else.

They were listening.

* * *

Ricky had had to make some tough choices during his time as this 'Guide' (a term he still disliked using personally, as it made him sound too much like he should be selling cookies or something). Some of these were life and death decisions—like whether he should have checked his voicemail last night. That one was definitely life or death. But the one facing him that morning felt equally significant in terms of importance.

To get a Coke from the vending machine, or try the coffee from the coffee vending machine. Sugar crash, or potential warm piss. Given he might have strained his knife-throwing arm last night, he was in for a world of hurt if he chose poorly. Jeez, did Indiana Jones have to think this hard when he chose the Holy Grail?

"Do you have a sec?" a voice came from next to him. He glanced over to see Luke, looking admittedly a little better after a night's sleep (although still likely broken by the looks of it) and having washed off the finer detail from the slashes on his face. You couldn't see them much now, meaning they wouldn't scar.

But the memories would still linger.

"Considering last night, I'm surprised you don't want a whole minute," he quipped, before settling on the coffee machine and plonking in his change. "But go on."

"I want to know what's going on," Luke continued, sounding that slight mix of anxiousness and excitement of someone discovering something new. Although, then again, this wasn't exactly a new hobby. Ricky pressed some buttons on the machine, unsure quite what he was doing.

"Are you sure you're ready for that?"

"I'm not saying it's a commitment," he shrugged, "But I could do with knowing just what the hell happened to me and why. Give me closure, like."

Ricky could respect that; it wasn't every day you were confronted with the lurking

supernatural world beneath the normal one. Well, except it had been so for Luke in the last two of the four weeks, so maybe there was some truth to Sara's calling of bullshit on lightning striking the same place twice.

"The Scooby Gang assembles in five minutes at the Library," he offered, "You're welcome to join us. Although as last to the table, you will be designated as the 'Shaggy'." He shrugged, "Group politics."

"Sure," Luke answered with a smile, seeming a little relieved.

The machine finished its whirring and whatever was happening in the cup – for better or worse – reached its conclusion. Ricky picked it out of the machine, which then decided to trickle a little more just to spite him, and indicated for Luke to fall into step with him.

"Let's walk."

As they began to make their way down the corridor, he could sense more coming from Luke, he also decided not to push it – let the lad ask his questions in his own time. After all, he'd had far longer... well, a few months... more to process this and... well, have to be cool with it.

"Why do you do it?" Luke asked him. Okay, not the first question he'd expected. "Why do you fight?"

"I suppose it's because I have something worth fighting for," he shrugged.

"What's that?"

"My friends, my family," he answered, jostling the bag on his shoulder, which threatened to fall down. "Hell, even the world if you wanna get all noble and shit. What else am I gonna do, right? Someone gave me the superpowers."

They reached the library doors and hesitated outside.

"Don't you get scared?"

"All the time," Ricky admitted, honestly. "But don't worry, in there they don't bite. Well, Sara does, but you whack her on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper, and she calms down." He couldn't help but smile. Luke was in for a treat. "You ready?"

Luke nodded, and Ricky smiled. Of course, he wasn't. As he opened the door and stepped inside, Sara, true to form, was already well into it.

"And then the duck says, 'Doctor, I have a man attached to my arse...'"

Yeah, he so wasn't ready for it.

* * *

"We have a third musketeer at last."

He wasn't quite sure what to expect, but somehow in the daylight, the image of Sara and Amy gathered around the table doing homework in the school library seemed incredibly mundane. Amy had her laptop and was sitting at the table, while Sara was opposite her with textbooks that were just... normal. He and Ricky stepped into the room, and they looked up at them both after Sara realised that her punchline hadn't landed with Amy, who was only half listening.

And then she called him a musketeer.

"What does that make us?" Amy wondered out loud.

"Busty French Maidens," Sara supplied.

"You are way too proud of your breasts."

As he and Ricky made their way over to the table, letting Ricky take the lead and realising he didn't immediately have to jump into the banter, he managed to share a look with Amy. After the way they had left things, with him being a grumpy sod, he half expected some kind of reproach. But her look was warm and friendly; she smiled and moved her school bag so he could sit down in the seat next to her.

"So, what made you change your mind, Luke?" she asked him, casually.

"I haven't, exactly..." he tried to stumble. She didn't push him, but Ricky took over and explained anyway.

"He was attacked last night by a vamp we think was made by Sundune."

"Ah, my least favourite leech-man of the decade," Sara sighed. She continued, as if explaining to Luke, "Satana *was* my least favourite, until I chopped her head off with a shovel." He couldn't help a frown, so she shrugged, "Long story. Cool ending."

"Are you alright?" Amy asked him, her brow furrowed with concern.

"He even managed to take two of them down," Ricky pointed out, when Luke's voice continue to feel a little bit locked.

"Kudos on the dusting," Sara congratulated him, before her eyes narrowed, "Were they UberVamps? Like pack leaders?"

He didn't quite know how to answer.

"Uh... no?"

"Then I still hold the non-Guide record," she smiled to herself proudly.

"So, what's he in town for?" Amy asked Ricky, "Family barbecue?"

"Our current theory is that he's here to get revenge on me for the death of the guy who made him," Ricky explained, "He told me he was here for me, so I'm guessing since we haven't exactly been exchanging Christmas Cards..." He trailed off.

"I'm afraid it's now more than a theory," Mark's voice came to them from the office, with an almost rehearsed sense of timing. Sara made a face at him.

"Do you just wait in there for a cue or something?"

"I've found our man," the older boy continued, ignoring her. "Black hair, dark eyes when they're not completely vampyric. Raven tattoo on his neck."

"Sounds like the dude," he agreed.

"Rinasi." When he spoke the name out loud, Luke felt a shiver. He didn't know why, he'd never heard the name before – wasn't even sure it was a proper name or anything. Maybe just by naming the thing plaguing him, that was all it took. "A vampyr who by all accounts came to notice at the turn of the century, in London. For the past hundred years, he's been referred to as something of Sundune's right-hand man."

"So why wasn't he here 'right-handing' when Sundune came to town?" Ricky wondered out loud.

"No idea," Mark shrugged, "Perhaps he was given another assignment."

"Vamps, MI-6, anyone see a difference?" Sara tried to point out.

"At any rate," Mark ignored her again. Luke was beginning to sense the rhythm already, "I think it's more than likely he's here for revenge. Or, to be optimistic, to thank you for increasing his rank amongst their pack."

"Ah, with Sundune out of the way, he's top dog," Amy nodded, "Or top vamp."

"Indeed," Mark agreed. His shoulders settled a little as he added, "Or of course, there's the possibility he's trying to set into motion Sundune's resurrection using another host."

Luke could feel his brain beginning to hurt, manifesting through his eyes. Resurrections? Hosts? He thought they were joking about a pamphlet or something, but he'd have to mention that another time.

"When Ricky said Sundune was immortal, he wasn't being hyperbolic," Mark explained for his benefit, "Once he's been dusted, his spirit body can pour itself into another vessel. Thankfully, a unique property to him rather than all vampyrs, but still a pain in the arse as you can imagine."

"He doesn't just reform and look like Christopher Lee," Amy added.

"Quite," Mark agreed, "In fact, the host body Ricky killed the other month, he'd been wearing since the seventeenth century. Apparently, it was a vampyr hunter with something of a vendetta. I have his name somewhere in the files..."

Ricky's look clouded a little at that, and Luke could sense a little of why.

"I really wouldn't like to think about that."

"I'm pretty sure he can only take over a dead body," Mark tried to reassure him, though the fact that passed for reassurance was worrying in a different way. "So I wouldn't worry about causing the host's spirit any harm."

"Still not helping."

"Sorry," Mark offered, before continuing brightly, "But I think it gives us a very narrow avenue in which to look."

"Castle?"

"Precisely."

"Why there?" Luke asked. He'd heard of Calendar Castle, most people had, but it was a ruin, wasn't it? Not even open as a tourist attraction anymore.

"It was the site where Ricky blasted him to pieces, so I'm guessing that's where his spirit is floating and needs to be released from," Amy explained.

"Astutely put," Mark complemented. Ricky stood and began to head for the door.

"Guess I know where I'm going then," Ricky sighed. Luke went to stand up himself, but Ricky shook his head. "Thank you, but no. I'll let you know more when I kick his arse, okay?"

Luke felt a little deflated, but the looks on Sara, Mark, and Amy's collective faces told him this was perfectly normal. He wondered for a moment why, then realised the truth. Ricky was this 'Guide' or whatever, this super fighter. And the rest of them were just kids, right? So why did it feel so wrong to let him go off on his own?

He wasn't sure if this was what 'helping' meant, but he still felt confused and uncertain. Oddly, he also felt a bit cowardly. The others seemed a bit unaware of it, as they were comfortably settled into their usual routine. Sara gave him a little shrug as she explained,

"You'll get used to it."

Yeah, time would tell.

* * *

Ricky hadn't been to the castle for a while and felt a small pang of guilt at the thought. The day was already waning; they were approaching the winter solstice, after all. So, by the time he made his way up the path, which was first slick with mud and then hardened into frost that never quite

thawed in the low temperatures, he fully felt it. The wind whistling through the bare trees and the remoteness of the location—even though it was perhaps a twenty-minute walk from the library.

No one came up here anymore, and not just because it was winter. Because it was a place of decay and death.

And after the confrontation with Sundune, the castle itself was probably even more dangerous to be around.

As he wandered up the path alone, the bulk of the castle came into view in front of him. The front façade remained remarkably intact, though it was crumbling on one side, where nature was beginning to take control again. The arch leading through the courtyard remained standing, and as he passed into the bare cold daylight of the centre, he felt a shiver.

He hadn't been up there since, because of the guilt.

Because of Claire.

He could almost feel eyes watching him from the darkness, but he knew he was alone. He had become better at understanding the difference between the tricks the mind played on itself and the truth of the matter. He was only being stalked by memory.

The memory of the fight with Sundune. Brutal and swift, both wielding swords. Ricky thought he had held his ground, but with a being as ancient as Sundune, he should have realised he was only being toyed with. Sundune was an expert swordsman and had lured him into a false sense of progress, only to turn it against him.

Of course, what Sundune had not foreseen was that Ricky had not been alone. They had rigged one of the old generators to blow, bringing down a good chunk of the left side of the castle and setting fire to the scattered debris from its brief stint as a tourist attraction. They had lost Sundune amongst the flames, and expected his combustion like any others, left there broken and bleeding.

But that had been too late for Claire. His thoughts turned to her often, the hunter whose entire family had been slaughtered by Sundune. The girl who had helped him, even when she didn't

fully trust him – or to be fair, he her. Sundune's final parting gift, a tag, a mark – that would lead her to take his place in the hell dimension in which he'd been trapped. She was probably still there now, well beyond their reach.

"I'll find you..." he sighed into the cold December air. He meant it; he hoped he could fulfil that promise.

As he surveyed the land around him, he realised how much of the castle remained intact – though he could see from the scorch marks the extent of the fire. It licked across the walls; all the wood had burnt away. There was still a faint smell of smoke as he glanced into some of the rooms on the far side of the courtyard.

"Boy, when I blow 'em, I blow 'em," he muttered to himself, before hearing the words out loud and thinking he was glad Sara wasn't there to hear him.

As he turned back to the entrance, he spotted it. Something new in this situation. The slumped shape of what was clearly a body leaned against the wall. It had been partly hidden by some rubble when he entered the castle, but now it was plainly visible. And it had not been there before.

As he approached, he noticed the dark blue cargo trousers and the bright blue t-shirt. One of Rinasi's victims from last night's assault, undoubtedly. Carefully he moved forward, keeping his senses keenly alert to his surroundings. He checked for a trap, but found none. And as he drew nearer, he understood why. This was not a trap. It was a message.

Taped to the man's shirt was a tape recorder – the kind with a speaker on one end and buttons on the side.

So this Rinasi was a vamp who knew basic technology. That was an upgrade. Not particularly a welcome one either.

It also meant he had predicted he would go there, which also indicated that Rinasi was fully aware of where his master's spirit resided. None of those possibilities filled him with positive thoughts – although Mark had quietly explained that the resurrection spell was not simple, and

therefore they probably would have noticed if it had been performed.

He knelt and clicked the play button on the side.

"You know, Guide, if you're hearing this, it means you were stupid enough to believe I would actually want to bring the old fart back," the smarmy southern accent sounded unnaturally loud in the stillness of the air. It seemed to reverberate through the hollow bones of the castle. "And also means you're crazy enough to go up to the castle."

He heard a sigh on the tape.

"And it also means you know who I am. And I know who you are already, maybe even more than you do. So how about it? How about we settle our differences with a good old-fashioned throw down? Vamp to Guide?"

"Come to the slaughterhouse, you know the one. That abandoned little abbatoir on the South Side. Given what you and your friend did to my men, it'll just be me. So I don't think I need to say it, but come alone, Guide. If you aren't already."

With that, the tape clicked off, leaving Ricky with the oppressive silence of the castle and the lonely sound of the wind outside. He recognised it well – the call to a showdown, the prickling of ego. Rinasi was angry that he killed his leader – yet not angry enough to bring him back. He wanted to posture; he wanted another notch on his belt, another kill to his name.

Ricky would give him something else entirely.

* * *

"Is this the part where I say 'hello'?" Ricky called out into the dark, cavernous space. The doors to the slaughterhouse stood open, the sound reverberating away into the emptiness. The place was huge, high-ceilinged, an old factory that no longer ran. Where livestock from the farms would be brought down to the slaughter, right there in the South Side of town.

Unsurprisingly, that had been the first business to close, even before the rest of the South

Side had been abandoned.

"Worth a shot," he muttered to himself, stepping across the threshold. As he did, the lights of the place spluttered to life, and he found himself taking in the enormity of it with his eyes. He blinked twice against the sudden brightness, then began to realise what he could see.

Hooks.

Conveyor belts and machines he couldn't even begin to understand dominated the main floor, with gantries and walkways high above. But everywhere there were hooks. Empty now, but he knew well what had hung on them. Bodies. Meat. They might have been for food long ago, but now... now they were destined for something else.

Or Rinasi was simply trying to rattle him.

"Okay, a little too creepy dollhouse for my tastes," he called out.

"Thought we could do with some lighting," came the reply.

The voice seemed to come from everywhere at once, which wasn't surprising given the echoes. He couldn't hear any movement, just the sound of that southern twang fading into nothing. He moved to one of the conveyor belts and jumped onto it, trying to get a better view from higher up. He still saw nothing. The light helped, but there were still patches of shadow all around.

"You like to hide?" he called out.

"Sometimes," Rinasi admitted from wherever he was hiding. "Sometimes I just like to kill."

He could hear the chug of a generator, and that was it.

"Fat chance if you're not around," he taunted.

For a moment, he thought he heard movement, the creak of a lever. Then the ground beneath him started to shift as he realised the conveyor belt was coming to life. He jumped back instinctively, before his head could hit one of the dangling hooks. Granted, health and safety might not have been a concern back in the thirties, but this was still a dangerously risky place to work.

"Cheap trick," he spat, as he stood upon the top of a stationary machine. The belt, which had come on, was whirring in front of him, moving old bits of rust and metal around. It seemed to snake

through the whole place, as his eyes scanned for the target.

"You still fell for it," Rinasi reminded him.

And finally, his eyes fell on him. A second conveyor, snaking between the first, remained stationary. On this, Rinasi stood, facing him, looking just like he had in the store, only less wet.

"So what's this about, Rinasi?" he challenged him. "Revenge? You don't even want your master back."

"Loyalty is a funny thing," the vampyr shrugged. "It may not be absolute, but that doesn't mean you don't avenge your boss when someone blows him up."

Ricky decided on his best course of action, so he stepped off the machine and onto the conveyor belt. He was just short enough in height that the hooks wouldn't harm him if he was careful and mindful of them, so he allowed it to move him around the room. Rinasi turned with him, locking eyes and not looking away.

"You think you can do better than him?" Ricky teased.

"I think he was too versed in the old ways of hunt and kill," Rinasi answered, "Grand master plan and slow-moving dipping mechanisms. Me? I'm a hand-to-hand kind of a guy."

As he came around one steel support and back into Rinasi's view, he didn't wait for another quip; he simply threw the knife straight and true. But Rinasi was prepared for him, having seen that trick a couple of times.

"Well, I expected that, really," he chided him.

Rinasi leapt onto the conveyor right behind where Ricky had passed his own and charged at him. It was like fighting on a treadmill, with the ground beneath him constantly moving as he tried to dodge and weave Rinasi's shots. It was probably throwing him off too, because none of his punches were landing.

Twice, he ducked as the hooks got too close to his head, and on both occasions, Rinasi tried to drive his boot into his face, only to have it deflected and receive a thump to the shins in response. Rinasi was barely taller than him, meaning he was having much the same problem.

"Come on," Ricky joked, "I'm not even breaking a sweat."

Frustration flashed on the monster's face.

"I'm going to enjoy this."

As Rinasi swung high to strike Ricky's face, he realised he had only one option — so he leapt and grabbed a meat hook, driving it into the flesh of the monster's arm as it advanced. It tore through his leather jacket, straight into flesh beneath, and Rinasi snarled in anger. The conveyor kept moving, and Ricky swept his legs out from under him, causing him to hang upon the hook.

It didn't last long as it tore, and Rinasi found himself landing hard, half-on and half-off the conveyor. The bugger went tits over arse and landed hard on solid ground as Ricky jumped down to join him. Blood splattered on the floor, but it only seemed to piss him off even more.

"You fucker!" the monster snarled.

"Now, now, watch your tone around the meat hooks," Ricky joked.

Whatever he had uncorked and unbottled was righteous in its fury. No longer satisfied with hand-to-hand combat, the monster unleashed a full animalistic charge, charging into him and crashing both of them through stacks of boxes. In a tangle of dust, wood, and that horrible packing material, he found himself slamming back near the entrance.

Ricky felt a blow to his nose, a trickle of blood, and was momentarily pushed backwards as Rinasi pressed his advantage. Blood dripped everywhere from his wound, but he wasn't slowing; if anything, he was increasing his effort.

"You know the one thing your boss forgot?" Ricky teased him, wiping the blood from the end of his nose. "And it seems like you have as well?"

"What's that?" Rinasi snarled at him, having regained his footing. Ricky went to answer, but before he could, Rinasi pressed on and kicked him full on in the chest with a boot powerful enough to crack ribs.

Ricky hurtled backwards out of the door he'd entered. While he had hoped to walk out normally, landing on his arse hard on the dirt and gravel outside in the moonlight was one way to do

it. He rolled to a halt on the ground, turning around to see the grinning lunatic still standing inside the building. His entire chest felt like it was on fire as he spat the word out.

“Friends.”

Rinasi’s eyes widened, but it was too late as Mark, Sara, and Luke slammed the huge double doors shut in front of him while Amy lit a match outside. As the four of them leapt back, the flames quickly spread around the perimeter. The building was soon engulfed in fire, and after a moment, he heard the generator come to a halt.

Well, his master Sundune would be proud.

Luke came over to him, holding out a hand and helping him to his feet as they regarded the flaming building.

“Thanks for the idea,” Ricky said, wincing at his ribs.

“Well... it came to me,” Luke grinned. There it was, the satisfaction they’d all felt at least once or twice, battling the forces of darkness. Amy, Mark and Sara gathered with him.

“Shouldn’t we worry we’re all pyromaniacs?” Amy wondered out loud, “We’ve done that a few times now.”

“Oh, no more of them please,” Ricky groaned, realising afterwards he’d misheard her.

“Seconded,” Luke agreed.

As Amy rolled her eyes at them, the five of them turned to the growing inferno. Underneath the roaring flames, there was something else. A rumbling. A sound that, oh, for bollocking hells’ sake.

“You barricaded *all* the doors, right?” he asked them, getting four sheepish looks in return.

The sound he’d heard was that of a motorbike, thundering away and off into the night. The five of them shared a look.

“He’s not going to be back, is he?” Sara groaned.

“We’ll have to wait and see,” Mark offered.

It was Amy who summed up what they were feeling, with perhaps the most philosophical point of the night – and indeed, a greater point could not be made.

"Evil is just plain... *not good.*"

Act IV

They agreed to talk tomorrow, even though it had only just turned night, as they needed rest. Mark assured them that he did not think Rinasi would be back for a while. After all, he'd had his vamps killed, was humiliated, and would need time to regroup. Down the line, sure – horror was always on the cards. But for that night? Nothing.

So they went their separate ways. Ricky, Amy, and Sara headed in one direction, while Luke and Mark took another. Mark turned off when he reached the flats, and Luke continued alone, his mind, heart, and body tangled in confusion. So much horror, pain, and anger. Yet, beneath it all, a sense of achievement lingered.

Sure, they hadn't killed the bad guy – but the bad guy hadn't killed them. And maybe there was some kind of justice in that. Maybe he was starting to understand a little why Ricky said he fought. Maybe sometimes there are things worth fighting for.

He nearly didn't hear the car pull up beside him until it was almost on the curb directly in front. Since he was on the right-hand pavement, the driver was closest to him. He didn't recognise him, but his eyes burned with a kind of sleazy anger he knew all too well.

"Get in," the man snapped at him through the open window.

What the actual fuck?

The guy was probably in his twenties, with scruffy facial hair and pockmarked skin. His hair was greasy or something similar, and he had fierce eyes that looked permanently annoyed. He wore a tracksuit and drove a Seat Ibiza. Luke didn't need to know the man to recognise the stereotype.

"Thanks, but I don't take sweets from strangers."

He turned to walk away, finished with everything for the night, until he heard the click and saw a handgun's barrel aimed at him. He'd never seen a handgun before, and he wasn't even sure if he was seeing one now. This was the UK, not downtown New York. They didn't have stuff like that, or if they did, it was like the Loch Ness Monster.

"Get the fuck in, or I'll blow your brains out right now," the man told him, his eyes telling the truth.

If he was bluffing, if it was a toy that just looked so damn real, he didn't know. But could he risk it?

"Don't even think about running," the man hissed as if reading his mind, "I will do it. Now stop playing cliches and get into the car."

Luke thought about his options for just a moment longer, then walked around the car and got into the passenger side. At least with another step alive, he had another chance to figure out what the hell to do. Even though he couldn't quite believe it. After monsters, vampires, the forces of darkness – this is what he was dealing with on the way home? This... bullshit?

"We're going to go for a ride," the man told him, holding that black eye barrel pointed straight towards him, "And at the end of it, we either part ways amicably... or you part ways from your lower half. Comprene?"

"Why?" was Luke's only question.

"Your girlfriend," was his only answer.

He sat there, stunned and quiet, as the man drove them. He pulled away from the curb, not bothered when Luke's height meant he bumped his head against the top of the car. His feet were surrounded by the debris of takeaway lids and cups, and the inside of the car smelt of sweat and body spray. The windows were down, and the icy night air buffeted them slightly as he drove.

Sam.

Five minutes later, the man had pulled the car off the road, down a lane and beside the river's edge. It was a dark, secluded spot. The kind seen in horror movies where lovers meet, or hook-handed men go on their nightly slaughters. In crime dramas, it would be the place for little confrontations, right?

This felt like the latter.

"Get out."

Luke did, knowing he could try to bolt for the surrounding woods, wondering whether that would be enough protection if he was wrong and the gun was real. Maybe, maybe not. Could he chance it?

No. Besides, the man had said the one thing guaranteed to make him stay, the one invocation.

Sam.

He approached from the front of the car into the headlights' beam as the man did the same. He was tucking the barrel of the handgun into his trousers casually. Luke hoped, mistakenly, that the safety wasn't on. Men like this only cared about one thing, and him firing the gun off downstairs was just the ending his night needed.

"Now, look, this wasn't my idea, but your bitch of a girlfriend insisted," the man told him. He'd switched performances now. From a stone-cold gangster to sleaze.

"What?"

"Yeah, such sweet cheeks, but a bitch when it comes to her friends," he continued to mock, his voice saying he was enjoying this way too much. "I'm surprised she never mentioned me."

"You stay away from Sam," Luke snapped at him.

It was all too much – this... this is what she'd been keeping from him? He didn't know everything, but a picture was beginning to form. Ideas began to connect in his mind. And he was done.

"Wish I could," the man sneered, seeming to revel in Luke's emotional pain as much as his physical vulnerability. "But both of us got a little addiction going on. Dunno which one might be the stronger."

"I'm warning you..." Luke told him. The man's eyes flashed again to a quick and sudden temper, his fist cold-cocking Luke right in the jaw. He saw stars, his vision exploding in front of him, and he felt himself pushed to the ground.

"You're just like her!" the man screamed at him, "You don't get it!" He took two steps

forward and swung one of his trainers into Luke's ribs, hitting him right where it hurt. He was suddenly winded, as the man continued to scream, "Ain't nobody warns me nothin'. I'm the one in charge!"

The first blow hurt. The second blow cracked something. The third, Luke never let land. He *was done*.

"I'm in charge!" the man cried, cocking back his leg for the third go.

Luke grabbed his shoe as it came at him, twisting his ankle quickly enough to hear and feel a pop. The guy screamed, high-pitched, reedy, and surprised, as Luke lunged at him as if back in a rugby match. They both fell hard to the ground, with Luke ending up on top.

He thumped him once, twice, a third time. He felt the monster inside of himself, the anger, the resentment, the hurt building up and fuelling each one. He stopped at three, the man's eye already beginning to swell and blood pouring freely from his nose. He stepped back, yanking the gun from the man's belt even as he struggled to stop him.

Knock off Calvin Klein underwear as well, says it all.

Luke stood, breathing heavily and feeling more than on the edge. The guy, whoever he was, sneered up at him as Luke trained the barrel right for his forehead.

"Oh, and what are you gonna do with that?"

"I'm gonna put a bullet through your head if you fucking try to come near me again," he snapped at him.

"That so?"

"Try me."

"I don't think you've got the balls."

Luke wondered for a moment, saw the lack of fear in the guy's eyes. Yeah, weariness, and blood dripping down his face. But not fear. So he pulled the trigger.

The bb pellet smacked the guy in his chest, and he yelped like a chihuahua. Emboldened, Luke continued. A second, a third. One hit him beneath the eye where Luke had thumped him. The

third between his eyebrows. A fourth, for good luck, right to the groin.

He threw the stupid fake gun off to one side and rushed forward, kneeling down and grabbing the guy by the collar of his tracksuit, dragging his face until it was mere inches away from his own.

"You know, in the last twenty-four hours, I have faced things that I can't even pronounce or believe in," he breathed into the guy's face, eyes blazing with fury. "I am not going to be bullied by a little nothing piece of shit like you. You come near Sam or me again, with any of this small-town Goodfellas bullshit routine, and it'll be more than just your face that I'll rearrange. Okay?"

He took a pause, then added, because this was obviously the play the guy thought he was in.

"Sorry... comprende?"

The weasel nodded, his eyes still defiant, but clearly beaten. Luke stood, backed away and walked back off up the lane, listening out for the sound of the engine behind him.

It never came.

* * *

Nine o'clock came and went, and Mark found himself standing on the cold on the South Side bridge. It was a little way away from the main street, so it was less frequently used than the other, Irwell Bridge, on the other side of town. This meant it was quiet, and the slow, deceptively pleasing sound of the trickling river was enough to make it seem almost peaceful.

He'd doubled back after he and Luke parted ways and slipped down to the river to be there with five minutes to spare. And Miss Drake... if that even really was her name... was late. Typical, he reckoned. Perhaps it was a power move, perhaps it was just her trying to get one over on him. Or maybe she was as paranoid as her 'they're listening' approach had been. Maybe she was waiting to see if he was truly alone, or whether she was being set up.

But then, he heard the footsteps coming up behind him, as he looked out along the river and

back towards the town centre.

"You know, I spent the afternoon wondering if this would be an elaborate trap," he sighed, "Maybe to have me killed."

"I could do better than a cliché," Miss Drake responded as she slipped into place beside him. Why did they have to do this crap during the winter? The fact that both of them were wearing dark jackets and standing away from civilisation felt far too Robert Ludlum for his liking. He shook his head. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"All bets are off as to what you would and wouldn't do," he sighed.

"The file tells you nothing," she shook her head.

"No, it tells me that the real Miss Drake is dead," Mark reminded her, finally giving her his full attention. He wished he'd worn gloves, as his hand rested on the cold stone of the bridge, his fingers felt a little numb. "And you've clearly taken over her life."

It was true. The file contained information about the real Miss Drake. She had been a Headmistress in Dorset until about five years ago. Coincidentally, it was around the same time the woman in front of him started working at their school. Same name. Same birthday. Similar facial features. Orphan, so no family to worry about. Same goddamn national insurance number. Everything.

But the photos had confirmed what had happened to Miss Drake, and it wasn't pretty.

So the question remained – who was in front of him? And what had she done?

"So, who are you?" he asked, simply.

"Who gave you the file?" she answered with a question.

"You tell me," he shot back, sarcasm dripping into his voice, "I mean, you're the one here who's dead, doesn't that give you all the answers?"

Her expression shifted from her usual defensive venom into something else – something far more complex and unexpected. She appeared partly frightened, partly sorrowful, and partly exhausted. She looked away, her eyes catching the glinting lights of the town beyond.

“Okay, Mark, you’re about to hear things I have never told anyone,” she began, “Because if I do, I’m dead. And afterwards, you have a choice to make, as we all have to once our eyes are opened.”

“And what’s the choice?” he asked carefully.

“You can either trust me and join me,” she began, an old familiar tune. “Or you can go back to the people who gave you this file, tell them everything... and get me killed. That’s the choice, okay?”

“Then tell me,” he offered quietly, “This should be interesting.”

She looked at him for a long moment, and he could see her thought process in her eyes. Trust, mistrust. Truth, deception. All the adults in his life were liars; it remained to be seen whether she would continue the pattern or break it.

And so far, he had no reason to trust her.

“Have you ever heard of the Covenant?” was how she began.

And thus she told her tale, she promised in full. And he listened. And he thought.

And then he made a choice.

* * *

He was too exhausted to even tackle the slight incline up to the front of his terraced house, but he did it. He was only three houses away now, and then he’d be there. As Luke steeled himself, his stomach sank — he saw Sam sitting there, waiting for him. Then he remembered their planned talk — the one they had said they were going to have. They hadn’t spoken all day, and he had had a chance to tell her... well, what would he have told her?

She looked cold, and he wondered vaguely why she hadn’t gone inside. His mother would have greeted her warmly; she always did — regardless of what she might have wondered about the state of their relationship. But instead, she sat on the stone wall at the front, by the gate. She hadn’t

spotted him yet, and he saw her face in profile. Sad, looking into somewhere in the distance. She looked like someone carrying a burden.

He knew how that felt.

As he drew closer, he noticed the bedroom light on upstairs in the front room – his parents' room. Early, he thought it was only half past nine, but then again, his dad had been going to bed much earlier lately. His mum would probably stay up in bed next to him, reading under her desk lamp. So old. But in many ways, he envied them.

Sam's eyes finally caught movement and looked down at him as he rose to meet her where she sat. He tried to pin down any single emotion he felt when he looked at her, but he couldn't. So he stood, stared, and said nothing. It seemed like the safest choice.

"Are we going to do this here?" she asked him quietly. There was a faint accusation, a kind of learned helplessness in her tone that irritated him, but he tried to push it down.

"Do what?" he asked her flatly, "What the hell do you think we need to do?"

"Talk."

"Right," he agreed, before continuing bluntly, "talk would have been good before your drug dealer kidnapped me for a little chat."

Her eyes flared in concern, but he also noticed no surprise. Upset, anger... and yes, guilt. Well, that was something – he didn't think he could have the stomach to hear another denial or another lie out of her mouth.

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

"I'm alive, aren't I?" he snapped, but some of the venom slipped from him. He was trying to stay mad, but he was losing the battle. He was just... so damn tired. "He's worse for the wear, but that's a different problem." He sighed, shoulders slumping, "What the hell did you do, Sam? What did you get yourself into?"

"You want the full story?" she asked, though the weakness in her voice betrayed she knew it would have to be so.

"I think if we have any chance, I have to," he agreed.

She looked at him for the longest time. He could see it, the decision-making in her mind. But thankfully, he could see none of the deception that had plagued them both up to that point. She wasn't taking her time to think about how to lie; she was taking her time thinking about how to express the truth. That would have to be enough.

"You remember a year ago, when you and I sort of broke up for a few weeks?" she began. Instantly, his heckles raised again.

"You're saying this is my fault?"

"No, just listen, please," she quickly returned. Her eyes fell down to the ground, lost in some memory of fog she seemed to be now existing in. "Things don't just happen like that, all random like. There's a pattern, when they all happen together or... like one after another. Until it breaks you down and you come to a point where anything, even the slightest thing, to take the edge off... You just got to have."

"I was in therapy for a while. Maybe it was not knowing my birth mum, maybe it was... I don't know, indulgent rich girl shit. I used to sit sometimes, and my throat would close up like there was nothing I could do. Like I was drowning, and all I'd be doing is sitting in a chair reading a magazine or something. So I went to the guy, when my dad insisted, and he made me all better. Generalised anxiety disorder, and all that. Gave me some great medication."

"And then... they said I was better. But you don't ever get better, right? You don't suddenly have all these feelings go away. And then last year, you'd dumped me, and I thought we were over. Julie kept nagging me twenty-four seven about this fucking dress she wanted. My step-mum turned into an icy, frigid bitch when she realised where daddy's inheritance was going. It was like, stupid petty, stupid bullshit stuff...but it was piling onto me. I'd sit in the bathroom stall, and again, I couldn't breathe. But I didn't want to tell anyone because... well, telling didn't help last time. But the pills did." Her voice cracked, "And then Julie and I went to Clarus."

Her look darkened further, though he thought he could see where the story was headed.

"There's an element in this town that preys on that kind of despair, you know? I shouldn't have fallen for it, for the guy who could say he could get those same kinda pills without having to go through all the pointless talking. And so I fell for it. Oh, it's harmless, that's how it starts – you're in control. But it grows until it eats away that part of you that tells you to stop, that screams that it's not right, until you can't stop it. And all you can feel is numb."

"Then... we got back together. My step-mother went from frigid to ignorant. Julie finally spilt tomato juice down the dress and ruined it. But by that point I couldn't... I couldn't function without them. And I didn't want to. I love you, but I couldn't fight it, and I couldn't let you know how much I'd failed, how much I'd let you down. So, yes, I hid it."

Tears fell unashamedly down her face. She tried to wipe them away, but he felt frozen to the spot, like he couldn't move. Like some part of him knew it wasn't completely over.

"And you're telling me now?"

"Because you're right," she answered, sniffing, "Because we've reached a point where either I have to tell you... Or I have to leave you." She paused, fishing a tissue out of her purse. "Or let Sara tell you, but she probably thinks its coke or something." She laughed weakly as she blew her nose and tried to compose herself.

He took a moment, feeling the sway in his legs, and sat down beside her on the wall. They sat like that for a long moment, as thoughts whirled between them.

"I think this is the most honest you've ever been with me," he sighed quietly.

"Not in the beginning," she disagreed, but added quietly, "I guess things can never go back there."

"But maybe we can move forward to something else."

She looked at him with hope in her eyes, a hope that broke his heart and mended it gently at the same time. She seemed so much more herself, as if confession really did begin to lift the burdens of the soul bit by bit.

"You don't hate me?"

"I know, and I understand now," he explained, "Not saying I'm overjoyed about it, but you *are* stopping now, right? Stopping the lies and the secrets and... and the pills?"

"Yes."

He finally turned his face to her, letting go of as much as he could into the night as he did. He wanted to be mad still, a part of him, but it was a part that was faded underneath the bruises, returning to whatever place anger goes when it waits for its next opportunity.

"And besides... I love you."

"I love you too."

He held her, and she squeezed him back. It hurt his ribs, but it didn't matter because it was her. Because they were there. Because love hadn't faded, but remained bright between them. Battered and bruised as they both were, physically and emotionally, but they... they were something worth fighting for.

"I can't believe I almost lost you," she whispered into his chest.

"Sam..."

A thought had started to form in his mind, beneath their own pain. The world he'd just had his eyes opened to... and some decisions he hadn't even realised he was making. Decisions about what was worth fighting for, and what he needed to protect.

"There's something else," he began, as she looked at him, confused and expectant, "You're honest with me, I'm honest with you. I've got some stuff going on, outside of you and me. It's not bad, or really anything like that. It's... a secret. But it's not my secret to tell, okay? And it's not something you need to worry about."

"I want you to focus on you, okay? Like, really focus on processing everything you've been through and kinda get back to yourself. Talk to your dad, talk to your therapist again, try to do something different. And in the meantime, I'll figure out that stuff... and then one day soon, maybe when I start to understand it myself, we'll sit down... and we'll talk."

"Are you sure it's not bad?" she asked him, "Like... you're okay?"

"Yeah, I think I'm gonna be," he agreed, taking her hands in his own, "And I think *we're* gonna be. Just know, while you're focusing on you... I'm good. And I'll be doing good. Maybe even making you proud."

They gazed into each other's eyes as she slowly stroked the side of his face.

"How did I get so lucky?"

He didn't have an answer, so he let a long, deep, lingering kiss be his response. She was happy with that, and so was he. And for the first time in a while, he felt his head might let him sleep. Or at least rest.

And hopefully, no dreams.

* * *

The clock was nearing ten o'clock as Mark walked up the gravel path, past the perfectly manicured lawn, and towards the front threshold he'd not crossed in weeks. When he appeared in their living room, the lamplight was low but ever present, creating pools in which his aunt and his uncle worked separately.

He, John Matthews, sat in his old high-backed armchair, reading from another academic tome. He almost just needed a pipe and a glass of whisky, except his uncle rarely drank. Too much for the slovenly man, that kind of behaviour.

She, Beth Matthews, sitting at her small table, sewing what looked like a pair of his uncle's pants, a small ring light pointed directly at them. A small cup of camomile tea beside her, a bedtime ritual.

They were both awake, of course. It was, after all, the deadline his uncle had set. The moment of reckoning and the confrontation they anticipated. He wondered if his uncle even knew what to expect, considering the icy reception earlier. Still, surprise did not show on his face as he entered their sanctuary, head held high.

"Mark," they both said simultaneously. His uncle's with a slight attempt to hide his smug satisfaction. So he had expected him to ignore it; perhaps he'd expected him to destroy the folder, or remain a petulant child. But Mark was no petulant child, and the more he encountered the life he had left behind, the more he began to realise how little his 'family' actually understood him. Even his aunt's recitation of his name was hollow, filled with a soft concern that he no longer trusted.

"I'm not coming back," he told them, watching as his Uncle's chest deflated. But a mean spark came back to his eyes as he continued, "I mean, not to this house. I think for all intents and purposes, I need to keep my apartment."

There it was, out in the world. The acceptance. He walked into the lion's den and offered his own head on a plate. His uncle could barely contain his smugness as he grinned up at his nephew,

"To keep up appearances?"

"Exactly," Mark agreed. "But I want in. Whatever's happening in this town, whatever the Covenant are doing, I want to know... and I want to be a part of whatever my bloodline is destined for."

His uncle and his aunt shared a look across the room, so much communicated between them in the kind of telepathy only long-married couples possess. His uncle seemed pleased; his aunt, relieved. Underneath her relief was sadness, underneath his pleasure was triumph. And both of them were wrong.

"I knew you would come around in the end," his uncle assured him.

"Well... it's about family, right?"

Mark felt the smile spread across his face, forced as it was. After everything Drake had told him there by the river, under the cold moonlight, yes – it was indeed about family. But he was beginning to realise that meant very different things to every person in that room.

Very different things.

* * *

Sunlight filtered through the high windows into the Library as Luke entered it for the third time in as many days. This time, though, it felt warmer and softer – perhaps only because of the late afternoon light. Or perhaps it was the chattering sounds of groups of young Year 7s heading to their lessons behind him, the hustle and bustle of daily life.

Perhaps it was the sense of lightness in his chest and mind as he walked to school that morning. The fog wasn't entirely gone, and parts of him still ached, but something felt like it had shifted. Significantly. And he had managed to sleep – without dreams of ravens or anything else to boot.

"Hey Ricky," he greeted the solitary figure in the room. Ricky was by himself, and he couldn't hear the librarian shuffling about anywhere. Ricky looked up at him from where his head lay on his hands on the table, as his entire focus was taken up with repeatedly pressing down on a Freud bobble head that bounced around delightedly in front of him.

"Top of the morning to ya," Ricky answered back with a grin. He pressed the bobble head down once more, pushing it to its most extremely depressed state, and they both watched as it sprang back up and fell over. He sighed, "This game is way more fun than it should be."

"No Mark around today?" he asked. He'd moved far enough into the library that he cast a glimpse into the office more directly and confirmed there was no hidden librarian or crouching bibliophile.

"Soon, he's just off fornicating with the devil... or carving wood nymphs or something," Ricky frowned back, "I wasn't exactly listening."

"Drake?" Luke deduced.

"Think so," Ricky confirmed, "Sara has a Salsa injury support group, but she's going to have a surprise when she realises it's for the dance, not the dip. And I think Amy is currently exploding with geek joy and setting up her new laptop, which is like from NASA or something." He picked up the little overly-large-foreheaded Freud and shrugged, "Which is why I'm playing with a bobbly head doll

and procrastinating.” He sighed, “Believe it or not, there’s not always a crisis around here needing some assembling avengers and all that. What can I do for you?”

Here it was, the awkward moment. Luke found himself feeling strangely throat-locked, and not because of how many times he’d been grabbed by it in the past twenty-four hours (he’d checked in the mirror and fortunately there was very little noticeable bruising – nothing shifting his collar couldn’t fix).

“Well, I actually wanted to talk to you,” he explained, taking a seat opposite him at the table. Ricky placed the bobble head off to one side and gave him his full attention. “Look, I know I said originally that I didn’t want to help. And I was right... at the time. Things were bad enough; I didn’t want to make them worse. But the past few days – and kicking that raven guy’s arse – have made me realise something.”

“What’s that?”

“That I have things worth fighting for,” he answered, “And I want to fight for them.”

“I thought this might happen,” Ricky nodded. For a moment, his brow furrowed, a look of some kind of unknowable sadness in his eyes. “It’s gonna be tough. There’s not just wins, there’s losses as well. Sometimes, before we even get involved.”

“I understand.”

He knew that was what he was expected to say, and in the moment, he really believed it. And maybe, in the grand scheme of things, he did. But he didn’t truly believe, even at that point. Maybe one day he would.

“Then, welcome to the team,” Ricky brightened, breaking out into a grin, “Bickering commences every morning, 9 am, here. Occasionally, at 10 am. Or sometimes if Sara’s late, even 11.” Luke felt the natural smile return to his face. Suddenly, Ricky’s look turned to a thought, “Come on, we have somewhere to be.”

‘Somewhere’ as it turned out to be Gina’s Café. By the river. With school over for the day, and with most of the commuters now too tired from work for caffeine, it was relatively quiet. The

daylight was bright and the air fresh, and Ricky led him into the atrium section at the back, where they could look out over the river and enjoy something filled with enough cream and marshmallows to be decidedly unhealthy.

Ah, well, he'd have a coronary when he was older instead.

They didn't talk about demons or vamps or anything. They talked about rugby and school and television and what the hell was going on with Mr Rowe's glass eye. Sometime along the way, Sara evidently left her support group, complaining that her first clue was when there were no Doritos at the snacks table, and someone was rocking back and forth when her phone ringtone turned out to be the Tango from *True Lies*. She brought a warm, glowing energy to the conversation, filled with sarcasm and more cultural references than you could shake a stick at.

Amy was reluctantly dragged into the group, as she'd already set up her laptop ages ago and was getting ready to start her mock revision. Sara had mocked her until she agreed to come, and Luke tried to take a moment to apologise for his previous harshness. So Amy decided to tell him about the time Sara snogged an incubus, was semi-possessed, and shoved her into a wall. That was quite a story.

Even Mark, who from their few encounters Luke had quietly thought of as the more reserved and independent of them – and not just because he was two years older – also joined them. With his dry observation, he mocked Sara's taste in raspberry lemonade mochas, while she asked which Japanese tweed convention he'd gotten his taste for green tea from. And were his daffodils blooming yet?

It was a beautifully chaotic, oddly ordinary (peppered with a few supernatural references) kind of an afternoon. And like someone finally coming in from hours out in the cold, it was only when he was around them that he really began to notice something. What it was like to sit with a group of friends, however bonkers and weird and funny they were, and just be a kid for a while. An ordinary kid.

With, it would turn out, an extraordinary future.

* * *

The sun had just about set – the sky the colour of a gel pen above him in the sky and stars just beginning to come out – as he headed home. It was only like five, but that was winter nights in the North for ya. Luke didn't feel the cold, though; it was as if the whole day of warmth was quite literal. To be fair, he did have a hot chocolate that would stun a gazelle, so that could have been the reason.

It had been a long time since he'd had a sugar crash; that'd be fun. Maybe he'd even spend a little time on his PlayStation. He thought a certain young buxom adventurer needed to uncover some ancient artefacts or something. It'd been ages since he'd swan-dived over the balcony of Croft Manor.

Sam had texted him a few times already, explaining that she'd started talking to her dad and that it was going well. She'd managed to find a rare moment when the 'she-bitch' (her words) of a stepmother was not around. Pilates, getting her nails done, or something. So she'd been able to tell him how she'd been struggling, and he'd been supportive, agreeing to help.

They planned to talk by phone later that night, and he was okay with that. It gave him hope.

"Hey mum, I'm home," he called out. His dad usually didn't finish his shift until a little later in the evening, but with how tired he'd been lately, it could have been that he'd swapped, so he also added, "Dad?"

No one answered. As he closed the front door behind him, he realised the hallway was unnaturally dark. There was on the faint last of the light – and a bit of streetlight – coming from the frosted window above the door with the number in it like stained glass. The hallway lights were off, and there were no lights in the living room.

Beyond, he could see the door to the kitchen, and that too was also off. Again, that was odd, but maybe his mum had simply gone shopping at a different time than normal and forgot to tell him. Or maybe his dad had taken them out for a bite to eat, and he'd find a note. Parents were weird that

way, and sometimes remarkably spontaneous when they had no right to be.

He hung his blazer on the coat hooks next to him, kicked off his shoes by the door and began to head further into the house. No sounds were coming from upstairs, and even the house sounded like it had already settled. There was a slight chill in the air, a fading warmth, as though no one had been hopeful to pop the heating on. His mum got in two hours ago from work, it was normally the first thing she did (and his dad turning it down was the first thing *he* did after getting in).

Their landline was by the window, in the small bay window looking back out into the street. He walked around the back of the sofa and saw the machine's glowing light. The red LED screen blinked twice rapidly – and he realised that was it – they'd gone out and left him an answerphone message telling him. There'd also likely be a reminder that he shouldn't buy himself pizza and eat it like an animal, but instead heat up the leftover lasagne in the fridge. He smiled to himself and went to press the button.

As he reached out for it, the phone rang shrilly, and so, deciding this was likely his mum's paranoia, he plucked it up and answered.

"Hello?"

"Luke?" his mother's voice, as he'd expected, on the other end. His heart began to sink. She didn't sound right. She sniffled. His mother never sniffled... she was crying. His heart thundered as he felt a blackness darken the edge of his vision.

"Mum, where are you?"

"I'm at the hospital," she answered him, her voice thick with worry. She sniffed again and said the three words that broke his heart.

"It's your father."