

NANCY &

HOLMES

A Hunter Garden Novel

HexDSL

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“The detectives who entertained me as a child, the hard-boiled noir, the talking dogs, and the pipe smoking classics. Thank you for letting me know that, in the end, the puzzle is always worth the prize.”

THE OUTSIDER

The sea cracked against the tide wall and spilled over, sprawling across the pavement where Neil sprinted in the darkness, ignoring the water that soaked into his feet and up to his ankles as it chased him. The rain beat down like an oppressive drum on the top of his sopping hood, but still, he ran.

The horizon was lit again by a blinding sheet of lightning. He stole a glance out to sea. Each time he looked, it had been closer. He had only minutes left to stop them now. Minutes before, the beast made it to shore.

He regretted not listening to the detective sooner. If only he had listened; his daughter wouldn't be next. This could have all been over now.

The storm banged its drum one more time and Neil again turned to catch its silhouette against the blackness of the sea. The beast stretched its wings. Its scream sounded like the ocean itself was begging for vengeance.

Neil stopped. "We're too late," he said.

“If you’re breathing, there’s still a chance. Now, get moving,” his passenger replied.

A SCARLET NIGHT

Nancy dropped another pint. It was the third drink she had dropped that shift. Her victims comprised two pints of bitter and a white wine. One bitter ended up on the floor, one had been released into the wild, over a table; the intended owner looked both unexpectedly wet and quite annoyed. The wine was mostly down Nancy's own leg due to what could only be described as a drinking malfunction.

It sounds like Nancy wasn't a good barmaid, but that's actually far from the truth; she was an excellent barmaid. Not in the top ten barmaids of all time or anything, but certainly in the top five barmaids of 'The Frog's Moon.'

We don't need to talk about the name of the pub. It's been commented on by every new patron since the day it was opened. At this point, there is no comment that could be made which Nancy hadn't pretended to be amused by. *The Frog*, as it was known locally, had a total of four barmaids.

Nancy was usually very competent. Tonight though, she had a lot on her mind. This was the anniversary of her father's murder and her mother's suicide. The events were separated by five years, but one had resulted in the other. To top it off, it was bonfire night. Something inside her was always resentful of this. The parties, the fireworks, and the general sense of fun. It was like it was a celebration of her loss, each firework a nail in her heart.

Nancy's dad was found beaten to death on the beach. Nancy was eleven years old when it happened. She had been on that very beach the day before. She had made a sandcastle no more than two feet away from where her dad's body was found. The forensic report had explained that he had been bound and hung from his wrists, then punched to death. Literally beaten, by hand, until dead. He had then been forensically 'cleaned.' That was the word that was used, 'cleaned'. *How* he had been transported to the beach and *why* was never discussed with her. The body was found in the morning just as the tide was coming in. If it wasn't for a young girl walking her dog, he may have been washed away forever.

Nancy hadn't coped well, because she was eleven. Her mother didn't cope well either, because her husband had been beaten to death and she was left a single parent to an eleven-year-old who had become a little odd after the aforementioned death.

"Seriously, another one?" yelled Marina at the spillage.

Marina was older than Nancy, but far more glamorous. She was always pristine and had long, perfectly straight platinum blonde hair. Her nails and makeup were perfect to the point of absurd. She was both Nancy's boss and her best friend.

"Oh, fuck off," Nancy yelled back, in that way that only friends can talk to each other.

“Nancy, I know what day it is. Stop being a twat. Sit down on the other side of the bar and drink away your problems, will you?”

Nancy was about to argue before realising that she really did want to get wanked, and did not want to work. *Not even a little.*

“Thanks Marina, I think I’ll take a bottle with me, if that’s okay.”

“Whatever you need hun,” Marina replied, effortlessly transitioning into yelling to a customer that she was busy.

A firework sounded in the distance; Nancy pushed back tears.

Nancy herself was also blonde. Though most would describe it as ‘dirty blonde’ or ‘mousy.’ She was short and pretty. She would, inaccurately use the word ‘homely’ if asked to describe herself. She was blessed with a buxom physique that she was not shy about. On days that were not this one, she wielded a good natured and cheerful disposition that wonderfully complimented her good looks.

She sat at the end of the bar and drank her bottle of wine. Marina shooed away the patrons who wanted to try their luck chatting up the sad woman in the corner. Nancy was grateful for her efficiency.

One wine bottle turned into two and the bar slowly emptied as midnight approached. The fireworks had long since died down. Most of the local displays were for families and had finished by half nine. The evening had got a little easier after that. There were still the occasional zoom-pop sounds from local teenagers prattling about in the car park.

“You okay?” Marina asked, handing Nancy a packet of dry roasted peanuts and a fresh beer mat. Nancy had torn three into tiny squares and stacked them in a little tower. She often did this when she was struggling with her feelings.

“Couldn’t be better. Fantastic; actually, I think I might be over it now,” she said with glassy eyes. Carefully ripping a beer mat in half. For her, it was a meditative act. She got the squares almost perfectly straight.

“And if you weren’t overcompensating with beer mat art-installations?” Marina asked.

“Well, if I were mad enough to stop creating my fine art and actually gave a moment’s thought to what this is the anniversary of; well, I would be a lot less okay.”

Marina put a large stack of beer mats on the bar. She was about to serve a grumpy old man who wanted a Guinness when she dashed back and put another bottle of wine down before vanishing into the uncharted territory of the far reaches of the bar.

Nancy gave out a sigh and poured herself another glass.

“Wake up, you daft bint.”

“... All night.”

Nancy sat upright to find the bar spinning in a very impolite way.

“What?” she asked, pretending to be copacetic.

“I said, as much as I’m sorry, you can’t stay there all night, hun,” Marina said.

The bar was in darkness, save for the lamps around the edge of the room.

Nancy looked around, wiggling her eyebrows, as if to make sure they were still working. The bar was empty, and the tables had been shined; the glasses put away, and the fridge restocked. Nancy had slept through closing time, clean-up time and at least one round of vacuuming, by the looks of it.

She scowled at the nautical themed trinkets attached to every spare section of wall as she inspected the room.

“Did you call me a bint?” she asked.

“What, no? Why would I call you a bint? You bint!”

“Good. Well. Don’t... bint,” Nancy said, or at least tried to.

“Oi!” Marina yelled as she lay her head on the bar again, instantly returning to sleep.

“You want to stay at mine?” Marina asked. She had been trying to get Nancy to stay all week, knowing the importance of the day.

“No, thanks... I need to seep at my own float. Face my fears and all that,” Nancy replied, trying to work out what was wrong with the sentence.

“Okay, I’ll walk you back to your *flood* then.”

“I think you mean *flat*, you must be *drink*,” Nancy corrected, falling off of her stool.

After three or four failed attempts to stand, Nancy finally managed to leave the bar. The cold sea air smacked her in the face like a wet fish and she vomited as if it was the most natural thing in the world. She did manage to get most of it in the bin by the door, which she was proud of.

“For fucks sake Nancy! You can come and clean that up tomorrow!”

“No! I have trauma, I don’t gotta clean stuff!” she replied indignantly, slipping on her own vomit and steadying herself by slamming a hand into the bin. “Oh, my god! There’s vom’ on my hand!”

Marina took her friend by the clean hand as the other was wiped down her shirt. The two walked twenty seconds down the road to the next door on the street.

“Go on, get in there then!” Marina ordered, trying to stand between Nancy and the view.

It didn’t work. Nancy knew exactly where she was. She pushed Marina aside and stumbled to the railing. The rail was old and made a groaning noise as Nancy grabbed it. The tide was high, and the water

almost licked its way over to the street. Nancy looked down into the ocean.

“This is it. You know?” she said. Her fake nonchalance now a distant memory.

“Yeah, I know.”

Just a few meters below where they stood was the beach where Nancy’s dad was found dead. His body was found there just after nine in the morning. He had been dead for hours by then. Killed and dumped there. Right in front of the flat that he and his wife had just bought.

When Nancy’s mom opened the curtains that morning, she saw police, ambulances, and even local journalists. She was at the right angle to look down over the tide-wall, from her living room window. The perfect angle to see her dead husband be zipped into a bag.

It had been a much younger Marina who was the one who had found him. Something that she tried to forget.

Nancy never recovered from it, not ever. She was playing with a toy dinosaur in the kitchen, patiently waiting for breakfast that would never arrive.

“You sure you don’t want me to stay over?” Marina asked. Every year since she and Nancy had become friends, she had stayed with Nancy or Nancy had stayed with her on this date. This year though, she had firmly said that she needed to get through it alone.

Marina wasn’t thrilled about it; she knew that the moment she was gone Nancy would cry until morning. Marina lived in the flat below her and she could hear the nightly tears through the rickety building’s floor.

Nancy would recount every detail of the event to herself. It was good that she was thinking about her dad though, because that meant she wouldn’t be thinking about her mom.

Nancy looked over at the ocean. “God, I wish I had seen more of it,” she said.

“It was traumatic, and you were eleven. It’s not really a shock that you don’t remember much.”

“Yeah... yeah. You’re right,” Nancy replied, just as quietly.

“Did you say something?” Marina asked.

“I said, you’re right.”

“Great, I’ll stay then!” she replied, sternly enough that Nancy knew there was no point arguing.

She also knew that it was dark, cold, and beginning to rain. A flash and accompanying whoosh-bang lit up the sky. More kids with fireworks. It was time to go inside.

It was the inside that Nancy was actually terrified of.

The flat was a simple layout. Once you were up the stairs in the corridor and in from the little half landing, there was a single large room with a massive bay window overlooking the beach. The curtains to that window were closed, always. There were three doors in the large living room. They led to two small bedrooms and a kitchen. The one bedroom contained a bed, and a door to the bathroom.

The bathroom was actually larger than the bedroom, for reasons that Nancy never quite fathomed. The other room had been turned into a wardrobe to house the ridiculous amount of clothes that Nancy had accrued, in some desperate efforts to make herself feel better.

There was a three-seater couch and a small TV in her living room, as well as a table for dinner parties she never had.

All the furniture was oddly seventies in style, her mom liked seventies looking furniture. Nancy only brought furniture her mother would approve of.

Once they were sitting on the sofa, they both desperately tried not to look up. The building was old and because the flat was on the top floor, there was a wooden beam that crossed the ceiling.

When she was sixteen years old, asleep in the bedroom, her mom stood on the sturdy seventies table, threw a rope over the beam, and hung herself, very quietly, so not to wake Nancy.

When she woke up the next morning, she found her mom, still hanging there. She wasn't even surprised. Her mom had left a note. It said, 'It's not too late.'

Nancy had no idea what the note meant but had framed it and put it on the wall parallel to the beam. A macabre tribute to the woman who left her.

Nancy went to the kitchen and retrieved a large bottle of vodka. She didn't bother with the pretence of glasses. She cried and drank while her friend held her tight, waiting for her to get through it, because that's all she could do for her.

OLD BUGS

“**Y**ou must be pleased,” Howard said, smugly. Putting his feet on the metal garden table. The large white house looking over them, shading them from the perpetual afternoon sunshine.

The garden was a lot busier than Mike had seen it in a while. He had been splitting his time between the garden and his mission. Currently, there were almost twenty people coming and going, some taking the traditional afternoon tea before setting off, some coming back looking worse for wear.

“Now what would I possibly have to be pleased about? Also, get your feet off my table!” Mike replied, pouring himself a cup of the wonderful tea that he had missed so much while he was away.

“Come on, you’ve missed me in the field. I know you have!” Howard insisted. He was still wriggling in his suit. He hated the suit. He had always preferred jeans and a heavy jacket over more formal attire. Still, given what he did for a living, it wasn’t like anyone would usually comment on his outfit.

There was a sound from just outside of the little walled off garden area, in the forest that surrounded them. It was somewhere between a splash and a cracking of wood. Howard glanced over towards its source, between the trees.

“She back?” he asked, speaking of Mike’s fiancé.

Mike took a delicate sip of his tea. “Nope. That’ll be Lilly coming back. We won’t see Sophia until our project is wrapping up. Her current problem won’t align with ours for a while yet. You *know* how the garden can be when our missions overlap.”

Howard finally took his feet off the table and leaned forward. “No, Mike. I don’t know at all, because you and Sophia never explained it to anyone else.”

Mike grinned widely. His own attire was uncomfortable too. He was wearing a grey hoody and jeans. He had become quite accustomed to a more classical hunter’s uniform in recent years. His thought was interrupted as he heard the thousand voices in his head excitedly discussing the current project. He and his passengers had almost become one identity in the time since he picked them up. He could hardly tell his own voice from theirs anymore.

Howard squinted at him. He always knew when they were buzzing around behind his eyes. No one else did, but Howard knew. “Well, you had better get back there. I can’t take my team into the town until you get out of here. *You know* how the garden can be,” he quipped sarcastically.

ANOTHER VALLEY

“H onestly, I’m fine,” Nancy said for the tenth time at least. “Last night you were far from fine. How are you fine now?” Marina asked, as she took burned bacon from the pan and placed it on bread that was cut thicker than it had any reason to be.

“That’s how it works. I get to be not-fine on the fifth, so I can be excellent on the sixth.”

Marina handed her the now assembled bacon sandwich, which was too large for a human mouth and contained more bacon than any single sandwich should.

“Okay, well, I don’t want to see you behind the bar of the Frog for at least a week! Maybe even two!” she ordered.

“I don’t want time off!” Nancy said, removing the top layer of the sandwich in order to make it human sized.

Marina sat down opposite her at the table with her own mammoth bread mountain and two cups of coffee. She slid one towards Nancy, who was grateful for it.

She watched Nancy eat, wondering how she wasn't hung over and how much of her good mood was an act.

Nancy, on the other hand, was feeling very hung over and wondered how Marina looked so perfect when she knew for certain that she hadn't slept properly and had no time to fix her makeup. She was annoyingly well presented. Nancy considered all the women on television who 'just woke up like that' and how even they would envy Marina's effortlessness.

"No, you have two weeks off. Paid! Have fun, get drunk, watch telly and sleep with someone who isn't battery operated!"

"Working *is* fun! I don't know what I would do with myself if I took time off," she argued back, mouth full of burned bacon.

The elegant blonde woman walked over to the pile of things under the forever-closed curtains and pulled out a bunch of books. She placed them on the table. "Maybe read something then," she instructed.

Truth was, Nancy had read all the terrible detective novels at least twice. Her sleeping habits were far less predictable than *anyone* knew. She stayed up most nights trying not to think about her mom, and reading books, wishing her life was more than booze and bar work.

She did her best every day to just get through it. Anything more than bar work and late nights was beyond her mental bandwidth. She was never good; she was just as okay as she *could* be at any given moment; she was very good at *acting* good though.

"Fine. But if I enjoy the lifestyle of leisure too much, I may not come back to you! Did you think about that?"

Marina laughed, "Hun' I know how much you earn. A life of leisure is well out of your price range!"

It took another half hour before Marina believed Nancy was okay and was willing to leave. She reminded her over and over that she only

lived downstairs in the flat below and Nancy was welcome at any time, for any reason. She even had a key.

As soon as she was gone, Nancy got a new bottle of vodka and lay on the couch. She looked up at the wooden beam that killed her mom and then at the curtain that must never be opened.

“Hi, mom. How you doing?” she asked. Her mom didn’t answer, because she wasn’t there, *and was dead*. But that had never stopped Nancy from having conversations with her.

“You know, I have a bit of money saved,” she lied. “I was thinking I should sell this place and get a flat that doesn’t have a history of death and sadness,” she lied, again.

She imagined her mother sitting at the table, telling her to stop being mean. She laughed at the very idea and took a long, slow draught from the bottle.

She cried for the rest of the morning. She cried quietly because if she wailed, it would attract the attention of the lady from downstairs; she would feel bad for ruining her friend’s day.

After a while, she put some music on, mostly to make it seem like she was doing better than she was. She knew Marina would be listening out as best as she could for signs of functional personage.

“You think you could do me a favour and stop being dead, mom?” Nancy asked. She blinked at the wooden beam for a little while and then cried again. This was how most free days went for her. Though this one was somehow more personal than most.

Nancy hadn’t wanted to take time off work. The truth was, being in the bar gave her purpose. Work was *always* a welcome distraction.

The morning turned into afternoon, and the bottle of Vodka began looking less and less full. A siren sound from outside attracted Nancy's attention. She stumbled to her feet and forced herself into the bedroom to look out of the window.

Nancy pressed her face against the cool glass and tried to focus on the outside world. There were people on the beach. No, not people, police. *There were police on the beach!*

A wave of sobering panic washed over her; she slammed her hands against the frame; she looked out of the window with sudden focus and terror took hold. *There was a body on the beach.*

She launched herself out of the flat and down the stairs, almost rolling to a stop at the bottom. A moment later, she was banging the door wildly. She should have brought her key; why didn't she have her key?

The door opened and Marina looked at her, confused. She threw her arms around her.

"Your alive!" she screamed, pulling her friend in close and trying to catch her breath.

"Of course I'm alive! Are you drunk *again*?" Marina asked, before she was distracted by a blue flash of light visible through the glass of the main hall's door.

"What's happening?" she asked, pulling the outer door open.

The cold of the street leaked in and the wetness from the rain followed.

They stood in the doorway, watching the police scramble to get as much forensic evidence as possible before the tide came in. They didn't have long at all. Nancy knew the tides well. She had lived next to the beach for her entire life and had been paying extra attention to them since the ocean almost stole her father.

It took longer than expected for them to start going door to door, asking if anyone had seen anything. Obviously, no one had. Why would they be looking outside on a day like today? It was cold and wet out there. It wasn't holiday season either, so there were no strangers exploring the shops; most of which were closed. It was as quiet as could be.

"Hello ladies," the officer said. He was tall and stocky. He somehow had the demeanour of a criminal himself. Nancy didn't recognise him; she knew most of the local police because *everyone* came into the Frog. It was a popular bar, in part because it stayed open all year round, unlike most in the area.

He asked them if they had seen anything, which they hadn't. Nancy had started crying at the question, which made the man understandably suspicious. She sat on the stairs while Marina explained the familiarity of the events to him. He was shocked; he had no idea that it was the second body that this stretch of beach had housed, albeit briefly. The officer was interested in the facts and took their names, confirmed their address and said that someone may come back to get more details later.

Once he had got over the initial shock of the information, he seemed excited about it. It was something akin to a *lead* for him. Nancy decided that he was a *wanker* and let Marina do all the talking.

She returned to her flat. Marina checked on her every hour or so. She was too shocked by the events to be crying, but she wasn't too shocked to be drinking.

She spent most of the evening telling her mom how she never forgave her. Today Nancy was extra angry at her for not being alive and needed to unpack her feelings and had no one who she could confide in. Not really.

Marina was a good friend, and she knew she would listen. She was involved too, after all; she had been sucked into Nancy's life when she found the body of her father. Marina wasn't that much older than Nancy was, she likely had trauma too.

It had hit her in a part of her mind that she couldn't articulate. She was scared and sad and unsettled in ways which couldn't be explained. If she tried, then Marina would call a doctor and she would find herself in a hospital again.

She had to be strong this time. The doctors never helped. They were all good people who wanted her to talk it through and it *was* good advice, but Nancy knew what she needed. She needed to bask in it until it hurt less, or until she was numb to it.

She drank more.

Nancy passed out at some point. She knew she did because she woke up and you can't wake up if you haven't passed out.

"You know, going to sleep is a valid option! You don't always have to get pass-out drunk!" said a man's voice.

Nancy jumped to her feet. She spun around the room, arms out, ready with an imaginary martial art. "Who said that?"

"Literally no one."

It was coming from behind the never-opened-curtains.

Nancy screamed and ran to the kitchen, pulling the draw open and finding the biggest knife she owned, which was a lot bigger than she had realised.

She closed the kitchen door and sat down in front of it to keep it shut and regretting leaving her phone on the floor almost instantly.

“*Good instincts, Nancy!*” The voice said, this time from the kitchen window.

Nancy was so shocked she almost pissed herself on the spot.

She scrambled to her feet and back into the living room, almost stabbing herself as she tripped over with the knife in hand. She threw it on the floor in a fit of self-preservation.

“*Okay, instincts less good now!*” the voice said, from behind the curtains.

Nancy lay on the floor clutching her knife again and staring, scared half to death.

She started thinking logically about what was happening. The voice couldn't be in the kitchen *and* in the living room. She had drunk a lot, even by her standard. She looked over at the door; it was locked. Marina was the only person with a key, and she was not the sort to play pranks on her.

She breathed deeply and stared at the curtains; knife at the ready.

Minutes passed. She was calming down. Had she imagined it?

After even more minutes, she slowly stood up and sat on her couch. She looked at the curtains. Still scared, but now convinced that she had imagined the voice.

“Well mom, I'm mad. That's the only explanation. I have officially just lost my actual shit,” she said with a nervous laugh. She lay down and suckled at her bottle until the darkness took her.

“Oh, my gosh!” Marina exclaimed. Nancy almost jumped out of her skin, rolling off the couch and springing into consciousness.

“What!” she replied, arms out in her own personal fighting stance, which was mostly inspired by the animation from a fighting arcade game she once saw.

“You opened them!” Marina said, running over to hug her.

The never-open-curtains were open. It was true. Nancy had a vague recollection of a new friend convincing her it was time. She couldn’t recall the details of the dream. The curtains *were* open, though.

The window was a mess of accumulated dirt and cobwebs. It struck Nancy as being like an old tomb from a bad horror movie. She cautiously edged closer and peered through the grotty window. This was the first time anyone had looked out of the window since her mom saw her dad get zipped into a bag and closed them in reflex.

There was a police sign there now, asking for anyone who saw something on the morning of the sixth to call them with information. It was eerie to her how familiar it all looked.

“Morning?” Nancy asked.

“Yeah. You got through it, girl!” Marina said supportively.

Nancy surveyed the floor and the wall under the bay window. There was a bookshelf covered in a decade of dust. It looked like she had dropped a bag of cheap cocaine.

“How long since the curtains were last opened?” Marina asked. She knew, she knew full well, but she wanted to make sure Nancy marked the achievement.

“Mom closed them the day dad died. Fifteen years,” she said nervously, while wondering how and why, exactly, she had decided to open them.

“Well, good for you hun’ It’s nice to finally see some light in here!”

There was a memory floating around in Nancy’s head as she considered the evening before. The very attempt to recall things caused her hangover to step up to the forefront of her mind. She was pulled

free from the thought by a quiet beep on her wrist. She glanced down at her old Casio watch; it beeped every hour. Three in the afternoon. Nancy was up early for a day that ended in a 'Y'.

THE HAUNTER OF DARK

The groundwork had been done, as expected. The building was waiting for Howard. It had been a dance studio up until that morning. His team had introduced themselves to the local police presence and set up such an ostentatious cover story that no one would dare question it. At least, not until after they were done.

The local police had even gone as far as posting an officer at the door, their way of maintaining a presence. A pretence of control over the situation. The officer currently out there was a competent prick who Howard instantly despised.

His team was making it look like it could be a real investigation unit. At least to a cursory inspection. Though, the truth was, none of them had any idea how police *actually* investigated things. Their own investigations usually took the form of stalking the streets at night and killing unpleasant things until the larger problem retaliated.

The current mission was far more subtle. Mike had informed them that there was a woman, a girl really, who needed them. Mike didn't want to forever tie her to *their* world. Because of this, they had to keep

their role in things as obfuscated as they could. Howard was not a man who enjoyed subtlety.

With a corpse on the beach, and the other problem, Howard had been required to do his part sooner than he had expected. He wasn't as good at the undercover stuff as Mike was, and he certainly didn't enjoy all the people.

Even inside, the day was painful to him. The light was streaming through the windows and felt unsettling. He put on the sunglasses Mike had given him. They protected him from the light and let him see things that others may miss, or at least, that's what Mike had said.

He knew that his first task in this place was to make himself known to the local police. Something he didn't like. He also had to start getting his people to do the same, in order to check the facts of the actual murder against the reported facts he had already gained. If there was something happening here, he needed as much information as possible.

THE BLUE CARBUNCLE

Marina had finally left; she had gone to The Frog to check on the afternoon team. Team was a loose phrasing for Nigel and Roy, two regulars who loved the pub so much that they ended up getting paid to be there.

Not much had really changed from their point of view. The old gits were there anyway from opening to closing and now they got paid, which was money that went back into the till before they left. The two retirees adored having something to do and Marina enjoyed the cheap workers. Actually, since Nigel and Roy started doing the early shift, the pub profits were up, and it usually opened earlier. It was a strange symbiosis that worked for everyone. The fellas liked to be relieved of duty before it got too busy, because the stress made them flap.

Nancy had taken a shower and put on the clothes of a functional adult. In this case, a brown skirt, tartan winter tights, and a cute jumper, also tartan. She accompanied the main offering with brown boots and a jacket.

She tried not to make eye contact with herself as she tied the thick scarf and zipped up the jacket. In the mirror, she looked past herself as she adjusted her hat, also tartan. She was afraid to look herself in the eye when she felt this functional. It was like a betrayal of her constant remorse.

She had already decided that as she had, at some point in the night, summoned the bravery to finally open the curtains, then maybe today was the day that she would also manage to feel better, a respite from the constant memories, perhaps.

She smoothed down her skirt with her hand and took a deep breath, put one foot in front of the other and forced herself into the cold November rain.

The world hit her with the wet, cold embrace that she knew was coming. She stepped towards the little wall and handrail that delineated the sea from the street. The tide was high, and it was anything but calm. She thought about how only a day ago there would have been a corpse on the beach, waiting for her to find it. If she hadn't been so drunk, if the curtains had been open, she may have seen it. Was that why she opened them, to prevent more guilt?

"Stop over thinking it, you daft bint," said a voice.

She jumped a little and turned around. There was no one else on the grey rainy street. She was always alone this time of year.

"You're going mad Nancy, calm down," she said to herself as she marched towards the town. She gave a passing glance through the windows of The Frog. It was almost home to her, with its warm glow and stupid nautical themed accoutrements.

There was the sound of some old Eagles song leaking from the front door for a moment as someone stepped inside. The amber glow from the windows called to her, promising a liquid relief from her feelings. Nancy marched on, ignoring the siren call.

She was still glancing back when a large shadow called her attention. A moment later, she walked straight into a tall thuggish looking man.

“Bloody hell!” the man said as he tried, and failed, to stop Nancy from slipping over and falling on her behind. After a moment of waving limbs and dramatic action, the man helped her to her feet.

“You okay, miss McQueen?” the man asked.

Nancy was more shocked at being referred to so formally than she was by the tumble. She brushed herself down and was then startled to realise she had bumped into a police officer. In full uniform, hat, and all.

“Oh, hi, officer! When you were told to walk the beat, did they specifically tell you to knock everyone over as you passed, or do you do that for fun?” she asked with as much snark as she could.

“Hardly walking the beat, miss McQueen. I am literally standing still.”

She frowned at the man before noticing the rest of the scene she had walked into. There was a police car parked around the corner and some people murmuring just out of sight.

“Wait, how do you know who I am?” she asked.

“We met yesterday afternoon, miss. I knocked on your door. I was asking if you had seen anything regarding the, err, body.”

Nancy had a sudden flashback to sitting on the stairs while Marina talked to the thuggish police man about the last time a body was found on that patch of land.

“You looked a lot less friendly last time I saw you!” she observed.

“It was supposed to be my day off. I was a little grumpy when I arrived, miss.”

“Stop calling me miss. It’s fucking weird.”

“What would you prefer?”

“Nancy... my name... what else would I prefer? Christ, and I thought you were a wanker yesterday. You’re new to town, aren’t you?”

The police officer raised an eyebrow at her. “I’m not sure you can call a police officer a wanker, miss... Nancy,” he replied, pushing back a smile.

He was cute, for a man, Nancy thought to herself. She glared at him. It seemed appropriate.

“I moved here about three months ago, actually,” he replied as people started coming in and out of the building. She could hear them just around the corner.

“Bollocks, I would have met you already. I work in the pub, and given that this time of year we’re the only pub open, I would have met you already,” she said absentmindedly as she leaned to the side to see past him to the activity.

“Not everyone goes to pubs, Nancy,” he replied.

“Fuck, you’re not a coffee drinker are you officer... what’s your name, anyway?”

“Philips,” he said, leaning to block her view.

The rain had stopped, Nancy almost hadn’t noticed.

“Okay, Phil. What’s happening in there? Why are you standing guard when there’s no way in there, anyway?”

“What? No, my last name is Philips. My first name is Mark. Not Phil... Don’t call me Phil,” he said, somewhere between annoyed and flirting.

“Okay *Phil*, and you are here because?” Nancy asked, annoyed at not knowing things.

“Oh, I have to guard here and tell people to *move along*. They sent a team over to investigate the murder. I’m pointlessly guarding them from... I don’t know. Passing drunk women, I suppose.”

“Noooo... actually, I’m not even drunk yet!” Nancy said, folding her arms.

“I wasn’t actually talking about you. That was a more general thing.”

“Wait. A team? Like a crime unit? Crime units are real? Like on the whatsit murders show?”

“What?” Phil, or Mark, or whatever-he-was-called, asked, adjusting his gloves and silencing a beep that was coming out of the radio strapped to his chest. Nancy wondered for a moment why they didn’t just use Facebook like everyone else.

“The TV show where a field has all the murders and the man with the tight lips turns up to arrest local vicars...”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. I don’t have a TV,” Mark-Phil said.

“Okay, now you’re fucking with me.”

“I’m not sure you can ask a police officer if they are fucking with you.”

“Not until I buy you dinner, right?” Nancy said with a cheeky grin, though she was mostly flirting with him to get information.

“Fine, but I’ll buy *you* dinner. What time?”

“I’m free all night. Got barred from The Frog,” Nancy said as she realised she had actually for real arranged a date with a strange policeman who she thought was a bit of a wanker. She felt herself flush a little. She didn’t usually date people who wielded penises.

“I get off at five. Pick you up at seven?” Mark asked.

“Sure. But I’m not going to sleep with you unless you tell me who the corpse belonged to.” She regretted her comment the moment she said it.

“Some weirdo who was going around town asking daft questions. Someone said he was a local journalist. And that’s all I’m willing to tell you,” Mark replied, looking a bit flush himself.

“See you at seven, *Phil*,” Nancy said with a wink and carried on down the road.

Mark was left with wide eyes, suddenly realising he had a date and hoping that Nancy hadn’t seen that he was sweating. He had been quite smitten with the fast-talking mysterious woman and he couldn’t believe that he asked her out so smoothly. He was quite pleased with himself. She struck him as a bit of a wild-one. He had always wanted a wild-one.

The afternoon was overcast enough that if she didn’t know better, it could have been evening. Nancy was wondering why exactly a local journalist would be dead on the beach. She didn’t know that there *were* local journalists.

She stopped outside the antique shop on the opposite side of the road to the building the ‘crime unit’ was setting up in. She pretended to look in the window while keeping a keen ear out for anything of interest.

The usual display of World War Two medals and strange brown furniture wasn’t there. The creepy old man that owned it must have been having a clear out. Today the windows were empty, actually, the entire room was empty. There were just white walls and a single metal table. She was pondering how strange this was when her newly attuned ears detected something of intrigue.

One of the people over the road was on the phone. He had walked out of the building, the mysterious *crime unit* and began talking loudly. He was now waving the phone around like it would summon the ever elusive 'signal' from the sky. After looking at the screen while he held it in the air for a moment, he snatched it back to his ear and was speaking far too loudly.

"Sorry, you're breaking up. Yeah. Apparently said something about the paper. He visited the library yesterday, *and* the church. Asked the same questions... yeah, yeah, I know... That's the thing the paper stopped being printed years ago."

Nancy had turned to get a look at the man. He noticed her interest and quieted the rest of his conversation. He was a typical self-important police type. Looked like he fancied himself a TV detective. Little older than expected and thin, no, long, he looked more long than thin. There was a distinction to that but she wasn't sure what it was. Long coat too and a suit he probably couldn't afford. Even wore sunglasses. What sort of berk wore sunglasses in this weather?

There was a knocking sound from behind her. She turned and the creepy old man shooed her away from the glass she was leaning against. The display now had a shelf full of old books, and there were those shitty medals. Nancy gave him a middle finger and wondered how the old man worked so quickly.

She wondered about that as she strolled down the hill a little way towards the marina where there was a little café that supplied exquisite cakes and hot chocolate to fishing crews and locals.

She tried to remember the local paper's name. It had been called the something-something-update... or something. It had stopped being printed when there was a controversy about some local business influencing their articles. Nancy recalled it being mostly a load of

boring shite anyway and its sales were so low that no one cared when it eventually stopped arriving in the shop.

“Bollocks!” The cake shop was closed. She looked around and realised all the fishing boats were moored. Sea was too choppy for boats, so no fishermen looking for snacks, probably not worth opening. Nancy wasn’t impressed.

“But why would someone be pretending to be a journalist in a town where there’s no paper?” she asked allowed.

“*That is strange. I assume he had a reason. Too specific to be random,*” said a voice behind her. She spun around and found no one there. She noted to herself that she felt no fear, no distrust of the voice. It was warm and familiar to her.

This wasn’t the first time she heard the voice, not even the first time that day. There was something familiar about it, something calming and commanding.

Nancy looked around the side of the little café. There was definitely no one there. “I’m being haunted. That’s it... haunted! Only I could get a chatty ghost. *Just my luck,*” Nancy muttered to herself as she marched back up the road.

Still, there was something about that voice that seemed to float around in her head. Also, the voice was right. *Why would anyone tell that lie?*

She turned around and headed for the church, pleased that the rain had held off.

The local church was a classically churchy place. A little graveyard with headstones so old that they were blank now, eroded by the salt

in the coastal air. The building itself was in a terrible state of repair and required an almost constant stream of fundraising events to try to repair it. It never looked any better.

The local vicar, however, was the exact opposite of that. He was an early middle-aged man with a pointy nose and seemingly very little interest in God. The vicar, who liked to be called Mike, because that was his name, was usually found in the rectory office at the back of the church, playing Halo and eating M&M's. He was quite a shock to those new to town.

"Mike, you in here?" Nancy yelled as she walked through the main pew-filled church. There were no signs of life. As she strode through the room, she stopped and looked around. "Afternoon, God," she said, and strolled out to the newer building.

The 'new' building was little more than a temporary office made of a large shipping container with a door and windows fitted. It was placed on a nice layer of large concrete slabs and had electric piped to it from the church. It was also not that new. It was used for church admin and meetings. Mike had told her that it was cheaper to keep warm than the old church office, as well as being considerably dryer.

She could see Mike through the window. His feet were on the desk and his hood was covering most of his face.

"Mike!" she said as she slammed the door closed behind her and dropped into the seat next to the desk.

The vicar almost fell off his chair and his limbs flailed for a moment as he righted himself.

"Oh, it's only you," he said with annoyance. "I thought it was someone important."

"Are all of God's children not important to you?"

“No. Not ones who only turn up to bother me and never come to service,” he said with a grumpy harrumph; tightening the strings on his hoody and putting his feet back on the desk.

“Napping in the middle of the afternoon. What *would* Jesus think?” Nancy teased as she put her own feet on the desk.

Mike fished out a packet of cigarettes from the large pocket on the front of his grey hoodie and lit up. “Jesus, like me, would give no shits, divine or otherwise. Though, he would probably say something like, ‘*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*’ Because he’s cool.”

Mike had an unusually weathered face and a skin-head. He had the same general demeanour as a sleepy bear, but for reasons she couldn’t fathom, they had become fast friends. He dropped the respectable man-of-God act around her; she saw more of the real him than he cared to show others.

The indoor smoking ban seemed to have passed Mike by with little effect. He had told her that he had only started a few years ago, something about a high-stress situation. He flicked ash into a coffee cup and rubbed his sleepy face. “What you want anyway, you annoying wench?”

Nancy decided not to give him another lecture on how vicars were supposed to conduct themselves. “You have a visitor the other day? A journalist,” she asked.

Mike looked instantly interested and pulled himself upright. He wheeled his chair a little closer to the desk. “Yeah, I bloody well did! And you know what! The fucker is dead now! Smited by the big guy, no doubt! The nasty little prick.”

“Mike, you can’t call God a *nasty little prick!*”

“What? No. Not the big guy. *Mister Marston*. The absolute heretic that darkened my door.” Mike said the name, *mister Marston* with venom.

“Wasn’t a fan then?” Nancy asked. Mike blew smoke out slowly, wondering why Nancy, the renowned slacker, would take an active interest in his visitor. He looked at the woman. He had known her for a year or so now. She was a good person, though a little too promiscuous for her own good. Well-liked in town, and considering her dark past, she seemed to be doing okay. Other than the drinking, but Mike knew about vices and didn’t judge them. He usually had bigger things to worry about than someone’s personal life.

“Nancy,” he began. “I have no idea who *mister Marston* really was, but questions about ‘The Papers’ were nonsensical. It was the lie equivalent of a greenhouse it was.”

Nancy raised an entertained eyebrow and leaned towards him. The ghoulish man may have been a terrible vicar, but he was an excellent judge of character. “Okay, tell me, what did he want?”

“The berk came in here early. Too damned early. It wasn’t even noon. He asked me where the vicar was and raised his dirty judgemental eyebrow at me when I introduced myself. Not that I could blame him. I was pretty stoned at the time and was playing Xbox on the church projector.”

Nancy ruffled her brow at him in disappointment. He stuck his tongue out a little and continued.

“Anyway, the condescending prick started telling me how he was going around town looking for information for the paper. I knew full well we don’t have a local paper, but I was *very* stoned and didn’t want to blow it.”

He briefly got side tracked about how good his ‘new stash’ was and asked Nancy if she wanted to join him for a smoke later. She hurried

him through his distraction, not totally against the idea, and pulled him back on track.

“Oh yeah, then he asks me if he could check the basement. And when I said no, he started telling me how I knew what he was looking for and I didn’t know who I was messing with. I knew I didn’t like him before but there was something specifically *nark* about the way he was talking to me. Couldn’t have been more clearly a government spook if he had have tried!”

Nancy was onboard until the last line. “You think this guy was a government spook? Really? I mean, you don’t think that possibly you were high as fuck and paranoid?”

“You know, usually I would agree with that, but you didn’t see the car he drove away in. It was a big old black jeep,” he said, as if that proved his point for him somehow.

“What did he want in the basement?” Nancy asked, a little more in-the-moment again.

“No idea, but that’s where I grow the weed. No way I was going to let a spook down there. Not even God can protect you from the spooks, Nancy!”

She leaned back, not sure if she should be laughing or not. Mike was an oddball.

“Why do you think he told you he was a journalist?” she asked. Wondering about the painfully transparent lie.

“I’ve been wondering about that, ever since he left. He was a prick, and it’s nice when the big guy smites a prick for once instead of giving a baby cancer or something.” Nancy raised both eyebrows at him. He ignored her. “Only thing that makes any sense there is if he wanted to rattle me.”

“You’re a strange dude, Mike. Real strange,” Nancy observed of her friend, who shrugged and lit another cigarette.

BEYOND

“I don’t even know what a website is,” Howard said into Mike’s ear. He pulled the phone handset away, knowing he was in for a few minutes of his friend ranting about how ‘back in his day they didn’t even have electric’ or something as pointlessly hyperbolic.

He lit a weed loaded cigarette. He sometimes regretted picking up the habit, but it had calmed him when he was first dealing with his passengers. Thankfully, they also prevented him from becoming dependent on it.

Howard’s rant began to pitter out earlier than expected. “Yeah, well, he had a well-known website and now he’s dead. Get one of your team to use that expensive laptop I gave you and give me some information.”

“Fine, I’ll ask Lilly to take a look when I go back to the garden. Anyway, how’s ministry treating you?” Howard asked, realising that from Mike’s point of view it had been a few weeks, or more, since they spoke.

“I need a rundown of the site, as soon as possible, so please go see her today,” Mike said, blowing out smoke. “Actually, I really like being a vicar. I think I may have missed my calling.”

“And if you didn’t have a small army of wraiths in your head whispering scripture in your ear?” Howard laughed.

“You don’t know for certain that I didn’t read the bloody book!”

Howard laughed again. “I’m not even convinced you’ve read any book, never mind the Bible, Mike.”

“Just get the information about the website, and try not to be weird. People don’t like weird, or did you forget,” Mike joked.

“I already promised not to bite anyone, didn’t I?”

DANCING MEN

The alarm on Nancy's phone warned her it was time to move; to get ready for her unexpected date. It was six, she had an hour to be ready, though Phil seemed like someone who would be early so she had to account for that.

She had been considering the strange conversation with Mike and couldn't fathom what it was about his story that was gnawing at her. Why would someone tell such an obvious lie and then act like a dick about it? She resolved herself to visit the other place that mister Marston had visited: the library, first thing in the morning, though she didn't really know why she was so interested.

She took a quick shower and threw on enough make-up to make it look like she had made an effort; she really hadn't. The whole time she was preparing for her outing, she was thinking about the corpse on the beach, or her dad, or was it the clues she had found?

There was something addictive about playing detective games with herself. She felt like a character from one of the novels she stayed up late reading. It scratched an itch she didn't know she had.

The doorbell went at ten to seven; Phil was early.

She glanced in the mirror one last time, making sure she looked functional. She smoothed out her red dress with her hand, something she did regardless of if it was required or not. She checked her shoes were on the right feet and sighed, not at all sure about this outing.

The bell rang again. Nancy stood behind the door and took one last breath. She opened the door with a cheerful grin, trying to look as attractive, and most importantly, as functional as she could.

“Miss McQueen?” asked the unexpected man in the grey suit that looked too expensive for him, judging by the shoes that accompanied it.

“You’re not Phil!” she exclaimed with annoyance. Her opening grin wasted on this scrawny man.

“No, I am clearly not *Phil*, Miss McQueen.” The man looked at her with judgemental eyes as he spoke, though he reminded Nancy of a confused dog.

“Look, I know how this goes,” Nancy began. “I don’t have, want, or need a TV license. I watch streamed shows and videos of cats and no, I don’t give a shit about sports or the good work the bloody BBC does for the people of the empire. Now, sling it.” Nancy, having this speech down-pat went to close the door. The man pulled an identification card out of his pocket. He did it in a practiced and controlled way, like someone who enjoyed this part too much.

“Agent Radcliffe, miss,” the man said, as if half expecting dramatic music to play in some imagined soundtrack. Nancy leaned a little closer to inspect the card.

She blinked at it for a moment, noticing the British intelligence seal. It certainly looked real, though she had no idea what it was supposed to look like. Then, she laughed. “Oh, my god! Your first name is Daniel. You’re literally called Daniel Radcliffe!”

The man put the card away with far less smoothness than he had produced it. “Yes, well, miss, some people have the same name; it’s not that funny!” he said, not at all hiding his annoyance.

“Okay Harry,” Nancy replied.

“Look. I’m here as part of a high-profile investigation with the support of the prime minister himself. I would very much like to know what the nature of your relationship with Mike Gardner is.”

Nancy was still laughing about his name the whole time he spoke. The moment he finished; she snapped it to a halt as if a switch had been flipped.

“My relationship with Mike is in his official capacity of vicar of the Church of England and not at all something that I am willing or obliged to discuss with you. And I don’t care where you went to school, be it Hogwarts, Eaton or Hard-knocks because the separation of church and state is something I happen to think is quite important, you fucking Muggle.”

The sound of the main door to the flat made a clattering at the bottom of the stairs. Before the man could say another word, Nancy cut in again. “And that would be my date. Mark Philips, police officer and someone quite qualified to tell me if your little ID card is real or not.”

Harry Potter snarled at Nancy and turned to leave. “I’ll be back,” he said as he left, buttoning up his suit jacket.

Phil appeared in the doorway to replace him in a matter of moments. “Who was that, am I the second date tonight?” he asked cheerfully.

“Just an unruly wizard,” she replied, grabbing her bag from the table by the door.

“Harry Potter!” Phil said, laughing so hard he almost cried as the main course arrived. “You actually called him that!”

“Yep. Honestly, I wanted to say something else, but I don’t know what the fuck Daniel Radcliffe has been in. Harry Potter seemed too obvious to be honest,” Nancy admitted as she sipped wine and thought about how her date was pretending to find her far funnier than she actually was. *She hated it when they did this.*

Phil wiped the fake tears of laughter from his eyes as he picked up a fork to attack the large, over cooked steak. “Most people who get visited by British Intelligence don’t recover for a week! I’ll bet he wasn’t used to being accused of being a TV license collector *or* wizard, then to be thrown out so you can go for dinner! You’re quite the woman Nancy!”

He had recapped her story back to her, to prove he was listening. It wasn’t a conversation to him; it was a social proof. He was trying to show his value and showcase his manliness. Why couldn’t more men be like Mike?

Though she admired that he had arrived for their date in a Hawaiian shirt and jeans rather than a suit and ugly shoes; he was wearing white trainers. Though, it was likely part of some ‘how to seduce a woman’ guide he had found on the internet. She felt not a pang of guilt as she ordered another overpriced bottle of wine.

“You think he was legit?” she asked.

“Well, I can’t say a lot, obviously. I will say the incident unit that moved in is overkill to be investigating a random corpse.” That may have been the first unrehearsed thing he had said all evening.

“Why would a spook ask me about Mike, though? All he does is talk about God and play video games. He’s a terrible vicar but hardly a reason to call in spooks,” she mused, tucking into her chicken and chips.

“The vicar? I doubt it was about him, probably just because he was visited by the corpse... victim, then you. He was trying to scare you into saying something; I would think.”

“I don’t know anything, not about anything,” Nancy said mid-chew; regretting it instantly and desperately trying to look lady-like.

Phil smiled with oddly eager eyes.

“He’s hoping you sleep with him. We can use that, see what else he will tell you,” said the now familiar voice that spoke into Nancy’s ear. She had heard it enough now that it wasn’t alien. So much so that she didn’t flinch this time.

“Do you know if they followed up at the library yet?” she asked.

“I think they went there this afternoon, same as the church; pack of lies and strange conversations that didn’t make sense.” He took another fork of steak and then said, “You’re very clever for a woman, Nancy. How did you know about that, anyway?”

She instantly resolved herself to get yet another overpriced bottle of wine. “I’m very good at overhearing things. Comes from all the bar work, I think,” she bit her bottom lip and pretended to be pushing back a smile. Flirting as a tool to distract her quarry.

They entered Phil’s house through the front door that opened out to the little pavement and quiet road. He was kissing her with so much hunger that they fell as they went in. Falling onto the sofa that was just behind the door.

Originally her date had complained about keeping up with her drinking, but then he got drunk enough to stop worrying about seeming like a lightweight and they had got a cab back to his place.

Nancy wasted very little time removing Phil's ugly shirt and was both shocked and thrilled to find a very toned chest under it. Phil *was* a wanker, but at least he was a hot wanker. He had pretended to have found her oddness entertaining, not off-putting. Men were often scared of her fast talking and casual manner. Phil was so obsessed with his seduction routine that he had hardly noticed it. To Nancy, an evening with a wanker like him should at least end with terrible sex. Better than going home alone, she had decided.

She slid a hand down the front of his jeans and let him unzip the back of her dress. He was the sort to take control of the sex and she wasn't against that at all, though she did hope he wouldn't be making any attempts to cuff her. She was up for getting laid, but had no desire to fulfil his porn fantasies.

At some point in the evening, they had transitioned to the bedroom. Phil was firm with his desires, but it was obvious to Nancy that his experience *in the field* didn't match his bravado. She wished he was just a touch more sober so she could have basked in the writhing for a little longer.

She lay in his arms, one hand on his chest, panting. They were both sweaty, but neither intended to shower until morning. It was relaxing to fall asleep next to a warm body that she had no feelings for, especially when she had intended to exit as early as possible; may as well rest up.

She planned on a brisk walk of shame in the morning. As much as she had enjoyed the sex, she wasn't sure she could tolerate him while she was sober.

EX OBLIVIONE

Howard was unimpressed with the news. “You’ve got to be messing with me!” he exclaimed down the telephone.

“Nope, she went into his house and by the looks of it, it was getting pretty hot,” the young woman replied. She was hugely entertained by how annoyed Howard was. He had taken an instant dislike to Officer Phillips and there was no way that this turn of events would mean that he would see less of him.

“Fine!” he said, with aggravation. “When was the last time I murdered a human?” He asked.

“I’m told never, sir,” she replied.

“How many have I saved?” he asked, now grinning himself.

“I’m told lots, sir.”

Howard chuckled. “Well, if I bury the idiot, I’m still up by the numbers then,” he said, hanging up the call and dropping, annoyed, into his office chair.

He looked around the newly installed office. It really did look like a functioning police operations unit, or was it investigation unit? He had no idea what actual police did.

His ludicrous cover story accounted for him not knowing about protocol and allowed him to flex his made up rank while still making it unlikely that anyone would be suspicious of him.

A couple of his newer team members were moving boxes around and trying to act as 'police-like' as they could. He wasn't sure he was qualified to train the new people, but Mike had told him it would be good for him. It wasn't the good for him part he worried about though, it was the question as to if it was good for them.

"You two, you're annoying and overthinking everything, so stalk some streets or something, will you?" he demanded. They scurried off immediately. Howard congratulated himself at their eagerness to be away from him; it seemed he was doing something right.

He turned on the laptop that he barely understood and managed to open the application that contained all the data on the current 'suspects.' Howard really hoped that he could find Mark Phillips' name on the list.

Lilly wasn't sure what to do when she saw the little gaunt man breaking to the woman's home. She had never been trained in how to deal with problems like this one. She had no doubt that it was a regular human breaking in, but that was actually part of her problem. If it was a supernatural thing, of basically any category, she would be within her rights, actually, she would have been honour bound, to kill it. But a human, she had no idea what to do about a human. She was also

under equipped for a fight, she was just learning the town and wasn't carrying weapons or even wearing any real armour, she just had a green hoody and a knife in her boot.

She skilfully shimmied up the drainpipe and peered in through the corner of the bay window. She considered for a moment the state of the windows and wondered if the resident of the flat had ever tried looking out of the dirty portals.

The man was wildly searching for something, opening drawers onto the floor, pulling books from shelves, and even throwing sofa cushions. It was all quite frantic. Lilly considered this behaviour for a moment and then decided that perhaps she should do *something* about it.

She tapped the window and then ducked down below it. The figure stopped his rampage. After a few moments, he resumed it. She tapped the window again and again he stopped. This continued for a few more loops before he nervously left to another room.

Lilly, now having a nice time, swung over to the next window ledge along and pulled herself up to see in. This was a bedroom with partly open curtains. The figure was now going through the drawers in there, specifically the ones right next to the window that Lilly was hanging from. Realising that her tap and hide game would be far more difficult, she effortlessly swung back to her original window and then put a hand in her pocket.

She fished around and found her keys, lacking anything else she tossed them so that they hit the bottom of the window next to her. She heard the man actually scream with surprise and fall backwards. A moment later she heard her keys hit the floor.

A few seconds after that, he was sprinting from the building. Lilly slid down the drainpipe and set chase after him, briefly stopping to pick up her keys.

It didn't take long before the man had to stop in an alleyway to get his breath. Lilly, however, wasn't so much as breathing heavily. She considered this, and not thinking of herself as particularly athletic, by the standards of her profession, she decided the man, whoever it was, was very unfit.

She crouched down like a cat and leaned around the corner, her hoody pulled up over her head and both hands on the ground, in case she had to roll out of the way of an attack.

She must have made a sound because the man turned, briefly illuminating his face. He screamed in pure fear and stumbled backwards. Lilly ducked back into cover.

"No! Get away you little fucking monster! It's not time yet!" he screamed as he fell multiple times trying to escape at the other end of the alleyway.

Lilly sat, considering what he had just said, somewhat confused. She didn't need to chase him though, the momentary glance was enough, she knew exactly who he was now. The strange unskilled burglar was none other than the known thorn in her teams' side: *Thomas Sinclair*.

THE ADVENTURES OF

The alarm scared the shit out of Nancy, who was very unfamiliar with the concept of waking up at a specific time. “What the fuck is that sound?” she complained, realising that the bed was empty.

“Off!” Phil shouted as he strolled in brushing his teeth, stark naked.

The voice assistant flashed indignantly in response as the sound silenced.

“Thanks. Why in god’s name are you up! It’s still dark outside Phil!”

He vanished for a moment, then returned free of the toothbrush. “It’s six. Go back to sleep if you like. I have to go to work, and with my hangover I’ll be shocked if I make it through the day.”

Nancy rolled over and pulled the blanket over her head. “Thanks... I’ll make sure to do a walk of shame before you get home.”

“Can I see you again?” he asked.

Nancy pulled half an eyeball out from under the blanket. “You want to see me again?” she asked, genuinely surprised that he wasn’t just moving onto the next woman already.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I?” he asked, pulling on trousers.

“I just sort of assume this was a one-night stand for you!” she said.

“I don’t usually do this, Nancy!” he lied. Or maybe it was true. He was an *unskilled* lover, after all. He obviously wanted to be a ladies’ man. Perhaps he just didn’t have the charm to pull it off.

“I don’t know, maybe. But I refuse to stop pretending I don’t know your name,” she said, retreating under the blanket, a little colder than she was before she had emerged.

Phil laughed and buttoned up his shirt. “I wasn’t sure if it was a joke or not. I was considering just changing my name to *Phil*, to be honest!”

Nancy, though still under her blanket, was smiling to herself, enjoying the afterglow of her evening of stress relief. She wished he would leave. He was still trying to be charming; it was annoying.

Mark, kissed her on the top of her head and put one warm hand on her behind before he left.

“Bye Phil,” she replied.

“*He’s gone. Check his house,*” said the man’s voice from behind her. She was lying down, so if the voice was really coming from behind her, then it was a talking pillow. She finally had the proof she needed. She *was* losing her mind.

She ignored the voice and threw off the blanket.

She lay there, in need of a shower and a drink, wondering why it had taken so long for her to go mad. She had always expected that this was where she was heading.

“*And cover up, neither of us need to see your post coital filth!*” the voice said.

Nancy went to investigate the shower.

Half an hour later, she was clean, dressed in the previous night's clothes. Properly awake now. This was possibly the earliest that she had ever been up and dressed. She couldn't remember seeing this time on the clock before. It was quite the revelation.

She was just beginning to force herself to forget the voice when it spoke to her again.

"What do you know about his boy, Nancy? At least do a little snooping!"

She almost answered it this time but caught herself before she did.

The voice was right. She really didn't know a lot about him. Was it time for just *a little* snooper?

She first looked in his fridge. This was truly the fridge of a man who lived *clean*. Lots of eggs, meat and more than a little salad. There were, however, a few cans of lager in there.

While Nancy wouldn't usually bother with lager; desperate times called for desperate measures. She opened one up, just to take the edge off the morning.

She was aware of her dependency on the drinking; unlike most people with her problem, she felt no guilt about it. She had no-one to disappoint, no-one who depended on her and no-one to explain herself too. If Phil and her *did* spend more time together, he would either accept her and her drinking or she would tell him to stop calling her. If she stopped drinking, she would certainly tell him to stop calling regardless of his thoughts. She wouldn't be able to sit through an evening with him if she were sober, she knew that much.

She looked around Phil's tiny two bedroomed terrace-house and admired the little trinkets of his personality in the place. There were posters for horror movies on every wall, all framed to look nice. His red horseshoe sofa was modern and expensive looking, no TV though.

She wondered how someone with no TV could love movies enough to have framed movie posters all over his house. She also wondered why the wall in front of the sofa was bare and white. She noticed its odd sparkle and touched it. It was almost sandy in texture. She looked back from the white wall to the sofa and noticed a box on the ceiling. No TV, but a projector.

“That’s cheating Phil.”

“*Proves he’s a free thinker though,*” said the voice that seemed to accompany Nancy now.

She took another drink of canned amber poison and thumbed through Phil’s letter rack. *He even paid his damned bills on time.*

She strolled into the kitchen. Where she should have seen the back garden, there was another room. It was white, with a single table in it. She peered through the kitchen window to inspect the oddity. There was a barred window at the back with the sun streaming in.

She wondered how she had not noticed all this when she was getting her can out of the fridge. Maybe the lack of booze was getting to her.

On the other side of the little room was a door. She walked out of the back door to the kitchen, expecting to find the entrance to the little room and noticing that Phil even kept his kitchen pristine. The kitchen door opened to the back garden. The garden was unkept and wild.

“What the actual fuck?” she exclaimed, going back inside.

The window in the kitchen showed the unkept garden. The little room was gone now, but in its wake was an unsettled feeling deep inside Nancy.

She went back to the living room and made sure she could see the window to the road. She sat on the red sofa and stared at the white wall. After a moment, it flashed as the projector lit. The image faded-in to show her that same creepy room.

Nancy wasn't scared. She knew she *should* have been, but she was, instead, focused. She was taking in all the information that she could. Perhaps she had been expecting this. She felt like she may have been, on some level, waiting for it. Maybe even wanting it.

Tile floors, metal desk, single fluorescent strip light, barred window, brown door on the left, which was ajar. What was out there, what was beyond the door? She recognised it; this was a police interview room.

She didn't try to turn off the projector. She didn't try to escape the vision, not this time. She didn't attempt to blink it away with a force of will. She simply and calmly commanded, "Who are you?"

The door to the little room opened. She glimpsed a corridor. It was lit by an old florescent light that had gained a reddish tint with age. There was a vending machine out there. *Or was it two?*

A man walked in. He was thin and tall, sporting a massive nose. His hair was black and loose with a salon look to it. He wore a blue shirt that had the cuffs folded back as if he had pushed them up, the look of someone who had experienced a long day. His trousers were black. She couldn't see his shoes; she expected them to be pointy and leather. He just looked like he wore pointy leather shoes.

He sat in the metal chair next to the table. She hadn't noticed the chair before. He looked right at the camera, at her. He lit a cigarette and now she noticed a large brown glass ashtray in front of him. There was a file open on the desk. There were notes and small square photos spread out; none of it was there a moment ago.

"*Steven Holmes*," he said, looking her in the eye.

There was a silence as Nancy waited for more.

"*So, is that it? Nothing to say to me?*" Steven asked.

"You're not a movie, are you?" Nancy asked, looking up to the ceiling and seeing that the projector was turned off. It had been the whole time, she realised that, now.

"No Nancy. I'm sorry. I'm not a movie."

"You're the one who's been talking to me?"

Steven nodded and took a deep drag of his cigarette. The kind of lung full that only a seasoned smoker takes. *"Yeah. I had to take it slow, so not to scare the shit out of you."*

"You're a ghost?" She asked.

"That would be exciting, wouldn't it?"

"You're an alien!" Nancy said excitedly.

"Nancy, I'm not an alien," Steven said calmly. His voice was nasal and condescending, but in a way that he couldn't help. He looked like he was trying to be nice, to be understanding; he was just nasal and condescending by nature, Nancy knew.

"I'm mad! I'm mad, aren't I?" she asked with a wave of unwelcome emotion.

"No. Well, maybe. I'm not a doctor."

She looked at him blankly for a long moment. "What do you want?"

"You have spent your entire life trying not to think about your dad's death and your mom's suicide. You compartmentalised like a champ. I think about the things you don't want to."

"What does that even mean?" she asked.

"You can't move on; not until you come to terms with it all. You can't do that until you know what really happened. Police aren't going to help you. Therapy didn't help you. Your friends aren't any use. So... I'm going to help you."

"You're going to help me?" Nancy asked, stunned.

"Yes."

"How?"

"I'm a detective. Best one you will ever know. All you have to do is keep digging. I'll put it all together for you. All of it."

Nancy finished her can of cheap lager. It was warm now. She put her feet on the coffee table. "I'm mad. You're my imaginary friend!"

"Yeah. But I already got you to open the curtains in your flat. Got you a date with Mark and helped you follow your first lead in the recent murder. I'm your new best friend. Symptom of a deeper problem or not, I'm one of the rare, good voices in the head," he said, blowing a lung of smoke clear out of his framed window and into the living room she was sitting in.

"I got the date with Phil, not you!" she said.

"No, I distracted you by making you pay attention to the stuff going on down the street and kept you from talking shit long enough for Mark to ask you out."

Nancy was furious that this man kept getting her date's name correct, as if to defy her.

The doorbell rang. Nancy had expected her new friend to vanish. He instead stood next to the window, looking out of his little room with great interest.

Nancy opened the front door. There was a short teenaged girl in a blue puffer jacket and jeans looking at her with a bag and a closed plastic cup of something hot.

"Delivery for Nancy McQueen," said the girl.

Nancy took the little bag, and drink. The girl left in a white delivery van. The van said 'Marina Café' on the side. Nancy was briefly concerned because there was no way the girl was old enough to drive.

"What is it?" the imagined man asked.

Nancy ignored him and opened the bag. Emptying its contents onto the coffee table. It was a breakfast wrap and a hash brown. There was a handwritten note in there, too.

‘Nancy. Sorry I couldn’t stay for breakfast. See you later, girlfriend.’ The note was signed ‘Mark’, with a line through it, and ‘Phil’ written next to it with a little smiley face.

The handwriting was pristine; Nancy wondered if it was Phil’s or if he phoned the order in.

“He got attached quickly, didn’t he!”

“Shut up, Sherlock!” Nancy replied.

“Holmes! Steven Holmes. Mark may not mind you getting his name wrong to appear more adorable, but it doesn’t work on me! Nancy-fucking-Drew!”

She felt herself smile. Steven Holmes was good company.

Nancy ate her breakfast wrap and drank her coffee while her new friend told her she needed to go to the library and then the church again.

Her friend followed her into the kitchen as she made sure to throw away her wrappers and cup.

She enjoyed having someone to talk to. Even if he was a symptom of something she didn’t want to think about. Mr Holmes felt like quite a natural thing in her day, and the fact that she wasn’t freaking out about a man appearing in her head was in itself, proof that she had some issues to work through.

She wasn’t completely convinced he was imaginary; he was too independent and competent to be a figment of something. She resolved herself to think of him as a ghost, a mind ghost. Maybe she would solve the mystery of him next. Though she was also aware that this very idea was likely her coping mechanism at play.

Nancy locked the front door of Phil's house and kept the keys. She considered posting them back but wasn't sure if he had spares. While he likely did, and he was a bit of a prick, she didn't want him locked out. She pocketed them. *He knew where to find her.*

She pulled her jacket in tight and began the very windy trek back to her flat. A red dress was not the outfit for a walk through town on a wintery morning.

After a few seconds of strolling, she needed to test something. "You still there, Holmes?" she asked quietly, almost inaudibly.

"*Of course, I am. Where would I go?*" Holmes replied in a stern and annoyed tone.

When she couldn't see him, his words appeared as though he was standing behind her, peeking over her shoulder. But she knew he would be able to show himself to her on any wall or window he... or she... chose him to.

"Just checking, old man," she said with a secret smile. She finally, for the first time in forever, felt like there was someone there for her, someone looking out for her. She hadn't had that, not since her mom...

The wind bit at her as she walked.

The town was quiet; it was still early. There was little in the way of people or activity, aside from a postman who eyed Nancy suspiciously as he saw her on two different streets. *Git could have offered to give her a lift.*

The town was old, very British, and a bit too focussed on its seasonal trade. It was extra depressing this time of year. That said, Nancy liked it best when it was depressing. *It complimented her well.*

She noticed that Holmes hadn't chimed in on her internal monologue. Maybe he couldn't read her mind. She intended to ask about this next time they spoke, though; it was up to her when this happened; she assumed.

After a half hour of silence and walking, Nancy arrived at her street. She fished out her keys.

“I don’t want any shit about my flat, Holmes. I like it how it is! We’re just here to get a change of clothes, then we can go sleuthing.”

Holmes grumbled at her as she pushed open the main door. The flat was originally an old Victorian house. Only two floors. Her and Marina were the only people who lived there and when the main door lock broke a few years ago, it wasn’t of great concern. Marina owned the bottom flat and Nancy the top. Neither of them was quite-sure who was responsible for the shared area of the corridor. Marina had put a rug and a potted plant on a little table in the downstairs area. While Nancy had done nothing upstairs.

She turned the key and pushed open the blue door. She stopped in her tracks. The flat had been ransacked. Drawers were on the floor, sofa tipped upside down and the bottom ripped out. The light fixture had been pulled down, and the bookshelves had been strewn across the floor.

“Fucking hell Nancy! You weren’t warning me for nothing was you! Still, if you like it like this, I won’t say a word,” Holmes said with a gasp. A gasp that Nancy felt may have been sarcastic.

“Shit the bed! I didn’t leave it like this. There was a plate on the floor, and I spilled some wine, but I didn’t ransack my own flat!” Nancy said in shock.

She slowly walked into the bedroom and then kitchen; it was all the same. Someone had trashed her home. Nothing was missing, and oddly, nothing seemed *randomly* broken. The TV was still intact and even her little laptop was there.

“They were looking for something specific, whoever it was.”

“Yeah, but what could I possibly have that anyone would want?” Nancy replied. “Why would anyone do this?”

“They took the time to empty all the cupboards and drawers on the floor, they even checked the books. Means to me, they were looking for something small, would be my guess.”

Nancy looked around some more. There was a brief moment where she needed to make a decision. She could either fall apart because her home was a wreck, or shrug and get on with her day.

She never really cared about the old furniture in her flat; people who care don't decorate like it's still the seventies. Her books were intact, though she usually read them and gave them away. All she really kept hold of were the ones that she wanted to reread over and over. Old detective novels and ghost stories. No, the place was a mess, but she carried everything of value inside her.

Nancy grunted in resolve and carefully stepped across the floor, which was covered in her belongings, into the kitchen, where the drawers had been emptied onto the floor and countertops. She looked around until she saw what she was looking for, next to the noodle packets, on the floor by the fridge. She emerged victorious with a bottle of cheap whiskey in hand and took a healthy dose of it as she walked to the bedroom to get changed. She ignored Holmes, who was peering in from his window, that her mind had somehow decided belonged in the window of the living-room.

Holmes scratched his chin. What could Nancy have that was worth trashing her home looking for? He tried to inventory everything that was in there. He would need Nancy to stop and take a good look around, but it wasn't likely she would be doing that. Not now that she had a bottle of something.

To his surprise, she re-emerged from the bedroom a few moments later wearing jeans and a hoody.

“Okay, Magnum PI, let’s go and see if Mike’s okay; if they did this to our place, god knows what they did to his, though, his security system *is* God so, he’s probably fine.”

Holmes raised an eyebrow at the notion of God smiting would-be burglars.

“You think you should check on your mate downstairs?” he asked.

“No, she works late. Chances are she won’t be up for an hour or so yet. I’ll go see her at the pub later.”

“Maybe she saw someone in here?” Holmes asked, revealing his hidden purpose.

“No, she would have called me if anyone was in here, likely happened while she was at the pub,” Nancy said, waving her phone in the air as if to illustrate somehow.

PICTURE IN THE HOUSE

“I can’t say I’m shocked about him showing up,” Howard said upon hearing the news of Tom Sinclair trashing Nancy’s flat.

“Really? Given that Marston is dead, I would have thought that Tom would have hightailed it back to Scotland by now,” Lilly replied. “I’ve never been to Scotland,” she added thoughtfully.

Howard looked at her, baffled at her sudden interest in the great north. “You have always seemed to think that the website was some sort of scam. They have been right more than wrong.”

Lilly shrugged and sat on the end of his desk. “I know, but, come on Howard! Have you seen how much money it makes in ad revenue alone? There is no way that Sinclair is going to pass up on that cash cow is there?”

Howard didn’t want to tell her she was wrong outright, but he knew men like Sinclair. Sure, he was a coward and an idiot, mostly, but he also believed in the cause and had little interest in the money. He would likely try to carry on the work that Marston started. No doubt he would get himself killed basically right away, but he would try.

After a few seconds thought, he answered Lilly. “Well, he’s here now. We had better post one of our guys to keep him away from the girl. Did he manage to get what he was looking for in her flat?”

Lilly made an annoyed face at him. “No! I wouldn’t have let him get away if I thought he had something. And I would have been able to call for backup if you let us use radios or phones or something!”

Howard had been doing this job a long time and knew firsthand that reliance on communications technology would only end up with people like Marston and Sinclair bugging them. He also knew that a great number of the things they had to deal with would be able to track them or turn them into explosives. Lilly was quite new comparatively and still thought there was a more modern way to deal with their problems.

“Lilly, instead of looking for backup, why don’t you train harder and not need it?” he grinned at her a little too casually and accidentally showed her his teeth.

Her eyes went wide with the little reminder that he was not only more seasoned than her, but less human.

“Are you going to tell Mike? Do you want me to go and tell him?”

She wanted to make sure the boss knew who she was. He understood that. Mike had become a figure of legend to his group and seeing him on a mission, personally, was a big deal. If half the stories about him were true, she was going to be witnessing history in the making.

“Sure. Go tell him, but make sure you don’t get seen by the girl. Your job is being invisible, not friendly!”

She saluted sarcastically and stood up. “Now, Howard, we all know the plan. You’re the friendly one!” she said with a repressed smirk.

Howard thought about stabbing her for a moment, then realised that his natural tendency towards stoic hyper-violence may have been

what made her words funny. She let out a dry grin as she left. Realising that everyone else had stopped working and was watching him.

“Back to work you lot, or I won’t be friendly much longer!” they laughed and carried on with their tasks, which mostly included stalking the townspeople on social media.

Lilly arrived at the Church just in time to see the woman go in. She froze up. This was her, the whole reason they were here. This was Nancy McQueen.

She knew better than to try to listen in. Mike would know, he always knew. Instead, she sat down in the cemetery and resolved to wait for Nancy to leave. As she sat there, she looked around at the tree line and the little wall and considered that it wasn’t a million miles away from what the garden looked like. She wondered if there was some connection between the two that she didn’t know about, or if it was generic by design.

THE SPECKLED BAND

“They literally trashed your flat?” Mike asked as he placed a bible from his stack onto the pew. He was dressed in full vicar garb today. He passed one to Nancy; she placed it on the next pew along, following him down the row.

“Yeah, and they opened all the books too, like they were looking for secret notes in them or something,” she said enthusiastically.

“Let me get this straight: you got visited by a government spook, then went on a date with the filth while they turned over your flat?” he asked, still a little stoned.

“Yeah, but I doubt Phil has anything to do with it. I think they just took advantage of me not being home.”

“You can’t trust the fuzz, Nancy. They are agents of the devil!” Mike said, pointing down towards the devil, *she presumed*.

“They haven’t bothered *you* since? No spooks?” she asked.

“No, but the big guy wouldn’t let them fuck around with my shit. When you got God as your smoking partner you can rest easy.” As Mike spoke, he pulled out a vape stick from his pocket and took a lung

of something that smelled like hot cola. Blowing it out as he finished speaking. Mike was classy. That's what Nancy always liked about him.

Nancy helped him put out more bibles and then slipped in another question for him. "Also, I think I'm being haunted by an imaginary detective named Holmes. You think I should worry about that?"

Mike shrugged and replied casually, "Sherlock?"

"No, Steven," she said, perplexed by his lack of shock.

"Nah, you'll be fine. If the voices tell you to hurt kittens or anything, pop back and I'll do some religious crap to get shot of them," he said, grabbing another stack of bibles from the back of the room.

"I just told you I have a detective living in my head and you don't even raise an eyebrow?" she was indignant at his lack of shock.

Mike laughed. "Nancy, half the town turns up here once a week to listen to me talk about the magic man who lives in the sky. At least your fella wants to do something useful!" he paused, seeing that she was a little upset. "Nancy, you are one of the smartest people I know, and you've been through some shit. Maybe it's an angel trying to get some wings or something. Either way, people who are mad don't come tell their vicar. Trust me. Whatever your brain ghost is about, you'll figure it out."

"Thanks Mike."

"Yeah, now fuck off, will you? I got a funeral in half hour and you're killing my buzz," he said, gesturing to the door with his eyes.

"Anyone I know?"

"Nah, just some old bird from a town over, saw a squirrel in her garden and dropped dead. I'll call you if I get anything regarding your spook problem."

Nancy left the Church feeling better.

"*How was he?*" Holmes asked.

"Like you don't know!" She chastised.

“I don’t invade your privacy Nancy, talking to a vicar is the very definition of private.”

He sounded sincere. She had assumed he was lying. “He told me to do an exorcism on you the very next opportunity I get. He says you’re an agent of the devil and the pope will personally smite you,” she said with a shrug, walking past him towards town.

“When did the pope go cee of ee?” Holmes asked, seemingly keeping pace with her, though she couldn’t see him.

“Actually, he said you’re most likely either a ghost, or an angel.”

Somewhere in her head, she knew he was sitting smoking with his feet on the table and snorting at her words; though, he simply replied with, *“Obviously.”*

She thinned her eyes at him. Because he was inside her head, she thinned her eyes at a passing cat. No, that was a rat. Now her eyes were wide.

The library was a strange place, like a bookshop where everything was free. It had been many months since Nancy had last visited. With the advent of little digital devices, books were cheap enough that she simply didn’t need the library. She did, however, periodically join every few years because she thought it was the right thing to do. She had no requirement for a library, but she supported them *conceptually*.

“Can I help you, miss?” said the small blonde at the desk. The woman couldn’t have been any older than Nancy, but she wore a cardigan and a very sensible dress, thick fabric, good for this time of year. Nancy knew, without looking, that this woman would also be wearing sensible shoes. She eyed Nancy’s tight jeans, hoodie and

leather jacket disapprovingly. Ah, yeah, this woman was very *librarian*.

Nancy calculated the best way to get what she wanted. She needed to know why the so-called crime-unit visited this place, and what mister Marston, the corpse, wanted too. At the moment, she knew basically nothing.

“Good morning!” Nancy said with bright eyes and a charming smile.

The woman just looked at her expectantly.

“*You’re doing research for the church,*” Holmes prompted.

“I was wondering if you have any local history information?” Nancy asked.

The woman raised an eyebrow. “*You want to know about local history?*” the condescending bitch asked.

“*Don’t bite, play the church angle.*”

“Oh, I never used to be interested, but the vicar asked me to look into some things for him and you know how he can be if you don’t give a task a hundred percent!” Nancy was internally laughing at the idea of Mike caring about anything other than video games and weed. His public persona was far more reserved and mysterious than the man Nancy had come to know.

The woman adjusted her glasses and did a strange little wiggle of excitement when she mentioned Mike. “Oh, you work for the vicar, do you? Never seen you at service.”

Nancy had a sudden flash of fear. Had she been rumbled? She waited a moment for Holmes to chip in.

“*He’s been helping you with a personal matter.*”

“He’s been helping me with a personal matter.”

The woman eyeballed her.

“*You wanted to return the favour, so you’re helping him.*”

“Relationship stuff... Anyway, he said he needed some research doing, and I wanted to repay the church, so I said I would get it for him.”

“Don’t over sell it.”

The woman’s frosty exterior cracked as it began to thaw, but just a little. “Ohhh, how *was* his advice? I often find him a little hard to talk to. He’s quite imposing, isn’t he?”

“He is a deep and thoughtful man, with just *so much* love to share.” Nancy felt a tiny grin creep into the corners of her mouth as she again flashed to a thought of Mike giving anyone actual advice that was useful.

“Don’t blow it,” Holmes chastised.

“What was it you were wondering about, my dear?” she asked. Warmer now, but still condescending.

“Eyes on target, but don’t shoot right at it.”

“Well, he asked me to find out about the history of that pub, The Frog; he wants to know where it got its name. He wanted to know about the harbour’s plaque. Oh, and there’s a recent buzz all about the old paper that the town had.”

“Nancy! That was pretty good!”

The woman adjusted the sleeve of her cardigan. “Well, I don’t know about the rest of it, but I’ve recently become quite well versed on the paper. We had a gentleman in here the other day, asking all sorts of questions and even claiming to be *from* the paper. Which, as you probably know, is impossible!”

“Yes, Mike, err, the vicar said that this was his motivation for researching the topic in the first place,” Nancy said, leaning in a little closer to add to the conspiratorial vibe.

She and the lady were the only two people in the library, anyway. It was a pointless performance. “He’s the one who was found on the beach, isn’t he? The visitor I mean.”

“Well, I couldn’t comment on that. The police told me I wasn’t allowed to speak about it,” she said, itching to say more and looking around to make sure no one had magically appeared in earshot.

“*Bingo.*”

“Well, obviously, you wouldn’t gossip! Neither would I, *or the vicar,*” Nancy said with a roll of her social dice.

“Well... obviously,” she began with a sigh as the floodgates opened. “He came in here all bullish and started saying that he had come from the papers. Well, I assumed he had been drinking. Probably come from that pub, The Frog; nasty little den of sin, it is. Anyway, he wanted to know about the shelves on the basement level. Even asked some of the other girls, err, librarians. Next thing I knew, he was arguing with Rob. He’s our manager. Anyway, he tried to bribe Rob, started offering him money for what he knew, about the paper, the paper that, as you well know, closed down years ago, after the first time a murder happened in town. When this was pointed out to him, he just started waving his arms around, saying there was no reason to lie to him and we could... well... suck his *I don’t think so.* Anyway, Rob took him outside. *Rob works out.*”

Nancy strolled down the road, deep in thought. She was aware of her surroundings, but at the same time she was, in some abstract way, sitting across from Holmes in his little interview room, face to face. She could even smell the smoke, almost taste his tobacco.

“The paper closed down the year my dad died, and then the guy saying he was from that same paper dies in the same way! There is no fucking way that this isn’t related Holmes,” Nancy said with a fire in her belly.

“I agree, obviously, it can’t not be, but that seems like an odd reason to go to the library, doesn’t it?” Holmes replied, with a mouth full of smoke that escaped as he talked.

“I know where the office was. They had a little building at the edge of the town, it’s abandoned now.”

“Check on Marina, at The Frog first. We need to make sure we’re not missing anything closer to home before we go further afield.” Holmes was right, of course he was. Nancy needed to show her face there, and she really needed a drink.

She was snapped out of her trance when a hand appeared in front of her. She traced the gloved fingers to an arm, which was, apparently, attached to a human. “Nancy?” said a familiar voice.

“Phil!” Nancy exclaimed, more in shock than anything else. He glanced around, then put his arms around her as if he was going to kiss her. She smiled politely and pushed back against the embrace. This fella was getting stalker now.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” he asked as he let go.

“Pub.”

“Oh, from the smell on you, I thought you just left there,” he said.

“Creepy prick. Did you really sleep with him? Were you drunk? Never mind!”

“Yeah, about last night...” Nancy began, planning her exit from her accidental relationship.

His radio made a conveniently distracting static beep.

“Wait, how is it I never met you until the other day, and now you are everywhere? Oh my god, are you stalking me? I’ve never had a stalker!”

Nancy joked excitedly. It was less of a joke to her than she pretended. It was occurring to her, for real, that she may want to be careful how she let him down.

“If anything, you’re the one who was snooping around my house, I assume. Maybe *you’re* the stalker!” he joked with a tone that, while still friendly, had an edge that she didn’t enjoy.

“No,” he said, now remembering he was in uniform. “Having a murder in town tends to shake things up. I’m helping the bloody crime-unit. Still, I do have Saturday off, which is nice.”

“Oh, the weekend!” Nancy smiled sweetly as she tried desperately to think of a reason not to go out.

“Actually, I have plans,” Phil said.

Nancy had to catch her relief before it hit her face. “Oh, I get it. Good guy like you probably has a lot of young ladies to entertain, most probably even get your name right!”

Phil laughed. “Hardly! I assure you, there are no other women for you to worry about. No, I promised to help move some furniture around at the church. Some pews are being replaced.”

Nancy grinned happily at the serendipity of the conversation. “Mike never mentioned it to me.”

“*You* mentioned him last night, so I made it my business to pay him a visit first thing. Any friend of yours and all that,” he said with a smile.

“*Fucking hell Nancy! You know how to pick ‘em, don’t you!*” Holmes said. His concern was well founded at this point.

“Right. Of course, you did,” she said, trying to keep thinking of Phil as overattached, not dangerous.

“You want me to go to church with you?” Phil asked.

“Not really. I’ve never had sex in the church,” she replied, instantly regretting where her brain had taken the conversation. She needed to

stop making sex jokes. While it was her standard nervous response to any situation, this was firmly not the time or place.

“Oh, sorry... yeah. Did you want to just hang out at your place, or should I cook?” he asked.

“Cut him off before he boils your head!” Holmes advised.

“I have no intention of tidying up my flat and yours is far too much of a walk!” she said, intending it as a final rejection.

“Okay then,” he said with an unexpected smile.

Nancy took the opportunity to leave. She felt his stalker eyes on her bottom as she walked away. She wondered how much she had imagined. Maybe he was nice, and she wasn’t used to it. Or, more likely, he was a creep.

“If he kills you, can we go and haunt that cute librarian?” Holmes asked.

“Oh, shut up,” she said, quietly.

“No really, that was like the opening to one of them horror movies he has posters of!”

“I thought you didn’t invade my privacy, Magnum PI!”

“In what world is the middle of the street private, Murder-she-wrote?”

“Just keep your opinions to yourself, Sherlock!”

“Okay, Drew!”

RATS AT THE DOOR

Howard could hear the interaction between the dumb-as-let-tuce policeman that guarded his door and the girl he was keeping an eye on. He was standing just inside the doorway and had better hearing than he let on. Not letting on about his advantages was one of the ways he had stayed alive for so long.

Once he was sure that she had left, safely, he considered having the police officer removed. Either by request to the local authority or just having one of his team put him in hospital.

Howard would have been quite capable of doing it himself, but he always enjoyed it too much and thought of it as gateway violence.

He then decided that Mike would likely frown about putting police officers in hospital and given that the creep lived in the town, it was likely better to have him outside the door where he could keep a close eye on him.

Howard really didn't like the look of a man.

He knew that Nancy was heading to the pub, and he had at least two of his people pretending to be fishermen, getting hammered in

there. Though, he had made provisions for the alcohol to have little effect on them. He was happy she would be safe.

He was starting to feel anxious now at the lack of progress they had made. They knew that there was enough magical energy in the area to make the town go off like a small nuke. And they knew that for 'reasons' they didn't understand, nothing supernatural was being drawn in to feed on the energy, which was the opposite of what usually happened in these cases. The problem was the absolute lack of anything like a lead. All they knew for certain was that Nancy was somehow, unknown to her, the only person on the town who *didn't* seem to be absorbing magical radiation and they had no clue as to where it was coming from.

Mike had confirmed that she did have a passenger, which was something. He wondered if this one would join the others when this was all over. He really hoped that the girl was going to get out of this alive. The innocents usually didn't.

Lilly was envious of her colleagues who had the terribly hard job of getting drunk night after night. They not only got to hang out in the pub, playing pool and eating crisps all evening, but they were also, likely, in the very place where everything was going to kick off. Lilly, on the other hand was following her own lead. A strange black cruiser had passed her twice now, and she had made it her business to follow it.

It had led her to a building site just out of town. She had only kept up with it by taking to the rooftops. Now though, it had stopped. An

older man with white hair and a bald fat man got out of it. Lilly knew predators when she saw them.

They had something running. Some magical stealth. The people on the building site didn't so much as glance at either of them. Lilly knew this magic well. It had literally no effect on hunters, and she was happy to witness it being used. She would have had no way of telling otherwise, which was in part, a weakness brought on by total immunity to it.

The building site was busy and the people milling around, while unable to see the black car, were somehow subconsciously walking around it without acknowledging it. Lilly hadn't seen the magic stealth work this well before.

She had her own way of being unseen. A way that was more reliable and less effort than whatever insane amounts of energetic fuel her prey was using.

Hunters could rely on a natural force that they knew as The Wind. A force that worked automatically. It shielded her from anyone not involved in the supernatural, as long as she didn't intentionally make herself known. She pulled her whip from around her waist and made sure the handle of her knife was on the outside of her trouser leg. She dropped down into the middle of the building site and pulled down her hood. This was the part she was good at. The part she didn't have to think about.

She walked in as quietly as she could. There was a man packing away a water pumping machine that looked like a robot from a fifty's science fiction movie. The two older men who she was stalking went down ahead of her. She quietly perched herself at the top of the stairs and observed them as best as she could. The one man was saying an incantation that sounded like a daemon language called Denti. Lilly didn't speak it. Few humans did, the ones that she had encountered

who could, well, they were almost always the bad guys, with one notable exception that is, but she doubted these people were working with Mike.

There was a flash of light just out of sight down there. It was a very familiar blue-purple glow. It was time to act, they were opening a portal.

Lilly slid down the bare wood banister, flipping into a low crouch at the end. She flicked her whip and snapped it to get their attention. The fat man turned, his little hands were inside a small portal floating in the air, just in front of the back wall. He looked terrified. The other man, the white-haired one, had a predator's calmness to him. He turned with a practiced motion and pulled a gun from his belt, a gun which Lilly had failed to account for.

She knew two useful things about magic. Firstly, if he fired that gun, it would break the spell that was keeping these people from being noticed, and likely Lilly too. And secondly she knew that magic was usually unstable, which meant that he likely wouldn't risk firing while the portal was open. It would, at best, close. At worst, it would explode.

As expected, he hesitated. Hoping she would be smart enough to let the portal settle. She wasn't dumb enough to give him what he wanted. She flicked her whip across the floor. He saw it was too short to reach him and stood his ground, as all good predators did. The whip, however, wasn't very good at knowing its limitations and at the last moment, it stretched out like a snake, almost alive and struck the man's ankle.

Lilly, like all in her profession, would avoid *killing* humans at all costs. But she was quite willing to beat the crap out of them to stop whatever they were doing.

The man fell backwards grunting in pain. The fat man pulled something from the portal which snapped shut the instant his hands were clear.

Lilly was about to turn her attention to him, keeping half an eye on the gun when a stream of water erupted from between the brickwork where the portal had been.

“Throw it to me!” the white-haired man demanded as he struggled to his feet. The fat man didn’t hesitate. He tossed a rolled-up parchment to him and turned to face the water.

Lilly wasn’t sure what was happening. She lacked the experience of these interactions to make a good call. She didn’t quite freeze up, but she allowed herself a moment of inaction while she waited for something else to happen.

The little fountain of water from the wall erupted into a sea and in a snap, a fraction of a moment, Lilly was under water. She panicked and tried to swim up, when she saw a frog-like creature swimming passed her, far closer than she would have liked. It looked at her, almost waving as it went by. It grabbed the fat man, and looked Lilly in the eyes as it grasped him and pulled him down.

A moment later, Lilly fell from the top of the room, hitting the now dry, stone floor with an unladylike thunk. She coughed up water, salty water. She was soaking wet and freezing cold. The white-haired man was gone, but the fat man remained. He was naked, hog-tied and dead as week old steak.

Lilly’s eyes were stinging, and her chest hurt from the water she had just ejected. She panted to get her breath. She wasn’t in a good way. She struggled to her feet and made her way up the stairs. The white-haired man was pulling away in his large black car. Lilly realised that she couldn’t chase him, even if her life depended on it. She knelt down and felt around in her back pocket, looking for her coin. She

pulled it out and then, taking her keys, she located the one that was silver and old. She pressed it against the coin and passed out. she knew that she would be delivered to safety before her body hit the floor.

A PUBLIC MOON

Nancy entered *The Frog's Moon*. The man behind the bar shot her an eager look. "Nancy!" he greeted excitedly.

"Nigel!" she replied with genuine joy.

Nigel Montague was one of the older men who run the pub in the day. He and Roy loved the place and were thrilled when Marina said they could open for her. She *did* pay them, but neither cared much about the money.

Nancy sat on a stool at the bar. *Her usual spot.*

Nigel poured her a half pint of cider and then added a shot of whiskey to it, Nancy's usual. He made a note on a sheet behind the bar, adding it to her tab. A tab which Marina threw away at the end of every week, if she was in a good mood.

It was quiet in the pub this afternoon. There were a few regulars mulling about and she saw Roy at the back, through the doorway behind the bar. He was deep in a book and hadn't noticed her. The speakers were playing the golden oldies, as they always did when Nigel and Roy were in charge.

Nigel was a tall, portly man with facial hair that made him look like a Victorian gentleman. He sported a waxed moustache and beard. He always wore a suit waistcoat and a very nice shirt. Today, it was a brown waistcoat and a white shirt.

“How goes the secret life?” she asked.

“You would not believe some of the things people have asked me about recently Nancy, I had to reply directly to some of them, not wholesome enough for the main page, my dear!”

Nigel had a secret. He was, strangely, the proprietor of a website called ‘BettyMakesItBetter.Quest’ where he pretended to be a lady named Betty and helped people with relationship problems. Nancy had never quite worked out how he ended up doing this, but he was rather good at it. He often had insightful things to say and wrote deep heartfelt advice, as Betty.

The website, despite having a ludicrous web-address and a stupid name, was incredibly successful. So successful, that at least one national newspaper had tried to hire ‘Betty’ to write a column for them, resulting, oddly, in the ‘Betty Who?’ meme circulating around the internet for the last few years.

“Wholesome? You wrote about aural sex techniques last week, Nigel!” Nancy protested.

“I know. Can you imagine how risqué something must be to make *me* blush?” he replied, wiggling his eyebrows playfully.

Nancy couldn’t help but laugh. He was always good company. Nancy always made sure to make time for the old freak.

Roy strolled in from the back room, book in hand. Roy was a tall thin man with long hair and a handlebar moustache that he had only grown because Nigel talked him into it. He didn’t remind Nancy of a Victorian gentleman like Nigel did. Roy was more like an aging cowboy, albeit with a Yorkshire accent.

“Roy!” Nancy exclaimed, leaning over the bar to hug him. “What you reading?” she asked. Roy was a prolific reader of terrible romance novels and one of the few people, that knew about Nigel’s secret identity.

“The buxom bitch of banger hall,” Roy said with a cheeky grin. “It’s exactly as trash as it sounds,” he added, passing her the book. She looked at the watercolour style image on the cover, a large-busted woman in a medieval corset with one arm across her brow in anguish, and another clutching her chest. The corset was pink, and the badly painted hay she was sitting on looked slightly cartoony.

“Is it good?” she asked.

“No! It’s trash! I love it!” Roy replied.

“Soooo, how goes things, Nancy?” Nigel asked, topping up her drink, almost automatically.

“Well, there was a corpse outside my flat the other day. I had a visit from a government spook, who I think trashed my flat. I had a date with a *boy*, who may be a stalker. I’m being haunted by a detective and I’m pretty certain my dad’s murderer is back,” Nancy said, oversharing and doing so in a single breath.

“Bloody hell,” Roy said, looking up from his book. “You had a date?”

Nigel gave him a disapproving look. “Marina told us about the body. You, okay?” he asked, ignoring Roy’s comment.

“Yeah,” Nancy said, slowly and unwittingly seriously. “I got a lead, I think it’s a lead. The library said the victim was asking about the old newspaper, before he died... obviously.”

Nigel and Roy looked at her confused and concerned. “Where is Marina anyway? Shouldn’t she be here by now?” she asked, to break the silence.

The sound of wind flooded the bar as a door from the back was opened briefly. "She has been summoned," Roy said with a dramatic voice.

Marina took off her coat and came to sit with her friend.

"Been for a fag?" Nancy asked.

"Yep, bloody smoking ban. It's my pub! Also, some wanker has parked a car in the alley!" she complained, as she was prone to do, daily.

"So... How was the date?" She asked.

Nancy left the pub an hour later and felt a fog wash over her mind as the cold air hit her. She zipped up her little jacket and started her trek through town. Her destination was quite a walk away, and she refused to get a taxi. She always liked to walk; it gave her time alone with her thoughts, *usually*.

"*Christ! That was like some kind of torture!*" Holmes complained.

"I thought you didn't invade personal space."

"*The very word 'pub' is short for 'public' so don't start that shit with me. Do you have any idea what I have just been through? That was literally the worst thing I have ever had to listen to!*" He complained a lot, now that Nancy thought about it.

"Well, no one was making you. Why didn't you go haunt Nigel while you were bored?" Nancy replied.

"*I don't even know how to reply to that. You realise I can't leave, right?*" he asked. Nancy shrugged in response.

The walk was good for her. Cleared her head and made her focus. Though, *not* spending an afternoon drinking cider loaded with

whiskey shots would also have been good for Nancy. She popped a tiny mint into her mouth to hopefully hide the afternoon's odour.

"Where are we going anyway?"

"Newspaper used to have an office at the far side of town. I remember where it was. It was empty for years. Sign was still up, when I was a kid. Some of the lads I went to school with used to smoke weed there, until one of them did a shit in the hall and they never went back," Nancy explained, as if it was very important information.

The walk really was very nice. The wind had died down and walking away from the sea, towards the back end of town changed the smell of the air. Not a lot, but enough so that Nancy's sea-attuned nose could pick it out.

When they arrived at the destination, Nancy was stunned to see construction work. She was aware that there was some construction taking place in town but didn't know it was the old shopping strip getting demolished.

The trucks were all moving about and there was a distant sound of one of those things that always looked part massive screwdriver and part pogo-stick, the things that cracked the ground and seemed to be turned on for hours at a time.

She took a moment to look up the company on her phone. She liked looking things up, Holmes seemed to approve as well.

Nancy grabbed a passing workman. Workmen always liked her. She wasn't bad looking, but also gave off just enough crazy vibes that they thought they may have a chance. This was no accidental vibe that she was giving off. She liked them too, usually.

"Excuse me," she began, without looking away from the row of old buildings. "You knocking that one down soon?" she asked.

"No, actually, that's not getting touched until next week, basement had to get pumped out. We're working on the other side of the road

for a few days yet,” the bearded, manly-man said with an undertone of confusion.

“Any chance I could have a look around then?” she asked.

“This is an active site luv, you’re going to have to talk to the boss,” the charming, man with biceps that Nancy was only just now noticing were like small trees said.

“Okay, where’s he then?” she asked.

“She,” he corrected. “Main cabin,” he said, jerking a head towards a large temporary office building that was actually a very nifty caravan. He looked at Nancy for a second smiling, she caught herself and let go of his beautiful arm.

“*Can we add sex pest to the list of reasons you shouldn’t be out alone,*” Holmes chimed.

“Shut up, Judge Judy,” Nancy replied quietly as she marched towards the caravan, *sorry*, office.

She climbed the two metal steps and knocked on the door politely. It was cold and noisy. She just stepped into the caravan, *sorry*, office.

“Yes? Can I help you?” said a tall, attractive, slightly younger and more feminine woman than Nancy expected.

“Looking for the site, I don’t know, manager?” Nancy said, realising she knew nothing about the construction industry.

“You found her,” said the woman. She was very attractive and was sporting a confidence that Nancy was a little intimidated by. She sat behind a large desk that had two chairs in front of it. On top of the desk sat a laptop that looked like it had been half beaten to death and what Nancy assumed to be a site plan.

“Well, what do you want?” she asked impatiently.

“I want to, err, need to...” Nancy’s mind went blank. *God, she was hot.*

“Really! Women too? Does your libido know no limits?” Holmes chastised before slipping into his advisor voice. “Tell her your dad used to work there or something. Any lie will do as long as it’s a feeling based one, you can’t get asked for proof.”

“Err, sorry, I expected a grumpy old fella,” Nancy said. “Not that I’m disappointed, not at all, but threw me for a second.”

The woman laughed. “Yeah, I should get used to that, I suppose.”

She was dressed in the same thick black flannel shirt and bright high visibility jacket as everyone else on the building site, but on her it looked odd, unnatural. Not because she was a woman, but because she was obviously not accustomed to it.

Nancy sat down at the desk in front of her, not taking her eyes off of the woman. “You new to this then?” she asked.

The woman eyed her for a second, then some ineffable wall dropped, and her warmth glowed through. “Little new to me, yeah. Don’t worry, I’m qualified. I just, usually I stay in the *actual* office but my site manager was... anyway, here I am.”

“Good job, now extract our purpose,” Holmes instructed. Nancy, somewhere in her mind, shot him a harsh look for being so mercenary.

“Nancy,” Nancy said, sticking a hand across the desk as a way of introduction. The woman shook it with a half-smile.

Nancy glanced at the licences and certificate that were displayed on the nicer-than-expected caravan, *sorry*, office, walls for a moment. She took stock of the very tidy area and the pristine paperwork. This woman was organised, which implied a level of competency.

“I’m Dink. Well, that’s what everyone calls me. I stopped fighting it,” the woman said.

“Interesting name, you should tell me how you got it some time,” Nancy said, with her flirty voice.

“You do remember why we’re here, don’t you?” Holmes complained. *“Besides, it’s pretty fucking obvious where she got her stupid nickname from!”* Not that Nancy was listening to him.

“I just might!” Dink said, matching Nancy’s tone. “Did you come here for a reason, Nancy?”

Nancy shook off her puppy dog eyes and got back to business. “Yeah, I want to look around one of your buildings, the old newspaper office, dog shop or something, in recent years, I think. And I can’t tell you why without sounding mad.”

Dink looked at her with intensity. “Tell me why anyway, or it’s a no.”

“Don’t do it!” Holmes instructed sternly.

“I’m being haunted by a brain ghost who is helping me solve my dad’s murder. I’ve been going around town looking for clues and I think it’s possible the government is involved. A guy who was murdered in our town recently kept claiming to work for the local paper and, as this is the only link to the place that’s left, I thought it was worth checking out.”

“Well fuck, really fucking helpful Nancy.”

Dink smiled. “Are you drunk?”

“Usually, a little-bit. Yeah,” Nancy replied.

Dink laughed aloud; her laugh was as alluring as the rest of her. “Well Nancy, I can’t say no to that, can I?”

Nancy and Dink were wearing oversized yellow hard hats and holding massive metal handled torches. There was no power to the place and the windows were boarded up.

“You’re not going to find anything. My guys have been through this place already. It’s little more than a shell right now. Also, it wasn’t a newspaper office. It was a dog grooming salon before it went out of business last year,” Dink said as Nancy walked around the empty building.

“You’re not local, are you Dink?” Nancy called from another room as she shone her light about.

“No,” replied Dink. “What gave me away?”

“Never see you in the pub.”

“I didn’t know it was a requirement,” Dink called back. Nancy was captivating to her. She was oddly *driven* and focused. Also a looker, Dink had noticed that right away. She wondered if Nancy’s strange attempt at flirting was genuine or just to get her in the building. She also wondered, if it was calculated, *what had given her away*.

“It’s not a requirement. Just unusual. I work there, of an evening and we’re about the only place open this time of year. I tend to know everyone’s face, at least,” Nancy called through.

She poked a head around the corner at Dink, “I’m not working there right now, they’re making me take a week off, so don’t go looking for me!” The head vanished.

Nancy was a strange woman. So far, in the short time Dink had spent with her, she seemed constantly confused; and kept muttering to herself. She was cute enough to get away with being a little odd.

“What are you looking for, exactly?” Dink yelled through, lazily pointing her torch around the room as she strolled through doorways. There was the occasional beam of daylight streaming through cracks in the old building’s back wall. Out of habit, Dink started working out how best to fix them before remembering she was tearing the place down to make room for a large hotel.

She thought she heard a yelp. If that's what you could call it. She yelled for Nancy. The last thing she needed was for an uninsured site guest to have an accident.

"I'm fine. I *was* looking for a clue, some reason why someone would pretend to be from a long dead newspaper," Nancy yelled. Her voice was quieter now. Dink followed her words and realised she had gone downstairs to the basement.

She rolled her eyes. "Nancy, it was flooded down there. We only pumped it clear this morning... Are you okay?" she asked as she walked down the stone steps. She looked back at the pump machine and pipes that were packed away at the top and made a mental note for her to chew someone out about leaving them there.

"Well. Good news is, I found something. Bad news is, it's not very helpful," Nancy yelled from the back of the old storage basement.

"Well, at least you got something, I guess." She paused for a moment to gather the courage to shoot her shot. "As you're off work... you want to go out tonight?" she asked, feeling an instant wave of panic wash over her. She hadn't actually asked another woman to go out with her before. There had been dates, but not ones she had organised. It was an odd, terrifying feeling to wait for rejection.

"I would love to! Assuming you still want to, once you deal with the corpse I just found!" Nancy said.

"Corpse?" Dink asked, now less lazily making her way to the back of the room.

Dink shone her torch towards the floor where Nancy was looking. She saw it piece by piece, a naked fat man. Arms tied behind his back and skin almost white. The water had been pumped out, but her people hadn't been down here since; it was entirely possible he had been here the whole time.

"Fuck!" Dink said.

“You didn’t kill him by any chance, did you? That would save me a lot of clue hunting!” Nancy asked casually.

ELEGANT TEMPTATION

The bed was warm, the air was clean, and the feeling of total relaxation was awash over her. Her eyes opened with a snap. She sat bolt upright. This feeling of contentment and joy meant only one thing. She was back in the garden.

Lilly looked around her untidy room and sighed. This meant that she had arrived unconscious, and someone had carried her to her room. The problem wasn't the messiness of it; it was the implication that her arrival would have been reported to Howard, or worse, Mike.

Knowing how the garden worked. She took a long bath and made an entry into her fight journal. Paying attention to things she could take away from this interaction. The last time he got her butt handed to her, she knew she had to get better at parrying. This time she had to consider things like 'practice swimming' and 'clothes that I can swim in,' which seemed oddly specific even to her.

After realising that perhaps there was nothing for her to learn, she decided to face the absolute roasting she was sure was ahead of her.

She dressed in brown hunters' leathers, whip around her waist like a belt, she entered the garden looking like a medieval thief, but with better skin and far nicer hair. Though her short red bob was hardly going to win awards outside of the Middle Ages.

She took a lung full of the crisp clean air and looked at the treeline. As far as she knew, outside of the little garden that surrounded the white Victorian mansion of a house, the forest went on, quite literally forever. This little tidbit of information haunted her, and she wasn't sure why. She was still not used to her new life.

She dropped her eyes from the infinite trees and surveyed the garden in front of her. There were surprisingly few people around. But, there, sitting at a table, with a little pot of tea, was the last person she wanted to talk to.

The supernatural cogs that made the garden work had a way of aligning things and, given that it was always perpetually mid-afternoon, time meant basically nothing here. Events would always happen one after another, never in the incorrect order but the gaps between them were fluid.

She assumed this was how, in the middle of this mission, Mike had time to leave his deep cover and come to the garden to talk to her.

She slowly walked over and sat opposite him. He watched her the whole time. His poker face was even better than Howards. He poured some tea and slid it over to her. The little cup rattled as it crossed the metal table.

"Milk?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied.

He poured in milk from a bone-China jug and passed her the bowl of sugar cubes. She dropped one in and stirred it nervously.

Mike was a legend. Even more so than Howard. The rumour was that he came to be in charge of the hunters by absorbing a race of

ghost-like beings into himself and then taking down an entire daemon realm.

“Do you think Nancy has a passenger?” she asked, hoping to get something out of him, before her roasting. She wanted some confirmation that all their information gathering and spying had been correct.

He sipped his tea. He liked it milky, which struck Lilly as odd, for someone so hard-boiled. “Yes. Why did you decide to take on two magic-using humans alone?”

“How do you know what happened? Do you think her passenger is on our side?”

He sipped his tea again. “I think it’s on *her* side. It doesn’t matter how I know. Why didn’t you get out of there and bring Howard the intel?”

“Her side? Isn’t her side the same as our side? I thought I could stop them. They took a document out of a portal in the basement of the building. I thought it was important to stop them getting away.”

He put down his cup and leaned forward almost menacingly. “Lilly. You need to stop overestimating your skill. It’ll get you killed. You’ll get there if you just keep training and learning from Howard. You can’t rush things.”

He was right; she knew it. Her training and skills made her feel invincible. And compared to basically every human outside of the garden, she probably was, which was why she had been paired with Howard. She had grown overconfident, and not for the first time she had got herself into a pickle.

She took a sip of her own tea; she didn’t really like tea, but everything in the garden was nicer than outside. “Your right. But honestly, it wasn’t the people, it was something else. Something fighting them,

a fish, or frog, I don't know. The room filled with water, and it did something to me. I was exhausted when it left."

Mike seemed more engaged. "I knew there was a non-human element. That was obvious from the state you arrived in. But a water monster? Tell me exactly what it looked like. I want to know everything. We need to figure out what we're dealing with."

Their conversation suddenly evolved, not from her getting a chewing out, but to her making a report of what she saw. Whatever he had planned on saying to her was ejected simply because her information was so useful.

While she didn't have a lot to tell him, she did describe the fish or frog monster in enough details that he was sure the garden's research team would be able to figure out what it was.

Lilly was suddenly a valuable source of information, possibly even a hero. And to think, she had sat down as a screwup.

A SONNET OF OBSESSION

Nancy sat in the cold while the police took statements in the caravan; *sorry*, office. The man from the so-called Crime-Unit in there, observing. Phil, being annoyingly honest, had told his bosses that he felt he may have a conflict of interest because he had recently spent the night with the woman who found the body. He had also texted Nancy asking if she needed him to leave work and come be with her as ‘support’, whatever that meant. *Ick*.

Nancy felt bad about Phil. He may have been over attached and freakish, but she had used him for information, sex and now possibly negatively affected his career. *Damn it*, she did not like having to think about things. Was that soberness kicking in?

“*You’re next, you know?*” Holmes said from within her head. “*Make sure you listen to me in there, Nancy. They can’t think you’re lying, or mad. Okay?*”

Nancy grunted in agreement as an officer came over. “Miss McQueen, we’re ready for you now,” he said, showing her into the office where she had first met Dink just over an hour ago.

There was a short ugly man sitting in Dinks chair now; she also saw the man with the nice suit from the Crime-Unit standing at the back of the room. He was creepy and had the same vibe as a Hammer-Horror vampire. She was pretty sure he was supposed to go unnoticed. The officer who showed her in stood by the door.

“Afternoon Miss McQueen. I’m Detective Farker,” the ugly man said. He was short and had mottled skin. His hair was thin in a way that made it look like his head had erupted from it. “I understand you found the body?” He asked.

“Yes, Detective Fucker,” Nancy replied. He eyed her, probably for intentionally getting his name wrong.

“Be nice and try to look upset!” Holmes instructed.

“Yes... well... Story is that you and Miss Hall were looking around the building when you just found the victim there. That right?”

Nancy wanted to be difficult but smelled the smoke from the fresh cigarette that Holmes just lit in her mind. The smell reminded her that listening to him now was smart. Probably the reason he existed in the first place; to keep her out of trouble.

“Yes, detective. Dink, err, miss Hall, was showing me around the building and then we found it. We did not touch it. Miss Hall got her construction people to call you guys, and we waited at the top of the stairs. Guarding it.”

The detective eyeballed her again. With a level of intensity that she assumed most police officers reserved for actual criminals. “So, you and, miss Hall were alone? What did you talk about while you waited for us to arrive?”

Nancy flashed back to the sudden kissing. At the time, it seemed like a good way of stopping her from freaking out. It had worked, and the fifteen minutes or so had passed quickly. From Nancy’s point of view, she didn’t want it to interfere with the tentative date they had

just set up and ‘making out’ seemed like the best way to lock it in. She couldn’t tell the police any of this. Nothing makes you look like a serial killer more than telling the police that you got all hot and steamy next to a corpse, with a woman you just met.

“We just waited... silently. It was a stressful time officer,” Nancy said, again flashing back to the kissing. She really hoped that this didn’t put Dink off their date.

“Miss Hall, says you were acting strangely, that she thinks you may have had ulterior motives for being there. What do you think about that?” The detective said or asked. It wasn’t clear. This was how people like him worked. Half-truths and altered perceptions. *Prick.*

“Little bit of truth now Nancy,” Holmes instructed.

“I asked her to show me around because I heard the last person that was found dead in this town was claiming to be from the local paper; this is where the paper was. I wanted to come and see. I was curious.” Nancy was pretty sure Dink would have told them that. It was the truth; she had no reason to lie about it. Curiosity wasn’t illegal.

Farker looked at her with his laser gaze again. She didn’t like it. She would usually sass him until he went away, but that wasn’t a good idea right now.

“You often interfere with police work? Do you miss McQueen?” he asked.

“Give him something to think about, Nancy. He’s being a dick.”

“Having a look around a building that the local boys in blue failed to even glance at isn’t interfering with police work, detective Fucker. It’s not even close. Actually, if I were you, I would be more interested in the wanker behind me who was talking about the newspaper angle so loudly by his car that the whole town likely knows.”

He motioned to speak again but instead looked past Nancy at where his companion with the nice suit and cheap shoes sat silently.

Nancy was never good at subtlety. She turned around in her seat to glare at the man. “Actually, given that a government agent visited me yesterday, I wonder if you’re even in charge at all... Nice suit, by the way.”

He laughed at her a little and nodded. “Yeah, all good points. Camera over the road confirms you didn’t kill him, anyway. Come visit my office if you remember anything helpful, miss McQueen,” the man in the shadows said with a disturbingly pleasant tone, though his voice was worn.

“Thanks,” Nancy said and stood up.

“I never said we were done, did I?” Detective fuck-end said sternly.

“No, you didn’t,” Nancy replied, she brushed past the officer guarding the door and left. She heard raised voices from inside and grinned.

“Bloody good job Nancy.”

“I know, thanks,” she replied.

“You should be more careful with that,” said a voice from next to the caravan, *sorry*, office.

She looked over to see Dink standing in the fresh rain under an umbrella. “People will think you’re mad if you keep talking to yourself.”

“I am mad. I told you that up front, didn’t I?” Nancy noted with a cocked head. Dink stood a little closer to share her umbrella.

“I assumed you were being cute, not mentally ill,” Dink said as they walked away from the now very heated discussion inside.

“Look. You seem great, Dink, and I don’t want to false advertise. I got some issues. I drink too much. I really do have a ghost in my head and my two best friends are the local vicar and the woman who owns the pub, where I work. Also, I’m a little obsessed with finding a killer right now. You should probably run.” Nancy was grumpy when she was sober.

Dink smiled and stopped walking. “Nancy, I’m kind of new to dating girls *aaaaand* you seem like a fucking nutter, to be honest. You smell like a brewery too. You seem really honest, too honest. Apparently, you randomly kiss people when you’re stressed. I would love to hang out with your more, and I don’t mean as friends.”

Nancy felt a warm glow fill her, the kind of glow she usually got from a bottle of vodka. “Well, good. That smell is probably cider, by the way,” she said as she pulled out her phone. “This all says more about you than me; you know that, right?”

“Are you really texting right now?” she asked.

“Yeah, I have to make sure I *properly* dump my stalker. He’s a bit over attached and it’s getting creepy.”

“Wow, I am honoured. You’re not gay then?” Dink asked with a different tone than before. Nancy wondered if this was nerves or annoyance.

“I prefer girls. If I get bored, it’s easier to get guys. If that’s a deal breaker, you need to tell me before I hit send on this, because I don’t want to be alone tonight.”

“Oh, no. It’s fine! I didn’t mean to come across like a bitch; just curious.”

Nancy nodded and pressed send on a message that read. *‘Hi, I have a feeling you and I are on different pages. I had a great night. Thanks for breakfast, but I’m not looking for a relationship. Sorry.’*

“*Oh god now, we’re going back to the tedious people in the pub again aren’t we!*” Holmes complained, loudly.

“Shut the fuck up, Holmes,” Nancy said aloud as she began walking with Dink. He was the welcome voice of her guilt, and her uncertainty, but he was also very annoying when she was this lucid.

“Brain ghost?” Dink asked.

“Yeah, we’re still finding our groove.”

“That’s messed up, Nancy,” she said, but there was an entertained warmth there that Nancy had a feeling she wouldn’t have had if she told Phil about her ‘problem.’

Nancy let Dink into her home with a stern warning, “Look, it’s a bit of a mess right now. I don’t usually live like this, but the government ransacked me. I think it was the government, anyway.”

Dink laughed, thinking it a joke, until Nancy swung open the door. “Fuck me!” Dink exclaimed, looking at the mess that lay beyond.

“Yeah, I know... It’s been a strange few days,” Nancy replied with a brimming grin. “Come on, once you get over the shock it’s fine!”

Dink, looking very uncertain as to what she had got herself into, tentatively sat down on the couch, once Nancy actually found the couch under the explosion that was her flat.

“Okay, so what happened? You get robbed or something?” Dink asked as Nancy retrieved the emergency wine from the kitchen and found two clean glasses that had somehow not been thrown on the floor by her home invader. Or invaders, it wasn’t clear to her how many wankers had trampled through her life.

She sat down next to her new *friend* and filled the glasses. The coffee table was still on its side. Nancy skilfully hooked an ankle around it and pulled it onto its legs, placing the glasses down in front of her. “I really did get turned over by the government. I know how it sounds, but it’s true!”

“*Why are you telling this woman all this?*” Holmes asked.

“Shut up,” Nancy replied from within herself. She had already appeared quite mad on several occasions already and did not want Dink thinking she was an actual nutter. Well, not more than she already did.

Holmes grumbled in reply. Apparently, she didn’t need to speak aloud for Holmes to hear her. That was useful to know.

“Okay so, there was a corpse on the beach outside my house the other day. I’m sort of still in the *clue seeking* phase right now but there’s an overzealous police unit in town, at least one government agent and a messed up mystery involving my dead dad and maybe a local newspaper,” Nancy said, “and I realise how mental all this sounds,” she added.

“I mean, it does, yeah,” Dink replied. “And I assume you can prove that this isn’t some kind of delusion?” Dink asked, though still with a fascinated and warm tone, not a judgemental and condescending one.

“I didn’t trash my own flat. Also, you saw one of the corpses... *and...* I can introduce you to the local vicar in the morning if you like. He can verify all of this!” Nancy replied, with a fake indignancy.

“In the morning, am I staying the night?” Dink asked with a sultry glance. Nancy felt her cheeks flush, among other things.

“You talk to yourself a lot!” Dink said, taking a sip of wine and looking at Nancy with just a touch of wanting. “Also, bit early to be introducing me to your priest, isn’t it?”

“Vicar. I *did* talk to myself. Now I talk to the ghost of a detective that lives in my head,” she replied with a shrug. “Yeah, look, I know I sound like I need medicating, and that *may be* true, but there really is something going on and getting myself in the middle of it is the most fun I have had in, well, ever!”

Dink laughed at her devil-may-care attitude and placed a hand over hers as their eyes met, with a lot more nerves than she let show.

“Well, Nancy, even if you are a *bit* mad, I’ve gone home with you.”

Nancy grinned. "Fine! But if you leave me in a cold bed at silly o'clock, I'll be livid!"

Dink giggled and put her wine down. She leaned forward and kissed Nancy with an adorable nervousness, like she was worried she would slap her and throw her out. Nancy did quite the opposite, which is when Holmes was polite enough to close the blind in his little room. *Nancy appreciated that.*

The doorbell buzzed, not rang. It was more of an electric torture device than it was a chime. It had been 'ringing' for a few seconds before Nancy finally realised it wasn't part of a dream.

"What the fuck is that sound?" Dink asked, pulling a pillow over her head.

Nancy didn't reply; she just patted the top of the pillow lovingly and then slipped out of bed. She grabbed an oversized flannel robe from the floor and strolled into the living room. The buzz 'chimed' again.

"I'm coming! Will you stop pressing that fucking button!" she yelled, holding her head with one hand, wondering why God would do this to her.

"*Someone's impatient, be careful,*" Holmes advised, though he sounded like he had just been woken up too.

"Good point," she replied quietly. She was careful not to stand on the squeaky boards as she stepped closer to the door and put her eye to the peephole.

A moment later, she flung open the door. "Really Phil, it's six in the morning!" she barked as she pulled her robe tight.

It took her a moment to realise that he was in uniform. She glared at him with suspicion now, rather than rage.

“What the fuck happened to your flat? Never mind, you haven’t seen it then?”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, looking around at the still messed up state of the place. “Wait, what *are* you talking about?” she asked, wondering what she was supposed to have seen.

“It started last night. I assume you would have heard by now. It was all over the internet, then a camera crew turned up about an hour ago,” he said, apologetically.

“What the actual fuck are you talking about, Phil?”

He pulled out his phone and tapped the screen. “Here!” he said, thrusting it towards her.

The headline of the screen read ‘Conspiracy theorist found dead on beach.’ Nancy was about to ask why he was bothering her with this until she glanced down at a picture of her dad. ‘Found in the same mysterious circumstance as murdered police detective, Neil McQueen,’ she kept reading... taking the phone and stepping away from the door so Phil could step in. ‘The link has attracted local interest as the victim, Pilgrim Marston, was arrested for harassing McQueen’s wife six years ago, claiming her husband was involved with a Lovecraftian cult, though no evidence was ever brought to the police regarding this.’

Phil was gibbering about something as Nancy flicked the screen to show more news on the topic. Apparently, it had garnered so much interest from the conspiracy community that at least one news network had sent people to investigate. Then she saw the reason that Phil had bothered her. There was a live stream happening right at that moment, on the website, and her building was the backdrop.

“That’s messed up!” Nancy exclaimed. “Who the fuck calls their kid ‘Pilgrim?’” she sighed as she passed the phone back to Phil.

A sound came from the bedroom and Dink appeared, wearing Nancy’s bathrobe and sporting hair that made it clear what sort of night she was recovering from.

Phil looked confused, but only for a moment, then he screwed up his face and snatched his phone back from Nancy. “You’re a fucking lesbian?” he asked, or accused. He actually backed away with disgust, which fitted quite nicely with his police uniform.

Dink made an uncomfortable sound and looked more than a little offended by the look she was getting. She gathered the robe a little tighter in automatic response.

“Fuck off Mark!” Nancy proclaimed as she slammed the door on him, with a more *righteous* disgust than his.

Nancy spun around on her heels. “Sorry about that!” she said, simply.

“All your friends as charming as him?” Dink asked.

“No, some are far worse!” Nancy tried to joke, though it felt hollow. She refused to let the shocked anger of one boy taint the very real connection she felt with Dink.

“*You should tell her,*” Holmes said.

“What?” Nancy asked, on the inside; on the outside she was simply smiling at her new lover with warmth.

“*Tell the girl how much you like her. Make her feel special. With you being so irrational and flighty, she probably thinks this was a one-night thing.*”

“I am not flighty!” Nancy said, realising it was out loud.

“What?” Dink asked, confused.

“Sorry, brain ghost... I like you. I don’t want this to have been just last night,” she said. Following Holmes’ advice.

Dink bit her lip and grinned. The few feet between them had slowly vanished. They were now nose to nose. The magic of the moment was broken by noises from outside.

The two women cautiously leaned towards the still very dirty window that made up the now open area behind the previously-never-open-curtains.

Phil, or rather Mark as he was no longer a friend, was standing outside pointing up angrily as the people with cameras and mics looked up. The two women glanced at each other, confused for a moment. When they looked back, the camera was firmly pointed up at them. They ducked down like scared children who had been caught by a scary neighbour.

“Shit!” Dink said, loudly.

“I know. I would have done my hair if I knew I was going to be on television!” Nancy replied.

“No, you twat, I don’t exactly advertise my sexuality!”

Nancy laughed. “They have us looking out of a window, not writhing in full view of the street Dink! As far as they know, we just got drunk and passed out!”

Dink looked angry for a moment and stormed into the bedroom. Shouting, “And what do you think your policeman friend is telling them?”

“I like her. She’s much smarter than you. Can I go live in her head instead?” Holmes asked, lighting up a breakfast cigarette and chuckling to himself.

“If only!” Nancy replied, going after Dink, hoping she would calm down.

SMALLER ADVERSARIES

The team of researchers had worked hard. It appeared that they had worked fast, too. Mike and Lilly hadn't been back at the church for more than a few seconds before another member of Howard's team arrived to hand over the information he had asked for. In truth, it could have taken them weeks to gather it from the dusty old library.

Lilly tried not to think about the confusing nature of the garden. She just accepted it. She asked Howard about it once, he had told her it was 'ancient and powerful magic,' as if that were a totally reasonable explanation.

Mike gestured to pass her a page from the folder. "This what you saw?" he asked.

She took the page from him. It was a photocopy of a page from a book. An old book, that wasn't in English, but she quickly realised that she wasn't supposed to be reading it. There was a sketch on the page. An ugly shaded ink drawing. It looked old, like something from the middle-ages.

The drawing showed a horrifying stubby humanoid form, with a large fish-like head atop of its neckless shoulders. “Yeah, that’s the fella,” she said with a screwed-up face. “I saw it underwater; it looked somehow less alien.”

Mike took his feet off the desk and took out a bottle of something brown and strong, and took a swig from it. He also took out a scruffy notebook.

He passed her both things.

“The creature is called a minion of Candiru, officially. Though according to the notebook in your hand, it’s locally known as a ‘little monster.’”

Lilly took a drink from the bottle. Whiskey, and not the good stuff. She winced. She wasn’t as accustomed to hard liquor as Mike and Howard were. She didn’t want them knowing, though.

The notebook was a bunch of scruffy writings and sketches that all looked old. “What am I looking at?” she asked.

Mike took the bottle off her and wet his thoughts before he spoke. “That little book is what started all this. After all the messed-up stuff that happened over the last twenty years, the church sent in a few vicars who were a little less traditional. When the last one basically lost his shit, they called us in. That was the entirety of their shitty notes. I half thought it was a work of fiction until you said fish monster.”

She flicked through the rambling journal. There were at least four different sets of handwriting and very little in the way of useful stuff. The more recent seemed to be the most logically laid out. She flicked to the front, there was a distinct change in style.

“This seems to have massive gaps in it, judging from the pen style and handwriting,” she said, more as a guess really. The early stuff was in old-fashioned flurries while the more recent was in ballpoint pen.

“The gaps between incidents seems to have a range from about fifteen years to a century. More frequently recently. Like it’s been building to something,” he said, putting the bottle back in his drawer.

She handed him the book back, she did this for a living, the only note she needed was ‘fish monster’ but she did have a question. “Are we really here to deal with one fish monster?” she asked.

“Lilly, we are absolutely here to deal with one fish monster, yes. Just not this one.”

She made a thoughtful sound. “You said it was a minion of something?”

He smiled, as if pleased she was following along still. “Candiru. Were pretty sure that if it still lives, it’s a minor god.”

Lilly felt the colour drain from her face. The term ‘Minor’ here was not the important part, it was the term ‘god’ that bothered her. “Are we, are we equipped for a god?” she asked nervously.

Mike shrugged. Their group had ways of categorising things. A designation of ‘god’ meant that, unchallenged by them. this creature could not be stopped by the forces of earth. There was no army, no gun, no explosion large enough to defeat it. The designation ‘minor’ implied that it wasn’t immortal. It could be stopped just not without some supernatural assistance.

“Honestly, we are still understaffed, under equipped and likely under skilled for this. But it’s a Minor God. We don’t have the luxury of asking for it to wait. In all honesty it’s likely the reason it’s chosen now to appear.”

Mike was right, obviously. And a few years ago, her group was a vast network of cells and had skilled people all over the world ready to take on whatever ancient threat would appear. There was an incident. The result was that the really common bad-things were all gone. The ones that stayed were a lot more frightening.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

He picked up a game controller and the sounds of battle blared out of his laptop speakers. “Howard and I will maintain our cover and see how things unfold. You need to patrol. Find the things we miss and do not get in any more fights,” he said, shooting on screen enemies.

TRUST BE DAMNED

“Despite what you fucking think, it was not cheating! We were not dating. I just used you for sex and then went home. No one asked you to get all stalker about it, you pleb!” Nancy said.

“And what did he say?” Marina asked, as she fried bacon.

“I don’t know. He hasn’t texted back yet,” Nancy admitted while laying her head on Marina’s kitchen table.

She had bothered her friend shortly after Dink had borrowed some sunglasses and ran outside to a cab, like a fleeing movie-star being chased by paparazzi.

Marina finished cooking her burned bacon and too-large-for-humans sandwiches. She brought them over and eyeballed Nancy as she topped up her coffee with vodka from her satchel. She worried about the drinking, but she knew commenting about it wouldn’t help anyone.

“He caught you with a woman? Scandalous!” Marina joked, lighting up a cigarette as she bit into her monstrous sandwich, which Nancy screwed up her face at.

“He did not *find me with a woman*. It wasn’t like he walked in on us. She was there, was all. He just jumped to the *correct* conclusion.”

“Thought you swore off women because you always fell for them?” Marina asked, chewing, as smoke escaped from her nose. Which Nancy pulled another face at.

“Yeah, well, she was pretty and bossy and nervous. Which, as I’m sure you know, is an exotic mix. Besides, I really like this one,” Nancy replied, disassembling her mighty breakfast down to manageable components.

“You always say that. Anyway, tell me about the cameras, corpses, and coppers, will you?”

Nancy laughed and started bringing her friend up to date with current events.

Somewhere in her head, as she spoke, she was aware of Holmes’ room filling up with interesting things. He had a large board on the wall, like people have in detective movies. He was pinning things on it. Photographs, or were they memories, she wondered?

Holmes was taking things out of a brown archive box that looked old. He had taken off his jacket and loosened his shirt, even rolled up the sleeves on it. He was still smoking, and still looked annoyed, but something had changed in him. He was working on something. He had a case now.

Nancy finished her tale of government spooks, dead bodies, and interesting girls. She left Holmes out of the story though. She knew that Marina would call doctors. She was half expecting her to react that way anyway. Though Marina knew all the things Nancy was telling her were true. She could see the cameras, read the news reports, and she

heard the angry policeman shouting out front. She had also, *no doubt*, heard the *activity* from the floor above the evening before, so she knew Dink was real.

“Bloody hell, Nancy, you need to stop playing girl detective and stay home. Read a book!” Marina said with concerned and raised eyebrows.

“You literally told me to get out more, and sleep with strangers!” she protested, throwing bits of bread crust at her.

“Yeah, but I didn’t know there would be dead people, home invaders and multiple lovers, did I?” Marina said, with a slightly mocking tone.

“This is what happens when I leave the house. Anyway, I have to go see Mike, and then I’m going to nut-up and call Dink. No plans to play detective today,” Nancy promised.

She felt Holmes turn and look at her with a disbelieving face. “*Bollocks to that! We’ve got sbit to do!*”

The TV crew had got bored or hungry, and left Nancy’s house early afternoon. She headed out to see Mike. She liked walking, she always had, it gave her chance to bask in the town. She took the time to talk to her internal roommate.

“I can see you. I know you’re up to something. You know that, right?” she asked.

“*I’m putting all the clues on the board. I was hoping we would have some time to get to know each-other before we had to go full sleuth but, here we are,*” Holmes admitted.

“How does this work? I can see you, but it’s like you’re an imaginary TV show. It’s hard to explain. How is it for you?” she asked.

“Hard to explain, yeah, same for me. Sometimes you’re on the other side of that window,” he said, pointing at the window that she saw him through from time to time. *“Other times it’s like I see through your eyes. I see everything you do, unless you shut me out, like you did when you were with your lady friend last night.”*

Nancy recalled some ethereal blinds being closed and now considered if it was in-fact her or Holmes who had made that happen. She had thought him polite, but perhaps it was her who did it. Either way, she felt some sense of comfort knowing there was a blocker, a privacy screen of sorts.

“I don’t mind if you listen in when I talk to people, even Mike. I like you being there, picking up on things I miss out on,” she said, after some consideration.

“Okay. Thank you,” he replied.

She liked Holmes, though she also wondered if that was by design. Could she imagine someone who she didn’t like? Was she even imagining him at all? Some part of her believed him to be real, despite all the evidence pointing to him being a symptom of something quite worrying.

She threw open the door to the church to find it empty. She sighed and walked through the old building and out the back to Mike’s office.

“You need to lock your door, or someone will steal your holy water or something,” she said as she sat down next to a very busy Mike. He was busy in the sense that he was deep in a game. Some shooting game he seemed good at.

He was out of his professional uniform and back in the old hoodie, with burn marks in it. The burn marks of a career stoner.

“Morning!” he said cheerfully. “That would be *Font water*. We’re not Catholics!” he objected. “I hear you found another body *and* bagged a hottie!”

“News travels fast,” she said before asking him how he knew.

“Well, a creepily nice policeman called me, said he won’t come help me with the new Pews at the weekend because of the company I keep; said some unkind things about you. Also, the dead body you found is all over the news,” he explained as things exploded on the computer in front of him. He had gained a ‘Victory,’ according to his laptop screen.

Nancy leaned forward to see his username. ‘Vic_BigBallz,’ she glanced at him disapprovingly. He shrugged, “True though. Anyway, how are you dealing with it?” He asked.

“Your balls? I think as a man of God, you should treat a lady with at least a modicum of respect!” she joked.

“No, the mess you seem to be running towards. Also, I see no *lady!*” he replied.

She thought about that for a moment and leaned back in the chair. She put her feet on his desk. “You didn’t comment on the woman,” she observed. She had been friends with Mike since he had come to town but had never mentioned her love life to him. She wasn’t embarrassed or ashamed of anything. It just didn’t seem appropriate.

“If you like her, I like her!” he said with a shrug.

“Thanks Mike,” she replied.

She had been pretty sure that Mike wasn’t a prude or a bigot when it came to matters of love, but she had never tested this theory before.

A polite bell rang from the corner of the office.

“What’s that?” she asked.

Mike flipped an application open on his laptop screen. It was a video feed from inside the church. She had always wondered how no one other than her had ever caught him slacking off.

There was a man in the church looking around. He was in a suit and struck Nancy as being suspicious. Quite suspicious indeed.

“I’ll go see what he wants,” Mike said.

“*Nancy, that man isn’t friendly. Get out of here,*” Holmes advised, always cautious.

Mike threw off his hoody to reveal a rather nice black shirt. He put on a grey cardigan and almost instantly looked respectable. He left the room and appeared on the video feed a few moments later.

“*Leave out the back. Now,*” Holmes advised, again.

“Stop being paranoid,” Nancy complained, rolling her eyes.

Mike and the man were talking. The video had no sound. Mike was gesturing a lot though, like he was annoyed about something. Nancy wondered if this was his dealer. Then the man slapped Mike with a backhand and gestured with both hands in that classic ‘come at me’ way. Mike fell back.

“What the fuck!” she said, standing up and pulling out her phone. She was about to dial the police when she saw Mike slapped the man back.

“*What the fuck?*” Holmes said.

Nancy paused for a moment. Mike *had* told her that he had lived an exciting life before he came to town. There was an implication that it was less than wholesome. She should have realised that he knew how to handle himself.

She started eyeing that back door that Holmes had told her to leave out of when the man on the television screen pulled something that looked a lot like a gun out and stepped towards her vicar.

The back exit suddenly felt a lot more important than it had just moments ago. She was out and in the rear ground of the Church in seconds.

Nancy was running on pure adrenaline, and the breakfast vodka still in her system. She realised her path to safety would take her back to the front of the church. That's when she heard the gunshot.

Panic washed over her, she froze, crouched down behind the back door of the office. She wanted to scream and cry and run, but she was too scared to even take a step.

She turned to see the carpark to the side, there were people there, people who did not look friendly.

"Listen to me. I will keep you safe. I promise. This is why I'm here," Holmes said with a calm and commanding tone which screamed of skill and trust.

Nancy silently agreed.

"Duck down behind the closest gravestone. Take a moment to breathe. Put your back to stone. This isn't a movie. No one is shooting through them." His words were clear and crisp to Nancy's ears, like she was hearing them in her very soul.

She nipped forward a few steps and slammed her back against the stone grave marker. She knew from the angle that no one from the car park could see her. Worryingly, from the back entrance of the church, she was quite exposed.

"Breathe, focus and listen," Holmes instructed. *"Send a text to your police officer friend, right now, put your phone on silent so it doesn't give you away when he calls to find out if you're serious."*

Nancy did as she was told. She tapped out her message. 'Men with gun @ church. Plz help!!1!' she considered correcting the erroneous 'one' but decided it was not the time for accuracy. She hit send, and she closed her eyes and breathed.

"Your senses are my senses. Eyes open please. Look back. Let's see what we're dealing with."

Nancy opened her eyes as if automatically and turned her head to look at the car park. “Two men, and the one inside,” she said to Holmes through her silent thoughts.

“Get up, stay low and walk directly, in a straight line, towards the wall of the churchyard. If you hear bullets, lie down and keep the heels of your shoes up. Better to get shot in the foot than the head.”

Nancy took another breath and hopped up to a crouch, ready to run. She did as she was told. She stayed low and moved forward, being masked by the large stone.

There was a sound, one of the men said something, loudly. She let herself fall forward and kept the soles of her feet flat, like Holmes had instructed.

“Who the fuck are you?” the man had shouted. Nancy had thought it was for her, until a moment later when she heard a familiar voice call back with, “I am vengeance!” in an artificially gruff tone.

“Mike?” Nancy whispered in shock. “Is he doing Batman?” she asked.

“He’s stalling, for you. Get up and run. They should all be looking at him.”

Nancy did as instructed, leaping over the small wall that surrounded the churchyard. She caught her jacket on its edge and landed in mud. For a brief moment, she was angry with herself for ripping the jacket, but knew that this was a far better outcome than getting shot.

She stayed low behind the wall and pulled out her phone. There was a message, ‘Fuck off! Cheeeeeeter!’

She rolled her eyes and tapped out a reply. ‘It wasn’t cheating! We are NOT dating. You are an over attached freak who came on too strong and creeped me out. Also MIKE IS ABOUT TO GET SHOT!111 DO UR FUCKING JOB.’ She hit send and put the phone back in her pocket.

"*Intel*," Holmes requested.

She popped her head up above the wall. She was too far away now to hear what was being said exactly, but she knew there was shouting and threatening. Now she was a modicum safer. She paid attention to the men. They weren't well built, didn't look like professional killers, but they did look like they could handle themselves. She noticed that they looked old, one even had a body warmer on. He looked like he should be out watching his grandkids, not getting into a shootout at the local church.

"The fuck?" Nancy asked, as if it were an actual sentence.

"*Duck. Phone's ringing*," Holmes instructed, and informed.

She could feel the vibration now that he had pointed it out. She ducked back behind the wall and pulled it out. As Holmes had predicted earlier, Phil was calling.

She answered it. "Oh hi, glad you found a moment!" she said angrily as she poked her head back over the wall. There was a lot of pointing going on, all towards the church door, slightly out of sight of her vantage point.

"I'm busy. What do you want, Nancy?" his stern voice said.

"Look, I'm not fucking around. There are men with guns at the church and I think someone got shot! Can you get your arse down here, *please*? Or are you too busy chasing away teenagers and pestering tax dodgers?" Nancy ranted with muted frustration.

"What? You're serious?" came the inept reply.

"Yes! You fucking idiot, *now* get your arse over here before I get shot!" with that said, she hung up the call and pocketed her phone, still peaking over the fence carefully.

"*Nice, I'm sure he'll be right over after that outburst.*"

"If you don't have anything useful to say, get stuffed," she rebutted.

“Nancy, we have two choices here. We leave, get to safety, or we get closer for information.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say something stupid like that,” she replied as she began working her way around the wall, closer to the carpark and the guns.

As she made her way to the end of the wall, she lay down and began crawling prone.

“What are you doing?” Holmes asked, annoyed.

“Being stealthy!”

“You sure?”

She stuck her head around the end of the wall and looked on. She was close enough to hear now and didn’t bother replying to Holmes’ jabbering complaints about her skills.

“Look, we could stand here and argue about it, but I’m the one with the gun mate!” the oldest looking, white-haired man yelled.

Mike laughed at them. “You think guns worry me? I kick arse for the lord! I also have your boy bleeding on the floor of my church, and if you want me to call an ambulance, you had better fuck off.”

“Bloody hell, he’s great!” Holmes complemented.

“Yeah, he’s also going to get shot.”

Nancy considered how she could help, and that, most likely, Mike was being brave in order to give her an unwatched escape. Which she had no intention of doing.

“Don’t do it.”

She pulled out her phone and opened her chat app; she set it to video and pressed record as she stood up and held it out in front of her.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen!” she yelled with confidence, her voice only cracking with fear at the last moment.

The less chatty man swivelled around, handgun pointing her way. The older man, the white-haired one, didn't so much as flinch. He stayed stoney, looking right at Mike, gun steady in his hand. Mike was still in the doorway and sporting a very confused face.

"Gary, eyes on the prize please," he said almost softly. The man, bald, with a beer belly and a shabby pair of slacks turned and watched Mike. The white-haired man then turned, calmly, to face Nancy.

"This is serious. If you're doing what I think you're doing, you're going to really need to sell it."

Nancy grinned widely, fake though it was. "You think you have power over me? I was born in the shadows," she said, quoting Batman, incorrectly, and glancing at Mike who was already palming his face.

"What are you talking about babe?" the man asked.

"Don't 'babe' me, you twat. My name's Nancy! And no one puts Nancy in the corner," she said, now misquoting Dirty Dancing for no reason.

"Why on God's green earth would you tell them your name? Why don't you give them your address? Add them on Facebook while you're chatting! You fucking mooncake!"

Nancy felt the corners of her mouth twitch as she internally grinned at being called a 'mooncake.'

"I can see that you're of an advanced age, so I'll explain this to you. This is a mobile telephone. Not that anyone makes calls on them anymore," she said, loudly, taking a few steps towards them.

The white-haired man shrugged.

"Well, you see, this is an internet connected telephone with a very good camera. It had a big number on the box when I bought it. Also, for context, I recently had disappointing sex with an overly attached policeman. I am sending him this right now. Now, I know you're old and don't understand things, but when I stop recording, it will send

the video to that unskilled lover.” Nancy felt her confidence flair. It was an excellent plan, by her standards, at least.

The white-haired man scratched his chin. He glanced back at the door and then to Nancy. “Gary, go get your useless mate. We’re leaving.”

“If you hurt Mike, I’ll send it!”

“Leave the vicar be,” white-hair said, bowing slightly with his head.

Mike stepped aside and Gary ran in. Nancy and white-hair locked each-other’s eyes for what seemed like an eternity.

Gary came back to the door with another man. He had one arm around his neck and the other holding his side. He had two black eyes and a bloody lip, as well as, presumably, a bullet wound.

They piled into their car as Nancy slowly circled them towards Mike. As their engine started, she stepped back into the church and slammed the door, just in time to hear sirens.

“Lock the door!” she ordered. Mike was already securing the big, aging door with a key that looked like it may have been from a castle.

“*Wood isn’t bulletproof,*” Holmes informed her.

“Back door, we need to lock that too,” she instructed.

Mike went to the back, presumably to bolt it. Nancy followed, far calmer than even she expected. The siren was getting closer.

She spun the recording to the selfie camera with a tap of her thumb. “You’re welcome for the evidence by the way *Mark!*” and she tapped to stop recording. As promised, the file began sending.

She found Mike pulling a table towards the back door of the church. There was an open area between the main church and the newer office. They were stuck in the old building until it was safe.

There was shouting from outside. She ignored it and sat on the raised platform where the lectern was placed.

“Nancy, you were actually pretty great back there!” Mike complimented as he sat next to her. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered her one.

She shook her head. Even in times of stress, she wasn't a smoker. Smelled terrible and made her feel sick. “Got any blood of Christ around?” she asked.

“Strangely enough, I don't keep the hard liquor in here,” he replied. They sat in silence. Mike smoked, flicking ash into a potted plant next to him. “Took some balls that did,” he finally said.

She looked at the blood in the middle of the room. She had already walked through it and left a trail of red footprints.

“You think they're okay out there?” she asked.

“Nancey, the police are professionals. There's no way they aren't sorting this mess out right now!”

“You're the one with the balls. Did you beat up an armed church invader on your own?”

Mike laughed and gestured upwards. “Big man *always* got my back. Easy to be brave. Also, I know it's hard to believe but I'm really *very* qualified to kick some old guys arse.”

UNTREQUITED SKILLS

Lilly had watched the situation unfold from in a tree in the woodland just across from the church. As much as she wanted to be in there, she knew it wasn't required. Despite his cover story, Mike was one of the most skilled hunters to have ever lived. He could take on a small army alone. One man with a gun was hardly a problem.

She was more concerned with the woman. Nancy had behaved stupidly. She had seen her nervously running around the graveyard and then even pointlessly prone behind a wall. After talking to herself and messing with her phone, she eventually mustered the stupid courage to call attention to herself.

Lilly was ready with her whip in hand. She would have been there in seconds, but it was unlikely she would have been able to get there before Nancy was shot, at least once.

Lilly had now read through the file that the garden had sent and she knew that the sea god needed a specific type of sacrifice to muster the energy to manifest. She also knew that all signs did in fact point to Nancy as being that very sacrifice.

She was pretty sure that this team of older men were well enough informed to know that Nancy needed to be alive. They didn't just appear here by chance.

Lilly had made the right call. She had always been told to trust the skills of others and now the gunmen had been shooed away with relatively little effort. Had she not trusted Mike's skill and got herself involved, there was no way there wouldn't be a bunch of corpses on the gravel now and everyone's cover would be gone.

The policeman had arrived and was making a fool of himself already. Howard was right, he really was a useless waste of human skin.

Lilly had quietly returned to Howard's pretend police office before the crowd gathered at the church. She had excitedly told him all about the events, which, annoying, he somehow seemed to know all about already.

"Let me know if they take her to the station. Actually, one of you get over there and keep an eye out for trouble," Howard barked to one of the other hunters. Lilly knew him as Layton, he seemed serious but generally useful. Howard liked him, so she assumed he wasn't a dick. Howard didn't like troublesome people.

She watched as he put on his ill-fitting jacket and checked the ammunition in his massive six shooter. "These people didn't turn up out of nowhere, and we didn't see them coming. Get me two more people and start watching the roads in and out of town," he then barked at the wider room. A young man who Lilly recognised vaguely as being from the garden's admin team grunted in agreement and gave a 'thumbs up' as he left the room hurriedly.

“What do you want me to do?” Lilly asked eagerly.

“Someone threatened Mike with a gun, and then drove away. Get a tracking crystal from the garden and go find them!”

She nodded excitedly and pulled out her key.

NEVETZ WAS

Phil, *sorry*, Mark, was outside hiding behind his police car. He was in full uniform and crouched down behind the door.

“Someone help me! There are people with fucking guns here!” he yelled down his radio, having forgotten all training, decorum, and pretence.

A bullet hit the floor next to where he was crouched. He pissed himself, not a little dribble of fear either. He actually lost control of his bladder. He screamed and ran into the open. Thankfully, the car cruised past, and no one shot at him again. A white-haired man with chiselled, manly features waved a gun at him as he drove away.

Mark’s radio beeped at him. “Officer Philips?” came the voice from the speaker.

He held the button and replied, “They just drove off! I’m okay.” He realised he was panting as he spoke, and his left leg was very warm.

“Is anyone else hurt, officer Philips?” replied the voice.

“How am I supposed to know?” he replied.

“Go and check! Ambulance and another unit are on the way.” The lady on the other end of the mic sounded annoyed.

Mark lamented that between the piss and the shouting on the radio, he would probably be in trouble over this. Oh, and he was told there were people with guns at the church; he had decided to investigate himself rather than reporting it. Yeah, that would likely get him in more trouble than he was already in.

He pissed a little more as he heard wheels on stones in the distance. He ducked down behind his car before realising it was a news van. “Fuck!” he exclaimed, smelling his own, now cold, piss.

Nancy’s phone vibrated. She pulled it out to see an unknown number.

“Don’t want none. Go away!” she greeted, assuming whoever it was would try to sell her insurance, or a phone, or ask about her recent accident.

“Nancy?” came a familiar voice.

“Dink!” she said with joy. “Sorry, didn’t save your number yet!”

She covered the bottom of her phone with her hand and whispered, “It’s Dink, the girl I was telling you about!” to Mike, who gave her two semi-sarcastic thumbs-up, cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

“Nancy, are you okay? Are you in church?” she asked.

“Yeah! How do you know about that?”

“It’s safe, sort of. You can come outside. I’m out here,” Dink said with a tone that was one part annoyance and one part relief.

Nancy pocketed her phone.

“Time to leave,” she informed Mike, who shrugged and put his now fourth cigarette out in the plant pot. Nancy went around the far side

of the room to avoid the blood on the floor. Mike, on the other hand, strolled right through it. “Baptism of *bloooooood*,” he said enthusiastically as she admired the footprints he was leaving. “Footprints in the *blood-sand*?” he asked, wondering if it was better.

“I’m going to convert. Catholics are normal!” Nancy exclaimed.

“Are they, bollocks!” Mike said, turning the castle-key and pulling open the doors.

The light streamed in and for a moment, he really did look, actually, very cool. Strong outline bathed in light, a trail of red footprints behind him. Almost made her wonder if the big-guy *was* looking after him.

There were voices and noise, Mike strolled out. Nancy followed. There was a small crowd of people, a camera crew, three police cars and an ambulance.

Mike looked at Nancy, then at the crowd. “Ghostbusters?” he asked out of the corner of his mouth.

“Better than Batman, I suppose,” Nancy replied.

Mike lit a cigarette with a flurry and took a huge drag from it. “We came.”

“We saw,” Nancy begrudgingly added, as she spotted Dink, who ran towards her.

“And we kicked its ass!” Mike finished enthusiastically, in his best Bill Murray impersonation.

Dink grabbed Nancy in a charged hug. Nancy went to kiss her, then remembered the camera crew.

Dink saw the hesitation in her eyes. “Fuck ‘em!” she said and pulled Nancy into a kiss. A few of the gathered crowd whooped.

“Miss, I’m going to need you and the vicar to come down to the station, assuming you are uninjured,” said a police officer that wasn’t Phil.

The camera man, and accompanying over-dressed woman ran over to Nancy and Mike and stood with her back to them. "Here we are with the survivors of the church shootout..." Nancy and Dink ignored them and followed the police officer as Mike grabbed the mic to tell everyone of the adventure.

"News crew give me away, did they?" Nancy asked.

"I have known you less than twenty-four hours, and the first thing you tell me is that you're haunted by a, what was it? Brain ghost. You get involved in a shoot-out, *in a church!* Oh, and apparently I'm telling everyone watching national news that I'm gay... something I wasn't really planning to do this week! Is your life always like this, Nancy?" she asked.

Nancy kissed her on the cheek as they got into a police car. "Only when I'm trying to impress a girl."

The car started; they began the drive to the police station. "Mike coming?" she asked.

"We'll let the paramedics look at him first. Looks like he had a fight," the officer said through the plexiglass screen between them.

"How were the people at work... about the gay?" Nancy asked, now a little sheepish. "I know you weren't flaunting it, *sorry.*"

Dink laughed and sighed. "Apparently, everyone already knew. Literally everyone!" she explained as the car rattled. "Yeah, so, they didn't even know it was supposed to be a private thing. They all just knew! The crew on the site, the office, no one said anything other than complementing me on the new woman."

"That's sort of nice, I suppose. Still... Sorry."

They held hands and grinned at each other like horny teenagers.

"I have no idea why I like you! You know that, right?" Dink said.

"You're only saying that because I sobered up. You'll feel far differently about me once I'm topped off!"

Dink laughed.

Nancy had given her statement three times now and was starting to feel like a criminal herself.

“You have seen the video? Right? It’s all on there,” she said, again. After some grumbling, the two men interviewing her whispered to each other and asked her to wait while they ‘looked at something.’ She shrugged.

“Hey Holmes, this place is a lot nicer than your little hole,” she said, internally, the moment she was alone.

“It’s literally the same! Even the shitty carpet is similar,” he replied.

“And you can’t smoke in here,” she said.

Holmes lit up and blew it straight up. Nancy, on some level, could smell it.

“Dick!” she said, almost coughing at the imagined cloud. She considered that this place *was* actually a lot like the one that Holmes lived in. She considered that perhaps it was an aberrant memory of her childhood. Did she once visit this place with her dad and stored it some place in the back of her mind or were they all so generic that even TV ones were the same?

“Actually, this room has one thing mine doesn’t,” he began. *“A locked door, which is confusing me because you aren’t under arrest for anything. You’re not even a suspect as far as I can tell.”*

Nancy looked at the door, then to the large, mirrored window that these places always had. She suddenly got nervous.

After only a few seconds of stewing, the door opened, and a familiar face entered. The creepy gnome faced officer from Dink’s building

site. He thought Nancy was involved with that body; she was sure of it.

Detective Farker sat down and eyeballed her like she had been caught with a smoking gun. Nancy responded by glancing over at the mirrored window, guessing the nicer man from the crime-unit would be there. She wondered if he was still wearing sunglasses.

“Play it cool, then get out,” Holmes advised.

“Good evening, Detective Farker. I have a few questions for you this afternoon,” Nancy said, commandingly, knowing it would throw the gnome faced rat of a man off balance.

“Yes, very good Miss McQueen, but I think you will find that this will go easier if I...”

“Prod him.”

“What connection has the second body got to Pilgrim Marston?” Nancy interrupted.

The gnome glanced at the mirrored window and back to Nancy.

“Looks like that was the right question,” Holmes observed, studying his face.

“When the police have a statement regarding the second victim, we will make it known via the usual...”

“Prod him again,” Holmes said, coldly.

“And how are these two victims related to the three geriatric shooters that arrived at our local church?” Nancy asked, tilting her head and smiling, just enough to let him know she was enjoying herself.

“Miss McQueen, your interference with police matters will not be tolerated,” Farker said, squirming in his seat.

“Interfering? That’s a stretch, isn’t it? I already found one body you missed, possibly saved the life of the vicar, got you video footage of armed shooters, attracted positive coverage from national news agencies, and looked fabulous while doing it. If anything, officer Fucking,

you should be paying me as a consultant.” Nancy resisted sticking her tongue out at him.

Detective Farker, glanced at the mirrored window again; his lip twitched. He was suppressing quite an out-burst. Good for him, managing his temper.

“Time to go; send him over the edge,” Holmes advised.

Nancy stood up. “Given that I have reported the crimes and supplied video evidence, I can’t possibly be charged with anything. Which means I’m here as a guest.”

“But Miss McQueen,” Farker said, with a slight glow of eagerness. “It’s not quite as cut and dry as that, you see, you were very young when your father unfortunately passed away, but I have to wonder why his former boss was shooting up the local church.”

Nancy turned back to him.

“Easy Nancy. He’s baiting you.”

“Sorry, what?” Nancy said, resisting the urge to correct his words from ‘passed away’ to ‘fucking murdered and left on a beach!’

“Yes. You see, I didn’t know either, but being the police, we looked up the registration of the car, and got a picture that matched one of the suspects. That man you spoke to in the church car-park was your dad’s old Sargent.” He grinned at the obvious shock on Nancy’s face.

“That was useful information. He thinks he was being a cock, but he just gave us a solid lead.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a crime to tell a policeman to get fucked, so I won’t. Good day, Detective Get.”

He flared his nostrils as Nancy left.

Nancy and Dink sat in the Frog's Moon. It was early evening; Marina had just relieved Nigel and Roy of their duties. They appeared almost magically at the table and sat down.

"He actually brought up your dead dad?" Roy asked with a horrified expression, as if he and Nigel had always been a part of the conversation. Dink looked between them, a little confused.

"Yeah! And he said 'Passed away' like he wasn't punched to death and left out front like the morning milk!" Nancy replied.

"Nigel," Nigel said, pointing to himself, "and Billy," he added, pointing at Roy.

Dink shook their hands. "Roy, actually," Roy added.

"Sorry, yeah, this is Nigel and Roy," Nancy said, as if it wasn't too late to be useful.

Nigel handed her a bottle of wine; she filled her glass to the brim. "Ta," she added as she slurped it down.

Dink was still on her first glass of red.

"We are, the entirety of Nancy's social circle," Roy added with his usual glibness. "Other than Marina, of course."

"What? Am I invisible?" came a voice from behind. Nancy ignored it. Dink looked up to see the vicar from earlier. He wasn't looking very vicar-like now though. He was wearing a red hoody and dirty jeans.

"Mike!" Nigel exclaimed, clapping him on the back. Mike pulled up a chair from a neighbouring table and placed a bottle of some nasty American beer down.

"Hi!" Dink said, now well out of her comfort zone.

"Oh, you the new woman?" he asked.

Dink's eyes went wide, unsure how to answer, knowing Mike's profession.

"Mike, Dink... Dink, Mike," Nancy said, refilling her wineglass.

Dink waved at them all and edged a little closer to Nancy, who casually rested her hand on her leg.

As much as Nancy was playing things cool this evening, she was worrying; her brain was very distracted by all the things that had gone on the last two days.

She was talking it through with her friends, but in her head, she was very aware of Holmes and his far more professional take on it all. His board was looking very complicated at this point.

On the top row he had the words 'Neil McQueen: Death,' the next row showed 'Pilgrim Marston,' and the mystery corpse. The next row, 'Shooters at church.' At the bottom of the board, he had written in a scrawl, 'Government spooks???' with a picture of a cartoon ghost on a note square. It wasn't very spooky.

Nancy looked at the board; it drew her in, distracting her from her friends. She was trying to forget all this and get blind-drunk, but there was something about it that was captivating her.

"Add another thing for me, will you?" she asked, with some part of her mind that she didn't quite understand.

Holmes turned to look at her. "*Sure,*" he said, not asking what she wanted him to add. He just wrote "Mike?" on the board.

"That's the one," Nancy said. Thankful that he hadn't asked why he had written it.

The bar came back into focus for her as she heard her name. "Nancy?" Nigel asked, realising she had missed what he said, he backtracked. "Tell Dink about the time you got so drunk you threw up in the Font at the church!"

She let Holmes and his work fade into the background of her mind; she forced herself to focus on the warmth and company of her friends.

“Okay, so while, technically, I *did* throw up in the Font, it wasn’t my fault! I was clearly not expecting to be hit with the smell of weed and Doritos upon my entrance to the house of God!”

Mike laughed and downed his beer. “That’s actually how Nancy and I met. When I took-over last year, I was warned about a local lunatic that got blasted a few times a month and came in to shout at the big man, but I never expected it to be at three in the afternoon, on a Tuesday!”

Everyone laughed, Dink more than anyone; she did it with a sparkle in her eyes. “Wait, why did it smell of weed? Also, you shout at God regularly?” she asked.

Mike, half choking, explained that it was him who was ‘getting blazed’ in the Church. Which made everyone, including himself, laugh even more. He had obviously decided to allow Nancy’s new woman into his *secret* life.

“Well,” Nancy defended, “I shouted at God about every two weeks for a few months and he sent the world’s worst vicar to look after me! I’d say, that’s a win - win situation that is!”

“How is *that* win - win?” Dink asked.

Roy chimed in like a surprise attacker. “That’s easy! Nancy finally got allowed back in on Sunday and Mike met some people who didn’t report him to the God-police for being the worst vicar ever!”

While initially Dink had been baffled by Nancy’s friends, she quickly warmed to them. They were an odd group of people, but they obviously loved each-other like family and were, as far as Dink could see, all keeping watchful eyes on Nancy. She wondered what she was signing up for, by allowing herself to develop feelings for such a strange, mayhem generator of a woman. Then she saw Nancy stealing a look at her and she flushed with something akin to a schoolgirl crush.

FOLLOWING THE FOOTPRINTS

Lilly had tracked the car using the tracker crystal. It had finally turned to dust outside of an old house that was so far out of town, it may as well have been in a different town all together. She had walked the whole way, across the fields and countryside.

The crystals were amazingly accurate at tracking a person from a memory, assuming they were just regular people. The major downside was that they glowed when you faced the right direction, and that was it. In order to use them properly, you basically had to go in straight lines.

Lilly had been grumpy on her long walk and decided that if ever she met an enemy who could turn into a bird, she would beat the secrets out of them before she killed them.

The house was all alone, fields on all sides. They would be able to see her arrive from any direction. This was an excellent place to stay. No one would be sneaking up on them here. She sat down well inside the treeline. As usually happened, now would be a waiting game. It

was already getting dark. Nighttime would allow her to get closer. She pulled out her phone and sent a text message with her location to Mike. He was the only person on the team who actually looked at his phone. Though she had a feeling that was more to do with his cover than it was a natural instinct.

She wished she had have brought something to eat but hadn't planned or packed for a full day of hiking. Her water bottle was empty, too. Thankfully, she had no intention of walking back. She would use her Void-key to return to the garden, get some lunch, and then exit via the usual means.

She heard a bird above and was envious of the little bastard's ability to fly. Which is when she realised there was another sound. The bird was fleeing something; and it wasn't her.

Her demeanour switched instantly. She was no longer a bored twenty something in the wilderness. She was a hunter now. She pulled her whip from her waist and used it to silently vanish into the trees. She landed delicately and crouched down. Silently waiting for whoever was there to show themselves.

She didn't have to wait long. Though, it failed to show itself. The underbrush below her cracked with visible imprints. Her hunter's senses, attuned to such things, began to guess about the weight and size of her invisible opponent. She began to realise that she had never trained to fight something she couldn't see. She had plenty of warning too. Part of her training involved reading mission reports, one of which was a fight in a shopping centre with an invisible beast. She had thought it quite silly when she read it. She was mad at herself now, for not paying more attention when she had the chance.

The thing was circling the tree, it obviously had her scent but lacked the common sense to simply look up. This told her it was dumb. Dumb things were easier to fight. It stopped moving and began

snorting. Lilly readied her whip and put a hand on the dagger she kept in her boot.

The sound of a car coming had distracted the little monster. The car was going to the house; they had visitors. But who?

She was just as distracted as the little monster was because, rather than using the chance to get the drop on it, it had done the same to her.

She felt air on her neck and with those hunters reflexes she leapt from the tree as a shimmer of distorted air flew towards her. She landed on her back and felt it crack

She also knew that this was not the time to feel delicate. She forced herself to stand, despite the bruising she had just made. The leaves next to her plumed and cracked as the beast landed. There was a little moisture in the ground though and it had stood with leaves stuck to it. From its motion, she could tell it was uninjured. So many creatures could shake off a fall like it was nothing. She envied that.

The beast began to circle her. She wondered why it didn't attack for a moment. Then it occurred to her, it had no idea that it was covered in leaves and mud. The dumb frog thought it was invisible.

She recalled what it looked like from the time she had seen it. And then she recalled the sketches in the book. It was about four feet tall but she knew it was likely crouching. It would have two arms out front that it would keep close. The arms were optimised for swimming and would be deceptively powerful. Her best option would be to catch its legs with her whip. She let it get behind her, and flicked her weapon spinning as she did, with the intent of pulling it over.

The next thing she knew, she was hitting a tree. She had caught it just fine, but it was strong enough that it reversed the motion.

The frogish freak faded into view. As it did, she felt the ground becoming wetter. The monster was summoning water. She was out-

side, there was no room to fill. This thing was so dumb it didn't realise how a field worked. She stood up and began sinking in mud. Maybe it wasn't such a stupid plan after all.

She struggled to reach the whip handle next to her. She fell face first into the mud and then, from the corner of her eye, she saw it vanish as it moved towards her. *Shit*. She was in trouble now.

There was a sound like squelching and the beast screamed. There was then a new wetness as its guts landed on her.

"What the fuck?" she yelled as she managed to push herself out of the mud.

The smell of frog-monster innards almost made her puke. The muculent remains, sticking to her hoody, didn't help that instinct either.

She moved into an ineffective fighting stance before realising that it was for no reason. Howard stood there, cleaning his blade with a red cloth. He was dressed in jeans and a loose black shirt. His signature gun hanging from his belt, a leather satchel the other side.

"You're a really crappy hunter, you know that, right?" he said, casually walking over to her, somehow not sinking in the mud.

She stuck a hand out. He pulled her to her feet and then looked at his hand disgusted.

"How did you know I needed help?" she asked.

"I didn't. You sent Mike the address, he sent it to me, and I thought I would check in. Got here a few minutes before the little beastie saw you."

"I only sent that about twenty minutes ago, how did you get her so fast?" she asked.

He pointed up, at the moon. "I travel faster by night, remember?" he said, and then shrugged.

“Oh,” she said. She often forgot that he wasn’t like other hunters. On this occasion, she was glad he wasn’t.

“Oh! There’s a car,” she said, pointing to the road in the distance.

Howard squinted. “Yeah, it stopped moving when the creature attacked. And now it’s turning around to leave. I can’t see the driver, tinted windows.”

“Should we go over?” she asked.

“Whoever is in there knew the moment the monster was attacked and is now running away. That’s not how humans behave and good hunters don’t get into fights without all the information. We let it go and report what we can.”

Lilly fought against the suddenly drying ground to free her foot. Howard was still just on top of it.

“Seriously, how you doing that?” she asked.

“You’re a bad hunter. I’m a good hunter. This is just a symptom of the difference,” he said with a grin. “Now get us back to the garden before someone comes to check on Kermit here.”

OF CHAMPIONS

“**N**ancy, Nancy are you there?” Holmes badgered.

Nancy mumbled, half asleep. As a reaction to her sound, Dink moved closer and pulled the blanket towards her.

“Nancy!” Holmes demanded.

Nancy’s eyes flicked open for a moment and then closed; not closed, to sleep. Instead, they closed to allow her to direct her full attention to her partner.

“Holmes, it’s I-don’t-know-O’clock and I am warm, happy and still drunk. Also, there is a rather attractive woman snuggling up next to me who I don’t want to be super weird around. What do you want?” she demanded as Holmes’ room came into focus for her.

“Oh, terribly sorry! But when exactly else are we supposed to talk? If you’re not flirting with miss hottie, you’re getting pissed with old men! That’s if you’re not getting shot and demanding my help!”

“Point taken. Can I get coffee in here?” she asked, sitting on the table. She looked down and was relieved to find that whatever part of

her was doing all this had put her in a dressing gown. A moment later, she realised she was drinking coffee. *Good job brain!*

Holmes looked at her quizzically and lit a cigarette that appeared in his hand. Nancy was going to ask about that, then remembered how she got a coffee. She was assuming that the combination of drunkenness and sleepiness was making her brain lazy. But then, why was Holmes so unaffected?

“Right, brief time!” Holmes began. He was excited. It wasn’t obvious, not at first, but Nancy was learning how to tell the differences between his array of *mostly* grumpy moods.

He pulled his board closer. It was a whiteboard, on wheels, and like everything else in the room, it looked oddly retro. Its frame was made of green metal and reminded Nancy of pipes. He had used big red magnetic coins to affix things to it and had lots of yellow note squares stuck all over it.

“We have the following things to be aware of. Puzzle number one; Mister Marston being found dead on the beach.”

Nancy shrugged and sipped her coffee. It was bad coffee. How did she imagine bad coffee. No, *why* did she imagine bad coffee?

“Puzzle number two; basement corpse.”

Nancy nodded, “I liked that one. Not often you see a wet corpse.”

“Problem three; The white-haired shooter and his crew, also, sub-point: Why did they visit Mike? What is he hiding?”

Nancy screwed up her face, “I think I was being paranoid. Mike can’t be involved in this, he’s a vicar!”

“Are you forgetting that Mike was visited by the government spooks before you? And how they came right here after speaking with him?”

Holmes looked smug.

“He told him he didn’t know anything and then he moved on to his next target, me,” Nancy defended.

“Nancy, Mike is the one who told us that.”

“Oh,” she replied. “Why would he lie about that?”

“I mean, that’s literally why it’s on the board... You did see the board?” he asked, poking the board behind him with his thumb. “Board,” he said again, for effect.

“Little bit, yeah.”

“What’s more likely? A government agent randomly decided to search your house. Or they searched your house for a reason?”

Nancy couldn’t argue his point. It *was* likely that Mike said something which set them after her. She didn’t like it, but she could not for a moment avoid the facts. They were at her flat, looking for something.

“Puzzle number four; why search your flat? What did they think they would find?” Holmes asked, as if on command. Nancy wondered if it *was* by her command and tried to project an image of Holmes standing on one leg.

“What are you doing?” He asked. *“You look like you’re trying to take a crap. What is that?”*

Nancy stopped her mental projections. “Go on,” she suggested.

“Puzzle number five; how does all this connect back to your dad? And why?”

Nancy looked at the board, pictures from her memories, little scraps of ideas and note squares with scrawl on them. It wasn’t a concise board of clues and ideas. It was a mess of abstract observations and notes. She hopped off the table to inspect it a little closer.

“Holmes, you sure you know what you are doing?” she asked pulling a note square from the board. She showed it to Holmes, “Really?” she asked.

The note in question had been placed next to a picture of Mike and read, “How much do vicars earn?”

Holmes looked at it and smiled a little.

“Planning a job change, Steve?” she asked.

“*Look at that. You called me Steve. Are we bonding?*” he said with a wide and sarcastic grin. “*Should we hug now?*”

“Ew, no!” Nancy barked. “Where does the library and the newspaper fit into all this?” she asked.

“*Shit, all my numbers are wrong!*” he said with genuine annoyance. “*This is because you’re drunk! I blame your brain for this,*” he complained as he added ‘puzzles’ six and seven to his list. Then got a board wiper and started again with a grump.

“Thanks Holmes, I know you’re working hard. I appreciate it,” she said as she blinked a few times to find herself looking at the ceiling of her bedroom. The only thing she could look at that wasn’t a mess.

Dink was still sound asleep and looked quite content. What did she really know about this woman? Was she just a wonderful stranger she had met or was there more to the encounter?

She quickly shook off the tangent. For reasons she couldn’t fathom, this wonderful, smart, financially solvent and functional woman liked her. She wasn’t going to second guess it just because of all the murder and intrigue she was wrapped up in.

She lay there for a few minutes more before realising she really, truly, and desperately needed a piss.

“What are you doing?” Dink called in from the bedroom.

“Tidying up!” Nancy called back from the livingroom. She was trying her best to do it quietly but flipping the dining table back to its upright position had made quite the thud.

“Do I need to help?” Dink asked, obviously hoping she didn’t.

“Nah, you sleep, I got this. Oh, be warned, we’ll have company soon. Marina’s probably going to show up. She’ll make terrible bacon sandwiches and tell me I need therapy.”

Dink appeared in the doorway. Far more naked than Nancy expected. It was traditional to pretend to have some mystique the next morning. Granted, Nancy had never worried about it, but other people usually did.

“You talk in your sleep, you know?”

“I do not!” Nancy replied with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, you do. I heard all about your puzzle list and your clues. Heard your half of the conversation with your brain ghost. It was pretty interesting!”

“Shit. That must have sounded mad. Wait... you’re not leaving because I’m a bit mad, are you?” she asked, suddenly concerned.

Dink laughed and bit her bottom lip. “You know, I really should. You’re obviously a fucking mess.” Nancy felt her eyes widen.

“But no. I really do have to go to work. I’m late for the second day and we’re behind schedule because finding a body on your building site slows construction quite a lot.”

“I want to see you again! I like you,” Nancy blurted out, a little too quickly. “You came to find me when you thought I was in trouble at the church. No one ever comes for me. I... I liked it.” Nancy suddenly felt far more vulnerable than she liked and regretted her uncharacteristic outburst of honesty.

Dink smiled and looked a little like she had just realised she was naked. Maybe it was an emotional nudity. She replied in kind. “You should come to my hotel later. We can hang out and watch the big TV.”

“You live in a hotel?” Nancy asked.

“No! I live in the city. I don’t want to drive back every day while we are working on the shopping precinct project. Wait, who lives in a hotel? Is that even a thing?”

“Fucked if I know!” Nancy admitted.

Dink turned, vanishing from the doorway.

“*She seems to like you,*” Holmes observed.

“Stay out of this. You’ve caused enough trouble!” she replied, possibly aloud. She wasn’t sure.

Nancy continued flipping furniture and reassembling her life. She wondered why she had left it as long as she had to actually deal with the problem.

“She’s going to start asking about you, isn’t she?”

“*I assume so. She doesn’t want you medicated though, which is something,*” Holmes said as the door opened and Marina strolled in. She had eggs with her, and milk.

“Oh, my gosh! Is it a special occasion?” she asked.

“Jesus Christ Nancy!” Marina said, surveying Nancy’s flat. “I know you said they turned it upside down, but I assumed you were talking shit! This is mental.”

Nancy looked around the chaos nest she was standing in, the centre being the less disorganised patch, though it was still quite messy. “I like it,” she replied.

“I ran out of bacon,” Marina said absently. “Who’s in the shower?”

“Dink. How did you, of all people, run out of bacon?”

Marina was still massively distracted by the state of the flat, but managed to utter, “None left. TV crew that’s stalking you bought it all up. They’re renting a cottage at the edge of town while they wait for you to find the next body.”

“Oh, fun! That’s something to look forward to,” she replied. “What we having?”

“Omelettes, I guess. Should I make an extra one?” Marina asked.

“I guess so.”

By the time Dink came out of the bathroom, the food was cooked, and the coffee was cold. She somehow came out looking like she had just left a salon. Which pissed-off Nancy no-end. She felt that she always looked like she had been on an all-night bender, usually because she had, and the two women she was sitting with always looked like they were ready for their proverbial close-up.

“Food!” she said excitedly.

“You were working the bar last night, so you didn’t have a lot of time but, for the record, Marina, this is Dink. Dink, this is my boss, best friend and woman who has had me placed in government mandated therapy three times now,” Nancy gestured back and forth as she spoke, with a pretence of formality. It was made less convincing because she was holding a fork in one hand and half chewing terrible omelette.

“*Oh, yeah, that’ll help. Tell the girl how mentally unstable you are,*” Holmes said, clapping and shaking his head.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, *properly*, Marina,” Dink replied, picking up a fork as Nancy slid her a plate.

“*Well, this should ruin her good mood!*”

Dink cut off a chunk of omelette and placed it in her mouth gleefully.

“Interesting name. What’s it short for?” Marina asked, at the exact moment Dink discovered, that despite appearance, Marina was a terrible cook and could, indeed, even screw up the simplest of meals. She glanced at Nancy and then back at Marina, forcing herself to chew.

The omelette was fascinating. It was, somehow, burnt on the inside and undercooked on the outside, which, as far as Nancy understood, defied physics. It was also too salty, too chewy and had the texture of meat in places, while tasting like cake in other parts. In theory, it contained cheese and mushrooms, but where they had gone during the cooking process was a mystery.

Dink swallowed; it actually made a sound as she did. Nancy had long since become immune to the bafflement and displeasure of Marina's cooking, instead accepting her fate.

"It's my dad's fault. My real name is Velma. Like the girl in the orange jumper from Scooby-Doo. My dad hated the name, said people would shorten it to *Val* or something. He just hated it. Started calling me Dink, and it stuck," she said. She obviously enjoyed telling this story,

"Val!" Nancy chuckled.

"Okay, but why 'Dink'?" Marina asked.

Dink was forcing herself to politely take another bite of egg-disk, so, didn't reply right away.

It was Nancy who stepped in. "Because it's Velma's last name, the one in Scooby-Doo, Velma Dinkley."

Dink's eyes went wide like two small headlights. Her mouth opened in amazement. "Fuck me! No one has ever known that! Never, not once in my entire life!"

Nancy shrugged. "I assumed, when we met," she said, eating her own torture plate.

"Wait, you knew my name was Velma?"

"Yep," Nancy replied, mouth full.

"She knows everything, it's annoying," Marina said, munching omelette as if it was edible.

“I Yahoo’d the construction company before I came over the morning we met. Your name is on the ‘about us’ page. Picture of you too. *Looks good.* I almost didn’t recognise you in a flannel shirt.”

“You still use Yahoo?” Marina asked, stunned by the revelation.

“Nancy! I’m sorry, I assumed you had no idea about that,” Dink said. Her face was somewhere between embarrassment and confusion.

“*Talk her down before she gets upset,*” Holmes advised.

Nancy took Dink’s hand. “Look, I get it’s a strange thing to tell someone. I assumed you were going to tell me at dinner tonight, at the hotel.”

Marina’s head was swivelling back and forth as she followed the conversation with no idea what was happening. “What?” she asked after a charged silence.

“Dink is married,” Nancy said calmly, reaching for toast from the other side of the table.

Dink looked nervous and was obviously working hard to suppress some feelings, though what those feelings were was a mystery to Nancy *and* Holmes.

“I... We separated. We have been for a few months now,” Dink explained.

“I know,” Nancy replied casually, buttering burnt toast.

“Okay... How?” she asked.

“You’re a fully qualified architect and a trained site manager who married the owner of the second largest construction company in the country. You did nothing with your qualifications until about six months ago.” Nancy took a bite of toast. It was terrible. How could Marina even screw up toast?

“When you separated, he wanted to keep it quiet, so investors didn’t pull out, I assume.” She ate more toast.

“He handed you control of a subsidiary of his company, which does small modernisation projects. Keeps you out of his way and independently solvent. I assume he got the house as part of this deal, which is why you are currently, *actually*, living in a hotel.”

Dink’s expression went from confused to angry. “How the fuck do you know all this, Nancy?” she demanded.

“Easy to see. You aren’t the type of person to wear flannel shirts, you were doing it to fit in with the site crew. The only reason someone like you would care what they thought of you was if you were new to the job and wanted them to respect you.”

“No one knows about that!” Dink demanded, now crossing over into *quite* angry.

Marina backed away and lit a cigarette, looking uncomfortable.

“It was obvious. You’re a nice person and I doubted you would have been cheating on your husband with a fucked-up barmaid who drinks too much. Don’t get me wrong, I know I’m okay looking, but I’m not the kind of beauty that makes you leave a happy home. You had the freedom to just leave work to come to the church yesterday, so you weren’t answering to anyone, not directly. I assume you were worried about what they would think of you being outed on national news because it could affect investors.”

Dink hadn’t said anything. Her face was hard to read. Nancy felt nervous, to say the least.

“Yeah, she’s freaked out. You freaked her out.”

Nancy took another bite of her omelette. Trying to not look like she was about to have her heart broken.

“I thought it was a *bit* you were doing. I honestly thought it was an adorable little mad *thing*! It’s not, is it? You really do have a ghost detective in your head! It’s not a bit!” Dink said, somewhat excited.

“Got a what?” Marina asked. She was ignored.

“I told you, from the start,” Nancy said, not sure if she was supposed to be readying herself to defend against a coming wash of anger.

“You did! And I wondered how you knew I’m obsessed with ghost stories. But then there was the body and the kissing, then the talking in your sleep. I was having such a good time, I never thought about it! You’re a haunted detective!” Dink was excited, animated like a teenager who just discovered porn in the back of their dad’s garage.

“Haunted detective?” Marina added, with another layer of confusion.

“Holmes said I freaked you out,” Nancy said.

“I did.”

“Well, he doesn’t know *everything*! Look, I really *do* have to go to work now. I’m staying at the Red Dacca, in the nice bit of town. Come over this evening?” Dink asked. Nancy realised she was holding her hand, which she liked.

“Okay. About seven?” she asked.

“I’ll remind you, make sure you don’t drink yourself to sleep by noon,” Holmes said, either supportively or sarcastically; she wasn’t sure.

Nancy found herself able to do little more than nod in agreement. She received a kiss on the forehead and Dink left, shouting a very well faked “Thanks for breakfast,” as she vanished.

Marina looked at Nancy expectantly. “Ghost detective?”

“I’ll stay out of this one.”

“Don’t start. As it happens, I like him. We’re buds.”

Marina took a long drag of her cigarette. “Nancy. Do you want me to call the doctor? Last time you went wobbly we left it too long, and you weren’t okay for a long time. Remember?”

“This isn’t me falling down a depression hole or hiding in my flat for months on end. This is me, my ghost detective, possibly my new girlfriend and my vicar on a crusade to solve a very interesting case.

I think there's a chance that in the middle of danger, hauntings, and history, I may, for the first time, be a *little bit* happy."

Marina let a smile betray her. "Well, good for you. But... If things get out of hand. I'm calling help for you."

Nancy shrugged, but was grateful that she wasn't having to argue it out. "If it helps. Mike has an imaginary friend too and no one thinks he's mad!"

"Don't start with me McQueen!" Marina said and started clearing away the remains of breakfast. "Get back to tidying your flat, you loon!"

"Mike has an imaginary friend too... really?"

"Shut up, Randal!"

"Hopkirk, surely!"

BAD HUNT

The camera crew had been worrying Howard a great deal. They had turned up, seemingly, out of nowhere. His group didn't have them on their radar at all before they came to town. Howard nor Mike had considered that the media would be remotely interested in the goings on of a little town on the south coast.

They had mostly ignored the media. Sure, over the years sometimes explosions, street fights and the occasional sword-based incident had garnered interest. The apparently low stakes goings on in this town were overall far too low profile for them to take much of an interest. Or so they thought.

The main problem with the media was that any attempt to keep them safe, by encouraging them to not snoop around supernatural events, would result in them being convinced that they were *onto something*.

Howard once tried countering this by simply threatening a troupe of journalists. Which resulted in them being convinced that they were *onto something*.

The only way to deal with them was to ignore them. Sometimes they got in the way, sometimes they got themselves killed, it often resulted in the ones left alive being convinced that they were *onto something*.

While, overall they were annoying, they were ultimately outside of the purview of Mike and Howard's organisation. The best way of dealing with them was to ignore them.

"They parked up outside Nancy's flat. You think I should get Lilly to move them on?" Howard asked on the morning that the news van arrived.

"No, I don't think so," Mike considered. His voice on the phone was gruff and low on energy. Howard found it strange that he was keeping normal hours now. It had been a long time since going to bed at night seemed normal to Howard.

"Sorry, I hadn't realised I had woke you. I'm still getting attuned to your hours."

He heard the telling swish sound of some curtain opening and the scratching of Mike's morning stubble. "No, its fine. What are they doing now?" he asked.

Howard lowered his phone from his ear, so as to remove the light from his sensitive eyes. He squinted for a moment, standing on a rooftop at the other end of the street allowed him a good view of them. "They seem to be talking to a camera, and pointing at the building. I assume they are streaming it or something."

"There a website or company name on the side of the van?"

Howard squinted again, lowering the phone. "Yeah, there's an 'a' in a circle and the words 'Kent on the streets' No spaces, upper case to separate the words."

Mike made a grumblng sound and then yawned. "Luisiana Kent. She's made a career out of debunking internet conspiracy theories.

She's actually not a bad investigator. Or at least, that's what her reputation says."

"Ah, so the Marston corpse was what tempted her into town?" Howard observed.

"Most likely, yeah. Leave them be, they'll likely pay Nancy for an interview then see themselves out of town," Mike advised.

"You sure you don't want Lilly to keep an eye on them?"

"No," Mike said. "I'm sure they'll go away on their own."

"What do you mean, you already knew about them?" Lilly asked as she followed Mike around the cemetery next to the church.

"Yeah, they parked outside Nancy's house the other morning," Mike replied.

"What? How did I not know that?"

"I don't know. Sort of slipped my mind to be honest. Media people get bored easy and go away," Mike explained as she squatted down next to a gravestone.

"Well thanks for nothing. What are you looking for anyway?" she asked, annoyed.

"Just checking the names. Seeing if I recognise anyone."

"Why would you... Never mind, you'll just tell me something cryptic that I won't understand. Do you want me to go back to the house, see if I can get in and deal with the old people with the guns?"

Mike stood up and brushed his knees, making sure the mud didn't stick to his trousers. He was dressed for doing a church service and wanted to at least *try* to look the part. "No. I already sent a team out there."

Lilly's eyes widened. "And you forgot to mention that?"

"They didn't find anything. By the time they got there, they had vanished. The place was clean. Like no one had ever been there. You got spotted, and we missed our chance."

Lilly realised the implication. It was her ineptitude that caused them to miss out on information that could have been useful. "Shit. I'm sorry, boss. I shouldn't have been seen."

"Happens. Just learn from it," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder supportively. "You're still new to this. It takes people a long time to learn all the things they need to be good at in this life."

"Did it take you a long time?" she asked, trying to get a little something out of him. Anything to get confirmation of his legend.

He grinned, knowing exactly what she was hoping for. "Actually, by the end of my first real mission the garden was on fire, our leader was dead and Howard had developed a new outlook on life. So, my training was accidentally fast tracked."

She grinned back knowing better than to push for the complete story. She was happy enough that he had confirmed the garden fire. Something to talk about the next time she hung out with her fellow trainees.

"Now get out of here before I have to tell people you're a youth pastor or something."

OF THE ID

Marina had informed Nancy that the camera crew had been staying at the shitty rental cottage not far from them. She knew that the only place to eat close by was the Marina Café. Marina informing her that she should go to the marina entertained her a great deal.

She walked down there, trying her best to get some basic information from her smart phone, but the evil beast 'no signal' was a constant companion. Still, she got a few titbits.

She pushed open the door and the old bell rang. The place was packed with fishermen and a great many familiar faces from the pub. A few of them looked at her like she was today's special. She ignored them. She saw the camera crew instantly. No surprise, their stupid van was outside.

They got a little excited when they spotted her and started whispering between themselves. Nancy ordered a large slice of chocolate cake and a cup of caffeine from the cute boy who never charged her

full price. She sat by the front window of the old rustic café. Waiting for things to happen.

“*You are supposed to talk to me before you do things like this,*” Holmes complained.

“You work better under pressure; besides, they’ll know a lot more about Marston than the internet does, I’m sure of it,” she replied, mentally assigning Holmes to the large window next to her seat.

As predicted, after a few moments, the woman Nancy knew from the streams came over and sat herself opposite her. Nancy, trying to play things cool, didn’t so much as look up. She just ate her cake and said, “That took longer than I expected. I was hoping you were going to pay for my cake!”

She then sipped her coffee and stared at the woman over her cup.

The woman wore less makeup than she did on the news stream, video, whatever it was called. She was also far less performative. She was platinum-blond and had teeth that were so white they were almost painful to look at. She wore bright red lipstick, the kind that silently screamed *predator*, but in a way that actually attracted the prey.

“Well, bribery seldom works,” she replied in a far too well-spoken voice. So English, it was almost a performance in of itself. Nancy didn’t like it when people forced out this accent, or absence of their real one at least.

“How ethical of you,” Nancy replied. Putting her cup down and making intense eye contact with the woman.

“You know who I am, I assume.”

“Yeah, you’re the wanker who thought my flat was ideal for an early morning filler slot on the news. Aren’t you?” Nancy said.

The woman grinned; Nancy squinted at the white of her teeth. “You must be very excited to have all this attention,” she said.

“She thinks she’s smarter than you, always a good place to start. Don’t say anything to make her reconsider that. Not yet,” Holmes advised, looking through the window and rubbing the side of his chin. *“Actually, play into it.”*

The woman screwed up her lips as if she wasn’t sure what to say, or at least was considering it, before finally speaking. “I’m from a very well-known news network. I’m sure you saw the van outside.” She pointed to her van through the window. Though, from Nancy’s point of view, she was pointing at Holmes’ crotch, which entertained him, and her, quite a lot.

“I know! I saw,” Nancy said, trying to add unnatural impressed overtones to her words. “And you were filming *my* flat. And then you were at the Church when all that unpleasantness happened! It’s almost like you’re looking out for me!”

“You sound dumber! Good job!” Holmes complimented. Nancy was actually doing a bad impression of the librarian she had met the other day.

“Yes! I suppose we are,” the woman said with a grin, *damned teeth*. “You know we’re actually here because of the sad find on the beach the other day. Do you know anything about that? It was right outside your flat, after all.”

“Yes, I do. I saw all the police and ambulances. I even got a nice policeman coming to ask me about it. And then, can you believe it, I saw another body up at the building site at the edge of town!” Nancy said. She felt herself slipping into the same verbal canter she spoke with when she was a teenager. It was oddly familiar; *she did sound dumb!*

“Oh, yes. I think we heard something about that. Hey, you know, I bet we could put this on television if you don’t mind talking to my camera team with me. *A real interview,*” the woman said. After a second or so she added, “I’m Louisiana, by the way.”

Nancy knew full well who Louisiana Kent was. She had Yahoo'd her on the way over to the Marina Café. "Louisiana, oh, oh, oh, like the country?" Nancy asked excitedly, and as dimly as possible.

Louisiana blinked for a moment. "Yes!" she said, waving her two companions over. They appeared like the little ghouls they were. One sat next to Louisiana and the other next to Nancy. They were on a bench seat next to a window; there was simply no escape for Nancy now. This was all part of the killer instincts of all mediocre news teams, she guessed.

In truth, she had no concerns about ejecting the little runt if she needed to leave. Nancy was popular with the locals and if it looked like she was in even a little bit of bother, a random fisherman would pummel any adversary, on the promise of a free pint.

"This is Jon and David. David does cameras and Jon handles all the technical stuff. Like *microphones* and streaming, all those fascinating little bits." Jon, who was a good-looking, overly pampered man, also sporting whiter than white teeth, pulled out a little gadget at the word 'microphone.' He placed it on the table and angled it slightly towards Nancy.

"*Smooth, they may actually be good at this,*" Holmes said with a nod.

"You think you might want to be on television, Nancy?"

"Oh, my, gosh! You even know my name! That's *so* cool, big star like you knowing me! Wow!"

Nancy, in actual fact wanted to stab Louisiana with her cake fork but was already committed to her 'friendly idiot' *bit*.

"Oh, yes. Actually, we learned all about you. The tragic story of your father's death was all over a website. Turns out the person who wrote it all there was the same terrible man who somehow wound up dead on the beach!"

“I know you’re playing it like you’re as dim as she expected, but why is she talking to you like you’re a child now?” Holmes asked. Nancy ignored him and kept smiling with a ‘wow,’ expression plastered across her face.

“Oh, I knew that already! I read your news article as soon as my policeman friend came to tell me you were out there.” Nancy paused, as if in thought for a moment. “I wonder who the second body used to be?” Nancy phrased her statement like a question and played with her cake fork.

The two men glanced at each other and then at their predator leader.

“Well, Nancy, the news hasn’t broken yet, but *our sources* indicate that the body was that of Tom Sinclair the number two at the website that Pilgrim Marston owned,” Louisiana said, half sounding like she was regurgitating some script she had memorised. Nancy wondered if this was what she was intending to say later when she was on camera.

“Was he missing?” Holmes asked, studying Louisiana closely from the vantage point of the window that she had placed him on.

“This Tom bloke, was he reported missing or something?” Nancy asked.

“No. But we think he flew down here from Scotland, on the same plane as Marston and no one has seen him since. It only makes sense,” she said.

Nancy pulled out her phone and typed in Tom Sinclair’s name. She scrolled past some old computer stuff and found a profile page for the well-known conspiracy theorist.

“Sorry, did you just get a text or something Nancy?” Louisiana asked, quite put out at not being the only thing in the room that mattered.

“No fucking way!” Nancy loudly exclaimed a moment after the page loaded.

“*Oh, shit!*” Holmes added, looking at the phone through his window.

Dave and Jon looked quite entertained at Louisiana’s obvious annoyance, not that Nancy was paying much attention. She was scrolling about the page like a madwoman. Which she probably was.

“Excuse me! Nancy?” Luisiana tried again after a few more seconds of being ignored.

Nancy looked up. “Okay, Lou, it’s like this,” Nancy said, not using her ‘dumb’ voice now. “I *know* this wizard!” She held up the phone. There was a small, familiar face on the screen. “This wanker right here, he turned up at my house claiming to be named Daniel Radcliffe; said he was working for ‘the government.’ Little Harry here turned over my flat looking for *something!*”

Louisiana looked shocked at Nancy’s sudden change of demeanour, but quickly corrected her attention. “And you didn’t recognise him when you saw the body? *Don’t call me Lou.*”

“No! Your sources, which I assume are just your own best guesses, are total bollocks. The stiff in the basement was a fat man. Naked as a sausage at a barbeque and twice as bald. Not this git!” Nancy said, quite animated now.

“*Why would this guy flip your house the day after his buddy is killed?*” Holmes was writing ‘Tom Sinclair’ on his crime-board. He added a fresh question mark to ‘who is Victim two’ and made thoughtful noises to himself.

“Some use you are!” Nancy complained.

“What? Who?” Luisiana asked, looking at Nancy staring out of the café window and talking to herself.

“Okay, you idiots don’t know anything. Move,” she barked at the man sitting next to her. “Get out. Go, be gone! Off you fuck!” she

ordered as Dave, or Jon, whatever his name was, scurried out of the seat to let her out.

“Wait, you can’t just leave. What about the interview?” Louisiana asked, stunned by Nancy’s sudden change.

“You got some good sound bites on your little recording thingy. If you want something else, write me a cheque and we’ll talk. Also, if you put my lady friend on telly, or the internet or even in a newspaper, you won’t get any more out of me,” she barked as she left the café. The little bell on the door chimed as it closed behind her. Nancy glanced back to see the three of them looking quite confused and scratching their heads.

“Okay, so now we know who searched your flat, we have to figure out why,” Holmes said into Nancy’s ear as she walked up the hill.

“No shit, sherlock,” she replied. “I still need to know what the newspaper angle was. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Agreed, though we did find a body there, so maybe it was a message?”

“That would be quite a message. Why not just send an email?” Nancy considered.

“Maybe it was about the places he visited,” Holmes mulled. *“Library, Church, old newspaper offices. One of them had a body, one had your shooty friends. Maybe we missed something at the library.”*

“No, the geriatric gunmen of the retirement home didn’t show up until after.... Wait... you think they could have been looking for the same thing as Marston?” she asked; stopping in her stride.

“You think they were looking for something at all those locations?”

Nancy turned and began marching towards the church.

“Mike? You in here?” Nancy asked as she pushed open the door. The bloodstain had been cleaned and she’d felt a brief shiver at the thought of it. Nancy didn’t like blood. Actually, she didn’t really like *any* violence. She had managed not to think about almost getting shot. She decided to continue not thinking about it.

She walked to the outside of the church and could see Mike talking to a young couple through the window of the little office. He glanced up and mouthed ‘two minutes,’ gesturing to a wrist watch he wasn’t wearing.

She walked back into the church to wait. She sat on a pew and looked around idly. It was oddly calm given how much fist waving, gun firing, and general scariness had been there just a day before. She half smiled at the memory of Mike suddenly quoting Batman and somehow having a good time while people were outside with guns.

There was a man in a hoodie, looking somewhat tormented on one of the pews. Nancy decided that he would probably like some privacy and instead of taking a seat, she navigated to the other end of the building. One of the old side rooms she knew was the entrance to the basement.

“You think Mike will mind you snooping?” Holmes asked.

“I doubt it. Besides, he’s the one who didn’t lock it,” she said as she pulled open the old door with steps behind. She briefly considered that she may find something she couldn’t un-see down there, but the smell of weed hit her instantly and she was suddenly sure that it contained exactly what she expected.

She closed the door behind her and carefully went down the old stone stairs. She opened another door and pushed aside a thick black curtain. She was hit with a bright light and a bit more heat than she expected.

There in all its glory was Mike's personal 'grow room.' He had put foil across all the walls, lights were hanging from the ceiling, and they were brighter than Louisiana Kent's teeth.

There were around a dozen large plants in the room, each one in its own planter with a light directly above it. Between each row of three there was a big pipe maintaining air flow and temperature.

The walls were covered in silver foil and a table next to the door contained what Nancy recognised as gardening equipment. There was a machine that looked reminiscent of an oven in the far corner and a shelf filled with books. Nancy inspected them, they were all about the 'art of growing.' To Nancy's amusement, there was also a cross on a chain adorning the front of each planter.

"He takes this seriously, doesn't he?" Holmes observed.

"Well, it's just for personal use!" came a voice from behind her.

She jumped in shock and spun around just as Mike stepped in through the curtain.

"Shitting hell, Mike, you scared the bejesus out of me!"

"That can be payback for you setting off my door alarm! Thought that spook had come back!" he replied, carefully checking on his plants. "Why are you bothering the apostles anyway?" he asked.

"Wait, you call your plants 'the apostles?'" Nancy asked, quite amused.

Mike raised an eyebrow and then began waving for her to get out. "Come on, you're upsetting them with your stinky girl odours!"

They emerged at the top of the staircase and Mike resealed his door, carefully making sure it was fully closed and the handle was tight.

"I wondered if our friend Pilgrim Marston would have found anything down there. Hope you didn't mind," Nancy said.

“Nah, no problem. I know how nosey you are. I told that delightful young couple that I needed to get some paperwork, so go hang out with Jesus while I finish up will you?” he asked.

Nancy sat herself at the front of the church right in front of the little stage and tried to ignore the tormented looking man in a hoody who was still there.

“He’s not hiding anything, at least I don’t think he is. Not other than being a bit paranoid about his grow operation being found,” Holmes said as they waited.

Nancy, aware she wasn’t alone, replied in her head. “Yeah, literally, exactly what he told us we would find. Feel kind of bad for doubting him. Mike’s a good guy.”

“Yeah, seems to be... Terrible vicar, good human.”

Nancy chuckled to herself for a moment before being startled by a voice from behind her. “Don’t turn around,” the voice said.

“Piss off!” she said, assuming it was something to do with Holmes.

“That’s not me Nancy.”

“Keep looking forward or your life maybe in danger. My name is...”

Nancy turned around without a moment’s hesitation. There sat Tom Sinclair, the artist formally known as Daniel Radcliffe.

“You! You little goblin!” she said, jumping to her feet.

“You were supposed to stay in the seat! I said don’t turn around!” the ghoul moaned.

“First off. I know for a fact that Mike has cameras in here, and he can see them from his office. If you had a gun, he would already have

been here to slap the shit out of you. Second, why would I ever do what you told me to, you prick? You're not even a real wizard!"

It took her a moment to realise that it had been him, hiding out in the church with a hoody on. He looked nervous and more than a little scared of Nancy's sudden anger. "Shut up! People are looking for me!" he yelled in hushed tones.

"Yes, you twat! *I'm* looking for you! Why the fuck did you search my flat? And why did you have to mess everything up? If you had have searched *without* trashing it, I might not have even noticed! You *dickend!*"

"I got carried away! I'm sorry! I haven't had to ransack someone's house before. It was exciting!" he said.

"*Don't get distracted. Ask him about Pilgrim,*" Holmes said, putting her back on track.

"Not another word out of you that isn't an answer. One, what were you looking for in my flat? And two, did you kill Pilgrim Marston?" she demanded, readying herself for a run if he got nasty. That said, she was pretty sure she could take the runt in a fight.

"What? No! I wouldn't have ever hurt Pilgrim! He was like a brother to me!" Tom argued.

"Keep talking or start screaming!" Nancy said, as way of motivation.

"I was looking for the Papers," he said.

Nancy took in an over animated lung of air, readying a scream.

"No, really shut the fuck up! Look, I'm telling you," he said. Nancy thinned her eyes at him and gestured for more.

He rolled his ratty eyes and started explaining. "Pilgrim came here because it was the fifteen year anniversary of your dad's murder. He couldn't solve it at the time because no one believed him. Now though, he is, *was*, a rich man. He could get shit done!"

“What? Believe him about what? Get what done?” she asked, confused.

“The Papers, he needed to find at least one of them to stop the summoning,” Sinclair tried to explain, then sheepishly looking around as he heard some noises from outside.

“*Nancy. Press him for more. I think we’re running out of time,*” Holmes advised.

“The newspaper building, yes we, I, found the body there,” she explained, trying to figure out what he was gibbering about.

The noises outside were getting closer. There were voices now, muffled and spying.

“No... I mean yes. We’re not talking about the newspaper Nancy. There was just a Paper there. It’s about the *Papers*, not the newspaper!”

Nancy screwed up her face, trying to work out what he was talking about. She felt Holmes start to formulate questions of his own, probably far better questions than hers, and then the door opened with a thunderous force.

“Hold it!” came a commanding voice. There were two policemen coming. She glanced at the side door and there was another there.

“Nancy, if they get me, I’m as good as dead,” he said. With genuine fear in his eyes.

“*Nancy don’t listen to him. He’s a conspiracy theorist with a dead friend. He’s a paranoid wreck. The local boys in blue aren’t going to hurt him. Don’t fall for it,*” Holmes advised. He *was* right, of course. Nancy was kicking herself for not asking better questions when she had a chance.

“Oh, calm down Tom. They’ll just ask you a few questions and if you didn’t kill anyone, they’ll let you go,” she said.

“No! They’ll get me! They’ll come for me like it did your dad!” Tom yelled. He grabbed Nancy and pulled her close to him. It took her a moment to realise he was holding a thick but stubby knife against her neck.

“Are you fucking joking? I’m converting to catholic as soon as were done here!” Nancy yelled, more at God than at Tom Sinclair.

She felt Holmes shift mental gear and begin studying the situation with calm detachment.

“Back up. We’re leaving here,” Tom yelled at the police.

The police, following their training like good little automatons, all backed up, hands out to show they weren’t a threat. One started talking. He adopted the relaxed, reasonable voice that you see those negotiators use in cop shows.

Nancy wasn’t listening. She was barely there at all. She was someplace else.

“What are my options here?” she asked Holmes.

They both stood looking at the large, mirrored window in Holmes’ room. The window showed what Nancy was seeing. They both stood there, pondering it, as time outside the little room crawled to a halt.

“Judging by his body language, he really does believe that his life is in danger,” Holmes said, rewinding the memory to show Tom’s face moments before he grabbed her.

Nancy didn’t see anything particularly enlightening in the face. He just looked scared to her.

“He had the knife from the start. He pretended he had a gun. This man isn’t a killer.”

The memory on the glass ran back like an old VCR, showing her the moment that he had threatened her. She was aware of the gathering tension on the outside of her head. Whatever focus was being used to have this conversation; it was starting to break.

“He doesn’t want to hurt you. He doesn’t even want you scared, not really. He would have shown you the knife from the start if he did. He only pulled it now because he thinks he’s in danger.”

“What do I do?” she asked.

“There are at least three police officers here. The only way this ends is with him in custody. Either you get hurt or you don’t. He’s getting cuffed either way.”

She felt the pressure building once more as time caught up to her.

“We got this Nancy. Don’t think. Just do as I tell you.”

She felt the real world come back into focus like a sudden wave of motion and noise. She wasn’t scared, even though she could feel the blade on her neck. It was cold, and she thought it may have drawn a little blood, only a little.

“Right leg, pull it up. Left hand under his arm at the same time. Don’t push, just hold,” Holmes instructed. The instructions were vague, but they were accompanied with flashes of images, like a flat pack wardrobe.

She pulled her leg back and cracked the gimp square in his onion sack. At the same time, she slipped her hand under his, gently guiding the knife away from her skin as he tensed up.

“Take control of the weapon. Assert dominance and dispose of it before the police see you as a threat yourself.” His words were again sent with a mental diagram of sorts.

Without a thought of her own, she twisted his hand and effortlessly slid the knife from his grubby mitt. He wasn’t even on the floor yet. She had hit him in the balls hard enough for his teeth to ache for a month. She pulled the blade clear with one hand and smacked him in the nose with the palm of her other. She then turned to face the police again. She kicked back, just to be sure he was floored and jabbed the knife blade-first into the end post of the pew she was standing next to.

Tom, behind her, screamed with pain. The police officer looked agog, actually agog, at Nancy's handling of the situation.

"Well, either cuff him or get him some frozen peas, will you?"

"Nancy, I need to take a nap now."

"Thanks," she said, both to Holmes and to the still agog police man who was attending to her victim.

SHROUDED IN NOTHING

Lilly was furious that, not only had she managed to not be there when someone attacked Nancy, but that she wasn't there to witness Nancy kicking someone's arse. She had only heard about it afterwards from Howard. She felt like no matter what she did she was finding herself outside of the action. She wondered if this was how her entire career as a hunter would be.

She had these thoughts while she was quietly stalking the older man who had threatened Mike with a gun recently. She had tracked him and his crew down to a rented cottage that was far closer to the town than she was comfortable with. One that was also irritatingly close to where the annoying news team was staying.

She had been watching them for hours now, wondering what the right course of action would be. She stood in the doorway of a bookshop a little way down the street, eyeballing the building carefully. She did not want to end up having to escape to the garden, all beaten up again, or worse, being rescued by Howard. She wanted to do things

which would make them proud of her but she also, really wanted to be a hero.

The thoughts swirled around her head as she looked at the cottage from a way down the road. With the benefit her hunters gifts gave her, she was being ignored by passersby. She always glanced at them though, just enough to see if they eyed her whip or the large knife sticking out of her boot. Noticing these things was usually a sign that someone was a little adjacent to human. Sadly, even this usual pastime for her was losing its appeal. She was only getting the kinds of looks that any reasonably attractive woman hiding in the shadows usually got. No one was trying to kill her, which made her grumpy.

She thought she should be grateful to be in a place where her usual pray was absent. She was more worried about what was preventing them from coming to this town, where people usually strolled around with no fear of the night.

A sound from a little way down the street made her tense up. She put a hand on her whip and dropped into a combat ready stance. She lowered herself down into a crouch in her doorway. Her fighting style was about staying low and moving fast. When she was first training, Howard had described her as a scorpion in her movements. She never could see it, she was going for cat, but she took it as a compliment, regardless.

The sound pulled her attention again. Her eyes darted around, looking for what caused it. Then she realised why it was so hard to spot. The sound was a roof tile at the top of the building, sliding and getting caught in the guttering. She relaxed, until she saw another one go.

“It’s playing with them,” she said to herself quietly considering the reason for what she was seeing. She could almost work out the way the thing would have been squatted up there, guarding the building like a

little gargoyle. Another tile slid from the top of the roof. Lilly smiled a little, it was almost endearing.

Howard had been right about not rushing in though. Had she not spent these hours just watching, she wouldn't have known the little thing was back. The information they had on the critter implied that it was of a type that would be replaced by its creator, in the event it died. The old diary in the garden archives said that it would be reborn every moonrise. Well, that was confirmed.

Her own preference of running in and fighting things would likely have gotten her killed. Still, this was why newer hunters had people like Howard. She wondered if the monster was looking back at her, wondering if she killed its predecessor. In many ways she was the only reason it was even alive, did it understand that, she pondered.

There was something nerve fraying about not being able to see it. She decided there had been enough watching and she would return this information to Mike. Would it follow her, she wondered. Had it followed her here? She didn't like enemies she couldn't see. She would need to do something about that.

IMAGINARY ALLY

Nancy was dressed as nicely as she knew how to. Marina had helped with her make-up and the dress was one of the fancy ones she bought, but never had a reason to wear. She couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe, she may, this evening, have crossed the line into 'hot.' Also, for the first time that she could recall, she looked 'hot' without the suffix 'mess.'

She wore a short purple dress that was hugging because it was *meant* to be, not because it was a little too small. It had a black pattern stitched up one side that looked vaguely floral despite never actually committing to being flowers. Her shoes were *actually* lady-like and not 'sexy boots' or 'stealth trainers,' they were real shoes. Pointy with heels. Because she lived in the coldest, windiest, rainiest and, maybe, shittiest part of England, she also had to wear a heavy black coat over the top. The coat went with the look quite well. She clutched a small darker purple bag that contained her phone and a hip flask, nothing more.

Because of the complaining that Marina had done, she was sober enough to be nervous, which she didn't like. Her nerves were also, in small part, because Holmes hadn't said a word since he had helped her beat up a man in a church. She missed him, despite it only being a few hours since he went quiet. She had become accustomed to her passenger quickly.

After a short taxi ride with a grumpy driver who asked her if she was a prostitute, she arrived at the hotel. She stood outside and took some courage from the hip flask and wondered why she was so nervous.

She stood in the cold foyer realising that she had no idea what room Dink was in. She messaged her and waited as she headed to the bar, not really sure if it was a 'go to bar' date or a 'come to room' date.

As she put her phone away, Nancy saw the young man at the check-in desk checking her out. At least if Dink dumped her this evening, she had options, she considered. She wished Holmes was there to tell her to stop being glib.

Her phone, on silent, made that screaming vibration sound against the flask in her bag. *Uuuuuuuuuugbbbbb*. She pulled it out. It was ringing. *An actual call*. How retro, she thought, putting it to her ear.

"You're on time! I'm on the way down. I'll just be a second! I promise!" Dink said. Without waiting for Nancy to speak, she hung up.

Nancy looked at the check-in check-out boy and smiled. No options needed, apparently.

"Oh, my god! You look amazing!" came the voice from behind her a few seconds later. "I almost didn't recognise you!"

Dink was grinning ear to ear. To Nancy's surprise, she also had on a dress. Nancy was instantly aware that Dink looked classy and elegant. Meanwhile, Nancy felt unnatural in her own.

“It’s a fancy hotel. I was worried about them thinking I looked like I was delivering something,” Nancy explained, looking down at her dress.

“You look beautiful. Why are you making it sound like an apology?” Dink asked, still grinning.

“Habit. You look amazing,” Nancy said, ignoring the compliment she had just been paid.

“You want to eat? I made reservations at the hotel restaurant.”

Nancy felt a well of emotion inside her. This wonderful, successful woman made the effort to dress nicely *and* wanted to take Nancy to a restaurant with people who would see them. Hadn’t she noticed all the baggage, drinking and crazy that she cultivated?

“Sure, let’s eat,” she replied after a moment’s hesitation.

“You almost got stabbed! In the same church! Nancy, what the fuck!” Dink asked over the first bottle of wine and the second course.

“Yeah, by a Harry Potter impersonator too! You would think he would have more class than that!” Nancy joked.

“What were you even doing there after yesterday?” Dink asked, half munching on her salad.

“I was *actually* going there to ask Mike how he was such a badass and if he had worked out *why* he was being shot at. Also, I wanted to look in his basement, which, as it turns out really *is* filled with weed!” Nancy said, with a shrug.

“And your ghost never pointed out that you may have wanted to give the place a wide berth?”

Nancy felt herself reach for Holmes' room in her mind. Nothing was there right now. Just the hesitation and dread that she had always felt before his arrival.

"How are you so cool about me having a brain ghost?" she asked.

Dink picked up her wineglass with two hands and nursed it. "I don't know. I always loved ghost stories and you seem so serious about Holmes. I know, you drink a lot and your friends made sure I know about... you know, what you've been through. Either you're lying, you're quite mad... or... *maybe* you really do have a ghost. I just decided that believing you is more fun."

Nancy laughed. "And if my detective friend is just a mental illness, like he claims?"

Dink shrugged. "I don't mind. No reason you being a bit tilted makes you a bad person."

"And if I'm just lying?"

"Well, if it's all a pack of lies, then sooner or later it'll come out and we'll part ways. I suppose," Dink said, with a sternness in her voice. "It's not, is it?"

Nancy poured the rest of the wine into her glass. "Don't worry. *I swear*. It's all true. Actually, today I realised it's a bit *more* true than even I knew."

"Cryptic! What does that mean?" Dink asked, excited by the mystery.

"Well. He says he's a figment of my imagination. But today I was attacked at knifepoint, and he knew more than me. He showed me angles I couldn't see and showed me how to knock young mister Potter on his arse. I'm scrappy, but I'm not a ninja. He knew things I didn't. If he *is* imaginary, he should *not* be able to know more than me."

Dink took in a deep breath. "Chills! That's amazing! You think he really *is* a ghost, don't you?"

“I don’t know. But he scarpered after the event. Said he was sleepy; why would an imaginary friend get sleepy? He’s not shown his face since. I have a feeling that however he could do what he did, it left him exhausted; or needing a recharge or *something*. Either way, I’m pretty sure he isn’t imaginary, now.”

There was a sparkle of fascination in Dink’s eyes that Nancy couldn’t help but adore. She may have found the perfect woman, and she was enjoying the moment exactly as much as she always hoped she would.

“What about when you go for a piss? Is there just a fella there, watching?” Dink asked, grin extra wide.

“No! My boy Steve isn’t into that. He’s not always around, anyway. Most of the time, it’s like he’s talking in my ear. When he’s paying extra attention, he appears on the wall. Well, the window to his interview room does, and he’s in there. But no, he just closes his blinds when he doesn’t think he should be seeing something. He’s actually not an arsehole,” Nancy explained.

Dink kept gawking at her with a look in her eye that she thought she recognised. As strange as it was, Nancy was starting to think that Dink was enamoured with her. They touched hands across the table and suddenly Nancy didn’t feel quite as alone as she usually did.

“Did you find anything at the church, after all that?” Dink finally asked.

“I think I did. I’m starting to think that I misunderstood something at the start,” she explained.

“Again, very cryptic, are you doing to tell me?”

“Pilgrim, the first corpse went to the church and the library. Those are the only two places we know he went. He said he was from the local paper in both locations, but thing is, he may have said he was there

‘for the papers’ not as in, ‘for the newspaper’ more like he was there to collect *the papers*.”

“Interesting. And what *are the papers*?” Dink asked, as a waiter took away the plates. She ordered another bottle of wine.

“I have literally no idea. But we still found a corpse at the newspaper building, which means something... I think... I need Holmes to come back and chew on that one for me,” Nancy said, feeling an itch in her mind that she couldn’t quite scratch. “I mean. It is... a *bit* odd isn’t it?”

Nancy lay in the bed, possibly the comfiest bed she had ever been in. She lay there next to the woman she was falling for, fast. But despite this, she didn’t sleep.

Instead, she lay thinking about the parts to her ‘case.’ It was the discussion over dinner that rattled about in her brain. Why was there a body in the basement of the newspaper building if it wasn’t related to any of this?

She glanced at Dink, who was sound asleep and holding her tightly with a dopey grin. She smiled to herself and closed her eyes with purpose.

“Holmes! Holmes, you slippery bastard, get in here!” she yelled as she forced herself into his little interview room. “I know you can hear me, and I know you’re avoiding me!”

His room was clean and empty, like it had been when she first met him a few days ago. No ashtray, crime-board or piles of papers. It was as new again. She didn’t like this implication.

“Holmes!” she yelled again.

The room remained silent. Nancy remembered Holmes saying that the real interview room had something his didn't: A locked door.

She went to the eighties looking wood-grain door with the metal handle. She placed her hand on it, feeling its rough, worn texture and sensed a quiet cold radiate from it.

"Holmes, don't make me come and get you!" she said boldly as she wrapped her hand around the handle.

"I wouldn't open that door if I were you, Nancy," Holmes said sternly. She spun round. He was sitting on the edge of the table and smoking. The crime-board, the ashtray and the piles of paper were back. It was *his* room again.

"Why? What's back there?" she asked. Not in the least surprised at his sudden return.

"The outside world," he said. *"Nancy, going out there would leave you baffled in ways I simply can't explain. Trust me. That door should stay closed to you."* He flicked the end of his cigarette into the ashtray. *"Sorry, I had to step out for a little while."*

"You abandoned me!" she said with a suddenly angry, pointy finger out in front of her. "You left me! You said you wouldn't leave until we were done!"

"Don't be dramatic Nancy. You were alone for about six hours, you daft bint!"

Being lovingly insulted by her friend was a strange comfort to her. It was nice to have Holmes back again. "Where have you been?" she asked.

"Away. You're not my boss. I have a life outside of this room, you know!" he lied. She knew he was lying, but wasn't sure she wanted the truth from him. Wherever he had been, for whatever reason, he didn't want to tell her. She felt she needed to respect that. It was likely in her

best interest not to know, given that he was trying his best not to tell her.

“I was talking to Dink, over dinner, which you would have already known if you weren’t hiding somewhere,” she said.

He smirked at her. *“Ob, right, so your new girlfriend says something cute, and you think I need to know about it? Christ Nancy, you’ve turned into a girl!”*

“No, you dick! We talked about the case, and I can’t help but think it makes sense, what Sinclair said,” she began. He perked up at the prospect of a new lead. She smirked back with satisfaction. “Sinclair, before he put a knife at my neck, he said, that we had misunderstood ‘The papers,’ and it wasn’t a newspaper at all.”

“Such a revelation, but if you were a touch more sober, you may have remembered I was there for that!” Holmes replied, rolling his eyes.

“No, you smug git! That’s not the thing. If it was never about the newspaper office, why the fuck did we find a body in that building?”

Holmes’ eye rolling stopped. He took a drag of his cigarette. *“Well, that’s a bloody good point, isn’t it?”* he replied.

“Yeah, yeah, it is!” Nancy replied with a smug grin of her own.

“Why did we think it was a newspaper anyway?” Holmes asked.

“I think I just misinterpreted the whole thing from the start. But someone put a body in the place that I was heading. I was supposed to find it. Holmes, Sinclair searched my home, Pilgrim was found outside of my flat, now someone left a body where they knew I was going. I don’t like this. Not at all!” she felt her tone change as she explained her concern. She was involved in this, not just investigating, but involved. And she didn’t like the implication.

“We need to know who that body belonged to Nancy. You’re going to have to talk to Phil.”

“Shit. I am, aren’t I!” she replied. “Unless... I go visit detective nice suit and sunglasses!”

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure that’s a great idea. I can see no problem with you strolling into a crime-unit and saying, so... who did that corpse used to be anyway?”

Nancy decided it was time to test her theory. “I’ll get us in there. You pop into the first wall or window you see and eyeball everything while I keep him distracted.”

Holmes looked concerned suddenly, like he had been exposed. *“Nancy, that’s not how it works. I’m a figment of your imagination. I know what you know, I see what you see.”*

“Bollocks! That doesn’t add up. You showed me a view from outside of myself in that church. You know how to fight and told me how-to beat-up Sinclair. Holmes, you either slowed time or made me think faster and then you had to sleep it off, out there somewhere,” she said, pointing at the door that she was not to open.

Holmes sat on his table and nervously lit up yet another cigarette. *“Nancy, I...”* he began. Nancy, without letting him finish, opened her eyes in the bed and made sure she didn’t listen to a word more from him. She pushed him to the back of her mind and turned in the bed to face Dink, who was looking at her with wide but sleepy eyes.

“Did you just tell off your ghost?” she asked.

“Yep. He was being a ninny,” she said as she leaned in and kissed her.

SUNNY SIDE UP

Mark Philips was annoying. Howard knew he was going to be annoying when he walked into the pretend investigation office and stood in front of Howard's pretend desk. He stood so upright that it looked like he may have had an actual stick in his rear and he saluted Howard like they were in the military.

Howard was not good at playing his part. He looked at Mark with contempt, sitting with his feet on the desk, reading a mission report from another hunter that reported to him. He looked at Mark for a moment, closed his folder and reached for his coffee cup, realising it was empty he put it down again, annoyed.

"What do you want, officer Philips?" he asked, feet still on desk.

"Sir, I have been literally guarding the front door for days. I want more to do, sir. I want in on the action," he said.

Howard wondered what action Mark was talking about and briefly fantasised about killing him and pretending he 'just found him like that.' Howard spent about a quarter of his mental energy each day suppressing the urge to murder people. He was quite good at not

murdering people and wanted to kill them less, overall, than he once did. He really wanted to kill Mark though. Not to satisfy a base instinct, but to make him go away.

“Really? Because, you know, I still have the video of you shouting at a journalist with piss on your legs.”

Mark made an annoyed face but didn't say anything. Howard enjoyed that. “Are those the same trousers? You had better have washed them,” he added, realising he was crossing the line into bullying now. He had to push back his constant irritation with a firm emotional effort.

Mark looked at him, embarrassed and motioned to speak. Howard raised his hand to stop him. “Mark, you're doing a great job guarding the door. If anything else comes up I'll come see you, but someone needs to watch the door.”

He made noises that vaguely made sense and left a little more cheerful. Howard had no need for support from the local police force at all, but they insisted on being involved. When all this was being arranged a few days ago there was a lot of negotiation from the local police about how much involvement the local force would actually have on things. They initially wanted Howard's team to set up in the local station. They wanted their people on the scene. That silly idea faded too and now it was just one prat at the door he had to deal with. He did wonder if Mark was considered by the locals to be a good candidate for this sort of job, or if they had been pushed out so far that they now wanted to just offload a grade 'A' pillock for a few weeks.

Howards open drawer suddenly garnered his attention. There was a blue glow pulsing from it. This was something that Mike had helped him set up. It was his early warning system.

“Get ready people, Nancy is in the vicinity. Look like you have jobs if you can please!” he yelled to the few hunters littering the place.

A radio was turned on blaring a local station, the coffee pot was flicked to 'on' and the pastry tray was opened, already empty, obviously. Everyone in the room began looking busy with pretend tasks.

Howard really hoped that Lilly wouldn't be choosing now to roll in, covered in frog blood or something.

SUNGLASSES

Nancy had used the hotel's room-service for breakfast, which, thanks to Dink being both an enabler and a little reckless, included a small bottle of vodka, or two. The omelette tasted like an actual omelette. They discussed in depth the crime that was Marina's attempt from the morning prior. Dink was shocked that someone could be such an awful cook. Nancy was well past the shocked phase and at this point was fascinated to see the new and interesting things that Marina would offer her.

Now, though, Dink was off at work, and Nancy was just walking around the corner of the street where she knew the mystical crime-unit was.

"I still think that this is a terrible idea, Nancy," Holmes warned.

"Oh shush! What's the worst that can happen? They can't arrest me for asking questions, can they?" she replied, a fresh bout of rain just starting to hit the top of her head.

She stopped in her tracks, suddenly reconsidering her planned visit as she realised that the officer on guard was none other than her least favourite human ever, Mark Philips.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake Phil. How are you everywhere now?” she demanded loudly.

He had, of course, already noticed her walking down the road towards him, yet still had no quip loaded and ready. “Nancy,” he said in a stern greeting. “As it happens, it’s your fault I’m still babysitting these wankers. I got in a bit of hot water for not reporting in your call to me.”

“Hardly my fault, is it?” she asked.

“Given your drinking, I had a hard time believing you. So, I thought I would check it out. I was doing my due diligence, *actually!*”

Nancy raised an eyebrow, well aware of recent footage where Luisiana Kent asked him if he had pissed himself live on a news stream.

“Sure. Okay, whatever, get out of the way. I need to go in there,” she requested, or instructed.

“What? No. I don’t work for you. Besides, people aren’t allowed to just wonder into a police office you know. Not one this high profile.”

The rain was coming heavier now. “Actually, detective nice suit-bad-shoes-silly-sunglasses invited me.”

Phil looked at her blankly. Nancy decided to make herself crystal clear. “The detective man, with the nice suit. Told me I should come visit here if I wanted to talk to him, and I do.”

Phil sighed and raised an unconvinced eyebrow at her.

The rain came heavier still.

“Just get out of the way before I scream. Because they will run out here and let’s face it, we both know they are looking for a reason to roast your onions, PC pissy pants.”

Phil rolled his eyes and stepped aside, letting her enter.

“He really is a tiresome wanker, isn’t he!” Holmes noted as they stepped into the warmth of the old building.

It wasn’t the hive of activity she had expected. Nancy had never been in there before. It had been used as a dance school for a few years. The police had filled it up with tables, whiteboards, desks. A rather nice large mirror ran the width of the back wall. The mirror was probably more to do with the dance class than the police, she noted.

There were only about three police officers in there, all looking oddly un-police-like.

“Okay, go, be free,” she instructed to Holmes as she used a force of will to project him onto the mirror, by a load of desks.

From her point of view, it was like a frame had simply appeared there with a window to Holmes’ room in it. He began leering out of it and taking notes on what he saw. This was the moment where she would know for sure as to if she was mad, or he was a ghost.

“Miss McQueen?” the voice called from across the half empty room.

Nancy spun around on the spot before seeing Detective-nice-suit. She waved, before realising she was looking at the mirror and then looked to the side. “Oh, there you at!” she said with her fakest smile.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” he said, gesturing for her to join him at his desk.

“Honestly, neither did I!” Nancy said with a sincere shrug as she sat opposite the man. She surveyed his desk and as she did couldn’t help but notice how empty it was, not so much as a piece of paper cluttered it. There was just a laptop and a coffee cup, well used.

He saw her looking, but ignored it. “I don’t believe for a moment you are here to help *me* with *my* investigation, so let’s not pretend. What do you want to know?” he asked.

Nancy grinned, now less fake. She had Holmes looking for notes and clues over by the desks. She had what she wanted, but would he really tell her anything of use? “Who was the corpse?” she asked.

The detective took a drink from his abused coffee cup and with a scampish grin, said, “Pilgrim Maston.”

“No, the other one, you bloody goon!” Nancy replied.

“You know, there’s a reason that they,” he stumbled. “We, haven’t released that information to the media?” he said with a sigh of amusement.

“Obviously. But I’m not the media, am I? If it helps, I *promise* to only tell my imaginary friend!” she said, leaning forward and using her most serious tone. The tone that she now realised was also her most sarcastic too.

“The body was that of a mister Robert Johnson,” he said, without any more prompting.

“Oh, that was disappointing. I have no idea who that is,” Nancy observed thoughtfully.

“Actually, that’s not true,” Detective-nice-suit replied.

Nancy raised her eyebrows at him and waited for more.

“He was, at one time a police officer. Your father and him worked closely together for a few years.”

Nancy’s interest was piqued now. “Go on...”

“He was a suspect in your dad’s murder.” At hearing this, Nancy dropped the fighty pretence and began earnestly listening to every word. “Okay; there had better be more to say here, sunglasses!” she said in a *somehow* appreciative tone.

The detective smiled at her horrendous attitude and continued on. “He and your dad were working on a case when he died. He was obsessed with Pilgrim, actually. He was convinced that he was behind the fisherman-disappearances.”

“The what, now?” Nancy asked, suddenly lost.

“The, err, the case... The one your dad was mixed up in when he was murdered. I’m sorry, I thought you knew.”

“No. I was eleven when he was killed, I had no idea what case he was working on. Can you fill in my blanks? Please?”

The detective looked either annoyed or constipated. He tried very hard at trying to look ‘cool’ but mostly failed on all counts. Nancy decided this was not the time to point it out.

“Your dad and Detective Johnson were investigating a series of oddities at sea. Multiple small fishing boats were turning up with no crew on them. Totally empty, except for the last one that is.”

She waited with excitement for him to continue.

“The boat was the third found by the coast guard patrol. It was a little net fisher. Empty, except for one survivor. A mister Pilgrim Marston.”

“No fucking way!” Nancy exclaimed. She quickly covered her mouth when she realised her volume. The two or three other police officers in the room all stopped their activities to glare at her for a moment. She ignored them.

“Yeah. I know. Plot thickens too, Pilgrim was, at the time, this town’s vicar!” the detective said. Casually delivering the bombshell.

“What the fuck! How? Wait, how did I not know any of this?”

“It was a good many years ago. In a tiny tourist town. You think it would have been good for local business for them to advertise this little dark secret?”

Nancy considered this for a moment. “So, what happened? Pilgrim randomly decides to pop out the church and go for a boat ride, then they all do their best Mary Celeste impersonations, as a total unrelated coincidence?” She asked.

“Well, that’s what your dad and Johnson thought, too. Pilgrim said the fishermen asked him to come out to sea because they saw a ghost or some mad crap; according to the case file. Says they got out there, there was a loud screeching sound and next thing he knows he’s being woken up by the coast guard. Without any evidence either way, he was never charged. But your dad and Johnson were certain he was involved.”

The detective realised his coffee cup was empty the moment after he put it to his lips and gestured at it with annoyance.

“Okay, Sunglasses, but when did the Vicar Pilgrim turn into the conspiracy mogul Pilgrim?”

He placed his cup on the desk with an unhappy sigh. “Almost instantly. He literally hightailed out of town, and out of the holy institution about two days after he came back from sea. Apparently left quite a hole in the community. Church was a bigger deal back then. Mind you, given that the current vicar is Mike Gardener, I can’t say I’m surprised the congregation has shrunk.”

Nancy nodded in agreement until she realised what he had said. “Wait. What does that mean?”

“Oh, nothing, never mind,” he replied, now looking less rehearsed and far more sheepish.

“Squeal, or I go ask Luisiana Kent to fill in the gaps!”

He laughed, but this time it was a genuine amusement rather than his polished practiced ‘cool guy’ chuckle. “It’s really nothing. Just that the guy has been involved in a lot of strange stuff over the years. He appeared on Pilgrims website more than Jesus appears in the bible!”

Nancy leaned back in the chair. Was this right? She knew Mike wasn’t exactly the most popular of people with the church management, council, whatever they were called. But how did all this fit?

Detective sunglasses could see Nancy mulling over the comments. “I’ll save you a Google. Mike is pretty good at getting in trouble. He beat a guy into intensive care, said he thought he was a vampire, and yeah, I know how that sounds.”

Nancy felt herself panic at the idea of her friend doing such things, never mind the fact that he was supposed to be a man of God.

Sunglasses continued. “Turned out the man he tried to send back to Jesus was a paedophile who had been grooming at least five local boys. All under ten. Mike got involved and literally beat the location of a missing child out of the guy. Obviously, it was hard to press charges.”

“Okay, and the other times?” Nancy asked, stunned by the revelation.

“General violence; though one time he burned down a church, actually, just before coming here.”

She once again felt herself turn white with shock. Detective Sunglasses was the king of cliff hanger sentences. It was annoying, but his timing was perfect.

“Once the fire was out, police on the scene started writing him up for arson. Next thing they know, some guys in nice suits with expensive legal advice turned up and all charges against him were dropped, before he vanished like he usually does.”

“Well, shit me!” Nancy replied. In part because there was very little else she could think to say. “This Robert Johnson worked with my dad. Pilgrim was a suspect *and* a vicar. Both dead, and I get shot at, in the bloody church,” she said, musing on her facts. “There is literally no way that all this isn’t connected, is there?”

“Nope,” he replied. “Which is why I thought it was only fair to fill you in. Everything I told you is public, sort of. Just thought with your nose for trouble, you should be informed. And... I wanted to make sure you knew that my team and I, we really are looking to catch

whoever is behind the bodies. We're not interested in grilling you like Detective Farker is. That man is a fucking troll!"

It was Nancy's turn to laugh now. "I'm a little shocked you've been so chatty, to be honest, Sunglasses," she said. It was true too; she really had expected him to warn her off her investigation and refuse her anything useful.

"What's your name anyway? Given that you don't appear to be a dick, I feel like I should at least stop calling you Sunglasses," she said, trying to offer him something lateral of an olive branch.

He pulled his sunglasses from his breast pocket and proudly placed them on his smug face. "You know what, Nancy, I think *Sunglasses* is just fine!"

"*Well, what did you learn?*" Holmes asked the moment she stepped out of the crime-unit.

"Basement corpse used to be a Mr Robert Johnson, worked with my dad. Pilgrim was a suspect in the case they were working on. Mike has a history of burning down churches. Oh, and the sea may be haunted," she said, unpacking gleefully. "And you? Nothing as cool, I would guess."

She was aware of Holmes, in his room, calmly lighting up a cigarette and putting his coffee cup in his lap as he put his feet on the desk. She could smell a bombshell.

"Spit it out then, Detective Gadget!" she sighed.

"Inspector, and yeah, I got you beat." He scratched the end of his large nose, making her wait just a few more seconds for his news.

"Those people. In there... They aren't police officers."

Nancy froze. Literally stopped walking a few steps away from the door. "What?" she asked.

"If there is one thing I know, it's police. Those people in there, they are military trained. They are not investigating anything and at least the three I could see from the stupid location you plopped me down in, well, they all had large, very illegal knives under their jackets."

"Nancy!" came a voice from behind her. She turned slowly. Chills running down her spine. Sunglasses had followed her out the building.

"Don't let on that you know," Holmes advice calmly.

"Yes, Detective Sunscreen?" she replied, trying to look casual.

"I forgot to give you this," he said. Handing her a card.

She took it and glanced at it. It was a white card, high-quality paper and contained just a telephone number printed on it in black, embossed print.

"If you find yourself in a pickle, this is my mobile number," he said with his over curated charming smile.

"How very reassuring to have this," she said. Instantly hearing Holmes mocking her forced tone in her ear.

"Yeah, well, if you need me," Sunglasses said.

They looked at each other for an awkward moment and he nodded to himself and left. Barking something to Phil about his slouching as he passed. Phil glared at her, as if it was all her fault.

She waved nervously and turned, walking at a rapid pace towards her flat.

"Okay, fill me in," she demanded.

Holmes dragged in another whiteboard and a fresh stack of note squares. *"It's getting interesting, Nancy; I can tell you that much."*

LIES IN THE SHADOWS

Howard stepped back into the room, ignoring Mark as he passed. He closed the door firmly to make sure that he couldn't hear.

“Good job guys, I think we got away with it!” he announced. There was sarcastic whooping from one of the men at the back.

Just as he sat back down in his seat, Lilly came in from the back door of the room, muddy and sporting a pissed off expression.

“I think I'm getting better at spotting the little freak!” she announced, giving a friendly nod to the rest of the team as she passed.

“And you think wandering in the fucking cover office announcing that is a good idea?” Howard sighed.

She looked around confused, fast drying mud falling from her. “Yeah! Anyway, I think I learned some useful things about the little bastard,” she said, sitting down. Mud flaked off her. “It gets bored. It has a low attention span, and is even dumber than we thought! I got it to chase me for a little bit. Well, I think it was chasing me because I

couldn't see it. Anyway, it got distracted by a cat. I know this because it ate it."

Lilly was brushing mud from her jeans and jacket onto the floor, with no sense of shame. "That's useful, right? Knowing they aren't the sort of beastie that goes after you, no matter what?"

Howard watched her, annoyed at the mess she was making, but couldn't help but agree with her about the information. "I'll see if Mike has had a chance to look into the notes about these Little Monsters. Why did it stop following you though? Was it how long it chased you? How far it chased you? Or does it just really like cats?"

Lilly looked excited at the questions. "I never thought of that. I assumed it just got distracted. You think it got out of range of its controller or something?"

Howard shrugged. "I don't know, but we need to find out. How was you tracking it?"

"Rain made it easier to see. It looks like a void. I tried having it chase me across a field. If mud sticks to it, it doesn't show up after a few seconds. I assume its invisibility is some kind of aura effect."

Howard grunted. He wasn't going to admit it, but this was very good information. She had done well. "And you stayed safe from it?"

"Yep. Kept my void key ready. If it got too close, I was going to transition to the garden. Would have been awesome if I could have dragged it along with me. Get a real good look at it."

Howard grunted again. Her plan was solid. If the critter *had* managed to follow her to the garden, it wouldn't have been much of a threat. The garden had a way of making scary things drop dead.

"Okay. I admit it. You did well. Now get a bloody broom and clean up your mess. Then go see Mike."

Lilly grinned. This may have been the first time that Howard had actually complimented her, as a hunter.

Mike knew she was coming when the whispering in his head started. Despite all appearances, he was one of the most skilled hunters alive. This was in part because he had some passengers of his own, who did more than play detective.

His were a legion of ancient wraiths who made it their business to know things, and give him their opinions. At first, he had found it annoying. Now though, many years later, they were part of him, a layer that sat just above his subconscious.

They gave him other edges too, but never ones he could quite articulate. Right now, he knew Lilly had arrived. He didn't know how he knew, he didn't know why he knew. He just knew that Lilly was around.

He carried on playing the video game and reached out with his wraiths, allowing them to form an image in his head. He didn't really need to pay attention to the shooting on the screen, his hunter training gave him the reflexes to consistently be the best. Often, he held back, so the anti-cheat systems didn't think he was cheating. Why was she sneaking around?

There. His mind snapped to attention on the unseen adversary. Lilly wasn't sneaking around, she was stalking something. She was stalking a prey. Hunting it.

She had it in her sights. He could see in his minds eye that she was watching it, calmly, studying it. It was outside, in the church grounds, just out back. She was on top of the lower area of the roof, at the side of the church.

Mike paused for a moment, feeling it out. He put his game controller down and slowly stood up, not really looking at his surroundings, but instead at the impression of things in his other senses. He could see the scene clearer now that he was focusing on it with more intent. The creature Lilly was watching was looking quizzically at a rabbit.

He checked under his long grey hood, making sure his knives were where he had left them.

He ran through the old sparse corridor that led to the side entrance of the church. He stood quietly against the door for another few seconds.

The creature leaped for the bunny and shredded it in mere moments. He opened the door to see it with his eyes now.

The creature turned and faced him blood dripping from its face. The sight didn't startle Mike. He was very accustomed to such attempts at intimidation. Lilly dropped down into a crouch. She had been hiding on the roof, just above him, she kept low, well aware that Mike would know she was there. His abilities were well understood by his people.

The little froggish monster leaped towards them claws suddenly extended and mouth open, as a weapon in of itself.

Lilly made a motion to move in defence but Mike had already taken the opportunity. Her instinct was to dodge an oncoming attack. His was to counter it. He pulled a concealed throwing knife from his pocket and with a smooth motion, let it fly true. It went into the creature's open mouth, causing it to turn in the air, in a way that only a demonic force could. As it rolled to the side, hacking up the knife and blood, Mike struck its head with his red crystal edged daggers.

Lilly watched from the periphery, wondering how a human could move with such precision and intent. She envied his skills.

Mike wasn't foolish enough to be overconfident though. Which, in this case, served him at least as well as his more active skills. The daggers had failed to penetrate the creature's hide.

It had visibly responded to the pain of the impact, despite his dagger not breaking the skin. It responded with a curled amphibian lip that formed an almost bear-like snarl. Mike pushed it away with a forceful kick, both feet in its head. He rolled backwards and onto his feet again, in one fluid motion.

"Office! Under the desk, bat!" he yelled at Lilly, before tossing another, chance throwing knife in the direction of the little monster. It plinked harmlessly from its stubby forehead, but it gave it a moment of pause, which is when Lilly shot off down the corridor, as fast as she could go.

The monster leaped again, repeating its mouth-open attack. Mike threw another knife, realising he was almost out of them, he rolled towards the one on the floor.

He considered the way it repeated the same attack, not learning from its mistake.

His internal advisors were pointing out to him that there was now nothing between the door to the church and the monster. He knew that Lilly wasn't likely a good enough fighter to take it on, in a corridor. He ran. Knowing it would follow him and lead away from the church.

He sprinted across the little cemetery and leaped over the wall, his passengers screamed, in alert.

"Slowly, I can't hear you all at once!" he said in his mind. Something he had to do, from time to time.

They calmed down and ordered their stream of ideas and visions.

"Are you sure?" he asked. They buzzed in agreement.

“You know, I have to test this!” he replied, much to their annoyance.

The monster was barreling after him, but his passengers had informed him that if it got out of the cemetery, it would be far more dangerous to him. They didn’t seem to be able to articulate why, but he had to know now.

He leaped over the wall at the edge of the church’s grounds and rolled, inverting himself as he did and standing to face the beast with daggers drawn.

His passengers buzzed, finally articulating what he was too busy to pick up on just as the monster leaped over the wall towards him.

As it left the holy ground, it vanished from his eyes, though he could see it through other means. Its posture changed considerably. It was stronger now, and likely faster. It rocked its neckless-head back and forth, almost like a bird that was about to throw up; it waved its froglike appendages in some ritualistic fashion. The floor became wet.

“You can’t flood the outside, you moron!” Mike said, rolling his eyes at the idiotic beast.

He turned back and noticed a torn square of fabric on the wall. He grabbed it as he leapt over. “Nancy, I swear, you’re going to be the death of me!” he grumbled.

The monster followed and as it did it faded into view for his eyes, his other senses now becoming secondary.

Lilly appeared in the doorway, bat in hand. He allowed himself to slide to a muddy stop and roll to the side. As much as Lilly was inexperienced as a hunter, she was still fully trained.

As Mike scrambled and twisted to regain something close to a fighting stance, he watched Lilly smack the frog on its head, and she did so with the unrefined raw brutality that a bat required, to be truly

effective. She also grunted and swore, which Mike was pretty sure would make the attack somehow more vicious.

The frog lost its footing in the mud and fell forward, squealing and screaming as it received yet more beatings from the old bat.

Mike saw no reason to stop Lilly from continuing. She was doing a fantastic job. After a few gruesome seconds, the monster's skull gave way and a yellow liquid spewed from its eyes and mouth. She hit it again. Now it was just meat, being tenderised.

"Good job! It's dead!" Mike called.

She hit it again anyway.

ELSEWARD KNOWN

Nancy was sitting on her couch, right in the middle, arms out each side of her and feet on the coffee table. Her eyes were glazed, because her attention was someplace else.

Holmes' room was a mess of dusty archive boxes, loose notes, and open files. His ashtray was full and his well-worn coffee cup was empty.

"Fucking hell Steve, it only took me five minutes to walk home. What happened in here?" she asked.

"I work fast when I need to. Sit down," he said.

"Where?" she complained. She pushed some papers off his chair and turned it around, waiting for Holmes' explanation of what had just happened.

"Okay, so, right..." he began, as he pulled out a pen to point with and pulled the second, now full, white board closer. *"Being your usual crap self, you put me in the worst place possible for getting anything useful and for reasons I don't quite understand, it's really hard for me to move my window once you place it somewhere. It's actually quite annoying."*

Realising he was already getting side-tracked, he shook off the thought and got back to his point. *“From the position you put me, I was on the other side of the divider, looking at the room, effectively, from the opposite side to anyone who would walk in from the entrance. It was quite a sight too. Behind the desk at the back form the room, there’s a box left open that contained fucking swords! Literal, swords!”*

Nancy’s eyes opened wide as he handed her a photograph of what he had seen. There it was, just as he said. The box was a large cardboard storage cube that would usually contain files. Something that you would use when you moved house, maybe. Its lid was open and inside were the swords! Three sheathed swords with ornate handles.

Holmes handed her another picture of how it looked from the entrance where they walked in. She hadn’t even noticed it then, but it was clearly on display, at the back, a little obscured by a couple of desks.

“They were all wearing military boots too. Did you notice that?” he asked.

She hadn’t.

“Then there was the lack of commitment to the ‘bit’ they are doing. There was no central evidence board set-up. No-one has been interviewed and they aren’t even visiting the places where the action happened. All they seem to be doing is turning up with that detective Fucker, or whatever his name is, and standing in the shadows. It’s all very creepy.”

Nancy looked at the picture in her hand and then at his board. “So, you could see things I couldn’t. You can’t be a figment of my imagination if you can see things I can’t!” she said. While she was triumphant in the revelation of Holmes’ ghost status, she was also very concerned about the things he was saying.

“What? No. Nancy, that’s not how it works. There was a mirror on the back wall. You could have seen all this in the reflection as we walked

in. Nothing here proves that I'm anything other than an imaginary friend!"

He was right. But she knew she wasn't that observant. She wasn't anywhere near that quick. "And the fighting? You showed me how to fight when Sinclair had a knife at my throat. Then you vanished."

They shared a stalemate for a moment. Nothing he did had *proven* he was real. However, Nancy knew her own limits and there was something else going on with Holmes. She knew there was a puzzle to solve but didn't have time to pull on its threads right now.

"Okay, big knives and shoes don't make them military. Could be, I don't know, secret service, M.I Twenty-five or whatever it goes up to. Hell, for all I know, they could be aliens. We don't know shit for certain," she argued.

"That's true. And even if they are military, I don't see how it fits in with everything else that's been going on... What did you learn?" he asked.

"Well!" Nancy began as she recounted her conversation with Sun-glasses.

The ringing of her screaming door-bell scared Nancy so much that she almost screamed herself, in response. She and Holmes had been in conversation for what felt like hours.

She shook off the mental fog that she had accumulated and eyed the peep-hole. A moment later, she opened the door. Luisiana Kent stood outside looking very annoyed.

"Come in, Lou," Nancy said as she walked away, heading for the kitchen.

“Don’t call me Lou. What happened to your house, was you robbed?” She asked, closing the door behind her.

Nancy filled the kettle and took a drink of water. She hadn’t moved in a while and felt like she had awoken from a deep sleep. “Actually, it *was* worse than this. That Tom Sinclair prick trashed it while I was on a date with my stalker,” she called through.

She returned to her guest a few seconds later, now more able to focus. She hadn’t noticed when she let her in; Luisiana was dressed differently than she had been the last time she had seen her. She wasn’t in a neat suit like she was on the streams, or in a casual hoodie. She was sporting tight jeans, and a flowy white shirt that was just a little-bit sheer.

Nancy blinked at her for a moment. She really was very easy on the eyes. Her platinum blonde hair was carefully pinned up so that it hung freely just above her neckline. Nancy then realised that she smelled great too. She wore a large satchel over her shoulders and had calculated the position of the strap for maximum accentuation.

She turned inwards to Holmes. “Steve, am I imagining it or has miss Kent shown up with her game face on?”

“Oh, you’re in trouble. She’s going to try to get information out of you, and with the way you drink, you’re going to give her everything she wants. Abort, McQueen! Abort!” he said gleefully, waiting for her to make bad decisions.

“Did you want something, Lou?” Nancy asked, leaning against the wall, and trying to decide how far she was willing to let this go. They locked eyes for a moment. “You want some coffee? I don’t have any milk, but I do put vodka in it,” Nancy said.

Luisiana opened her large black satchel and pulled out a bottle of high-quality whiskey. She waved it around like it was a prize. “Vodka is for the homeless and the Russian. Adults drink the brown stuff!”

“What about homeless Russians?” Nancy asked.

“I didn’t think that metaphor through that well,” she replied, twisting the top from the bottle. “I did some digging. Turns out everyone in town *loves* you, Nancy. But... I know three things about you that they don’t.”

Nancy had just finished her decision making and had concluded that she liked Dink’s honesty better than Lou’s cynicism and would throw her out at the next opportunity. But she *was* curious. “And what, three things would that be, Lou?” she asked, sitting next to her on the sofa.

“Don’t call me Lou,” she said, taking an amateur swig from the bottle. “You have been running around town playing detective and you even got to walk right into that little police operations centre, down the street. A place I can’t so much as stand near without PC pissed-his-pants moving me on!”

“That’s two things,” Nancy replied, accepting the bottle and taking an expert swig from it before handing it back.

Louisiana looked shocked at Nancy’s capacity for whiskey-intake. “What? Oh, yes. I also know that you are getting nowhere with your little girl detective game. I am, very happy to help you out though, if you want to collaborate on this case, detective McQueen.” As Louisiana spoke, she leaned in closer and stared at Nancy intently.

Nancy almost hadn’t noticed her hand appear on her knee. She wasn’t sure if Louisiana was genuinely interested in her, or just looking for information, but either way, she was in for a disappointment. Though, on some level, Nancy lamented that she had to reject this gorgeous mercenary woman. She knew she could have, at the very least, had a hell of an evening.

“Are you thinking about it? Really? You think Lois Lane here could hold a candle to my detecting skills? For the love of Watson, throw her

out!” Holmes complained. More proof to her that he couldn’t read her thoughts, not unless they were directed at him. She was stunned that she was thinking about the puzzle of Holmes right now, rather than the blonde on her sofa.

She was also entertained that Holmes’ was more concerned with her taking a second opinion on the case than her cheating on Dink. Was it cheating? Were they more than casual? Nancy considered the blonde on the sofa again.

“Actually Lou, I think you missed out of item number four of your list,” she said, taking another drink.

“Oh, and what’s that? Don’t call me Lou,” Lou replied, now a lot closer than Nancy had intended to let her get.

“I know lots of things. If we were to collaborate; it would just be you copying my homework.”

“Well, it could be a lot of fun copying it, if you follow,” Louisiana said, biting her lip like she was in a trash romance movie and sliding an arm around her.

“Hold on a sec, will you?” Nancy asked. Pulling out her phone.

“Are you texting, really? Right now? For real?”

Nancy stuck up a finger, as if putting her on hold, and deftly tapped out a message to Dink. ‘Hi. I knw a strange Q – but – we R gting along gud ->?’ She hit send.

“Okay, that was odd,” Luisiana complained as Nancy put her phone in her lap.

The phone buzzed and she glanced at the screen. ‘Yes. Gtng along great. Y is there a problem?’

Nancy smiled at the message and started tapping out a reply.

“Sorry, Nancy, are you too drunk to realise what’s happening here? I am literally offering myself to you. In case it wasn’t clear,” Luisiana complained.

Nancy kept typing. ‘No problems! Just rejecting hot blonde woman. Wanted to make sure was right choice!’ she added a few smiley faces and a heart to the end of the message. To make it clear.

“Right, sorry about that, Lou.”

“Don’t call me Lou.”

“Yeah, see, the thing is, while usually I would happily have meaningless sex and drink your whiskey, I recently met a girl and I really like her,” Nancy explained with an oddly apologetic tone.

“Fine, forget the sex. You *can* just tell me what you know. I don’t mind. At least it won’t have been a total washout.”

“*Nancy! You monster, she’s obviously heartbroken!*” Holmes added, now realising he had misread Nancy’s intentions.

“I don’t think there is any reason at all for me to do that!” Nancy observed. “You just want something to talk about on your boring news stream!”

“Did you not notice the offer of sex? I feel like you’re not living up to your reputation here, Nance!”

“Don’t call me Nance. What reputation.”

“A certain police friend of yours told me all about you, *Nance!*” Louisiana said. Though it did seem that she wasn’t trying to be hurtful as much as *was* hurt.

“That would be Mark Phillips. He’s a creep who is on the cusp of stalking me. Also, I really don’t want to be on the news again.”

Luisiana took a drink from the bottle and passed it back, lid now screwed on tightly. She looked quite put out by the whole conversation. “Yeah, I get that. Not sure anyone watches anyway, to be honest.”

Nancy instantly recognised her lie. She was just trying a new tactic now. Luisiana Kent’s live stream usually went out at one in the morning. It pulled in millions of views and her numbers after the fact were at least as high. She was the pinup girl of snarky oddball news.

“Yeah, no. Lou, thanks for the whiskey. Now sling it. I have to go visit my vicar.”

Louisiana raised an eyebrow and put forward her finest pout. “One little morsel? Just one, something for the stream?”

“*Tell her about, Sinclair, that should keep her out of our hair,*” Holmes advised.

“Fine!” Nancy exclaimed. Louisiana pulled out a tablet computer and a pen like a magician with a card. “Tom Sinclair seems to think his life is in danger in police custody, so much so that when he pulled a knife on me, it wasn’t to threaten me, it was to aid his escape. He thinks they’ll kill him!”

Louisiana furrowed her brow. “Interesting. I wonder if that’s related to Farker.”

“Why would it be?” Nancy and Holmes asked in unison.

“About three months ago, your tiny tourist town here had detective Farker transfer over. He’s closed more cases than any other currently serving detective in this region. He chose here as his new post. It was strange, he could have had any position in the country; it was actually why your town was on my radar.” She paused in thought for a moment. “Thanks for the crumb. Let me know if you change your mind about the other thing,” she said, and showed herself out.

“*That was unexpected,*” Holmes said.

“I know. I can’t believe I turned down casual sex. It’s not like me to make good decisions. Ugh! I think you may be a positive influence on me,” Nancy said, flashing back to her suddenly high principles.

“*I was talking about the Farker angle.*”

Nancy’s phone buzzed. It was a picture, from Dink. A selfie with a ‘kissy face.’ Suddenly, she was pleased with her decisions.

CANINITE

The dead monster was pulled across a table, legs and arms fixed in place with huge skewers while a woman that Lilly knew only as 'Doctor' poked around inside its body.

She didn't wear much in the way of protective equipment. No mask or tabard. She did wear gloves; leather ones, that matched her ornate hunting leathers. She had removed a cape and weapons when she came into the well-lit wood-clad room. Mike and Howard were leaning into the guts with great interest and a small older man was frantically photographing it all while comparing it to old books. There were some mutterings about its species which Lilly was already ignoring.

This room was once a dining hall, but since their group had a greater need for somewhere to fill their bestiary, it had long ago become a macabre room of oddities and trophies, oh, and an autopsy table. The hunters were not cruel people, and they certainly made no attempt to take trophies from their kills, despite what someone may think if they came into this room of taxidermy curiosities and ancient jars of suspect samples.

The Doctor had been called back from another mission at Mike's request. Lilly sat quietly on a chair, next to a large stuffed brown and grey bear with bone spikes coming out of its arms and back. Out of context, someone may have thought it to be the work of a grim taxidermist with a flair for Victorian horror. She had seen one alive when she was first training. There were scarier things in that room than angry bone-bears.

The Doctor was removing organs from the frog-monster and weighing them. Lilly had never quite been sure why the weight of the organs mattered to anyone, but it was a staple part of the autopsy.

Lilly was keeping herself from falling asleep by studying the doctor with intent. She wondered what mission the woman was on that would lend itself to the way she was dressed. She had known hunters who would suit up for an epic battle in leather armour, and she herself hoped that one day she would get to try it for real. But for this woman to be called back from somewhere and appear dressed like a thief from a fantasy novel perplexed her. She wanted to ask, but it was a firm policy to keep out of other people's missions, unless invited to become involved.

The Doctor's long silver hair was tied back in a complex plat that was decorated with wooden beads. She reminded Lilly of a timeless sorceress, or a magical queen. She was fascinating to watch. Each movement surgically intentional.

"Well, it's definitely a creation," the Doctor finally said, in a voice that was regal and commanding. She removed her leather gloves and tossed them into a bin that had been supplied for spare 'materials.'

"Yes, but what kind?" Howard asked. "Are we talking spare parts and a life spell, or conjured?"

"No, it's elegant. But there is no way a creature like this evolved naturally, not of natural selection or abiogenesis. It was designed, quite

intelligently.” She checked the books that the older man who had been taking pictures was now showing her and nodded. She pointed at a few key points that Lilly couldn’t make out and then nodded again, as if a revelation of some sort had been gained.

Mike, being excellent at cutting through pomposity, asked the important question. “And what resources would you need to create something like this?”

“Well, Michael, that’s sort of the big question, isn’t it?” she replied with too much enunciation. Mike raised his eyebrows at her. He was the highest-ranking person in the organisation and, thanks to his own gifts, an expert in most things supernatural. This woman had *quite* an opinion of herself to fence him like this.

She noticed the eyebrows and answered the question. “From looking at its insides, and from what you have told me about its behaviour. This creature was designed to use one or two magical workings, hunt based on scent and do so with an almost detached sense of self. Despite the brain being *juiced* by your team, its skull cavity and shape implies something a little smarter than a cow. Add to that the almost impenetrable hide, and I think we’re talking about a creator that’s very powerful and consider this creature disposable. It’s a hammer that gets thrown.”

Howard looked annoyed at the overuse of words. “Are we talking something a half-demon could create, with enough soul power?”

She raised her own eyebrows now. “Howard, this is a scalpel of a creature that can summon water, and seemingly smell through all of our defences. It’s naturally invisible and psychically controlled. This is not something created by anything less than a realm-god.”

“Well shit,” Mike said sternly. “It’s true then.”

“Yeah, looks like it,” Howard replied.

“Sorry, gentleman, I’m not clear. What’s true?” the Doctor asked.

“We found this one in the south of England,” Mike replied.

The doctor was visibly shocked at the revelation. After a moment of disbelief, she regained her confident demeanour. “Well, if anyone is qualified to fight a god, I’m sure it’s you two.”

She didn’t look convinced.

The three of them returned to the town through a portal, of sorts, that let them out behind a hidden wall in the basement of the church. The smell of weed was overpowering.

Lilly coughed at the sudden onset of scent. She still felt a little nauseous every time she travelled to and from the garden. The air went from crisp and delicious to salty and old tasting. The addition of weed plants to the mix made her want to throw up, even more than usual.

“I’m going to patrol the town before morning,” Howard informed them, ignoring Lillys wrenching.

“Be careful,” Mike replied.

Howard’s abilities allowed him to explore the night in ways Lilly barely understood. She knew better than to offer to accompany him.

They walked up the stairs to the main room of the church.

“Where do they think you sleep?” she asked, finally getting control of herself, now that the weed was behind them.

“What?” Mike asked, casually lighting a cigarette.

“Nancy, and the rest of the town people. Where do they think you live?”

He sat on the pew at the front and put his feet up on a potted plant.

“No idea. The thing is about civilians, is that they tend not to think

about things like that, not around us. The Wind muddies it all, and it doesn't occur to them."

Lilly was still fresh enough that she hadn't quite got used to the mysterious force of 'the Wind' and how it worked. She just knew that lacking guidance, *normal* people didn't notice her weapons and always managed to explain away any fighting they saw as 'youths' or 'gangs' and that was about it. There were no teachings on the topic, though it wasn't like her training took place in a classroom anyway.

"Okay," she asked. "How come, when were in the garden you're like, this epic leader. But, here, you smoke weed, play video games and, you know... you're different."

She had noticed the distinct change in him, as soon as they started this mission a few weeks ago. He had already been undercover for months by then and he was very different.

He blew out smoke and rubbed his stubbly chin. "I've been doing this, hunting, for a long time. Life outside the garden is monotonous and depressing. I hate being forced into this bloody place. But the mission needs me to be here. Basically, I hate this portion of my job, and given I'm here to look after a rain covered tourist town and an alcoholic woman, I don't exactly need me 'A' game, do I, Lilly?"

She shrugged. He was right. She could see his logic. She sat next to him on the pew.

"Well, if I was following what doctor snooty back there said, we just got confirmation that this really is a realm-god sort of problem. Does that mean we get your 'A' game?"

"Time is a funny thing. Trust me, when it's time to stab things, I'll be ready."

The word stabbing reminded her of something. "Oh, how come your daggers couldn't hurt the monster, but Howard's swords can?"

Mike chuckled. Cigarette bouncing up and down between his lips as he did. "Howard's sword was a gift from my fiancé."

"Bloody hell!" Lilly heard herself say, realising the measure of those words.

Mike's fiancé, the Gardener was a legend, far more so than Mike himself. She had been away, looking for some artefact since before Lilly was recruited. But the way the other hunters spoke about her, she knew the meaning behind it. This was the woman who was said to have created the garden.

"Yeah, that's one way of putting it," Mike said with an entertained side eye.

REVELATION AND LOSS

Nancy was in no state to be making sentences by the time she made it to the pub. She had been chatting with Holmes about the evidence and slowly made a sizable dent into the bottle that Louisiana had left.

“I really like her, Nige! I said no to a hot blonde for her. For her! She’s famous too, *kinda*, so that’s gets toooos be worth more points, right?” Nancy said to Roy, who she thought was Nigel, because of all the whiskey inside of her.

“I don’t know why; you could have just *not told her!*” Roy said supportively as he read his smutty novel and tried his best to endure Nancy’s ramblings.

“No! I, she is a princess! She deserves better than that!” Nancy replied, suddenly pointing at her drink for no reason. She placed her face on the bar and started sniffing about how Dink deserved better. She had firmly hit the melancholy phase of her drunkenness.

A cold sobering wind hit Nancy’s head. She shouted about it for a moment before laying on the bar again.

“Oh, be quiet you!” Marina barked. Well used to Nancy’s mid-day binge drinking.

“It is bloody cold out there. Also, whatever tit left that car hasn’t been back yet. We have a delivery tomorrow; if it’s still there, I’m getting it towed,” she said as she hung up her coat and scarf. “If we have any more winters like this one, I may have to quit smoking... or worse, take up vaping!” Marina shuddered at the thought.

“*Nancy, that may have been worth listening to,*” Holmes said sternly. “Get up, you daft bint. I need to take a look.”

“No, sleeping! Go away!” Nancy yelled aloud.

One of the regular patrons cheered in agreement from the back of the pub and returned to his paper.

“*Nancy!*”

Nancy looked up for a moment. She took a sip of her drink and rubbed her eyes. The headache was already setting in. She needed to either top-up or sleep it off.

“Roy, when did you get here?” she asked. He gestured to answer, lowering his book. She shushed him. “Someone open the back door for me please, and thank you?” Nancy asked as she wobbled a little.

Marina gave her a sideways look and opened the back door. Nancy leaned, or to be more accurate, slid to the side to get a look outside, through it. There was the bonnet of a large black car out there. The large window of the flower shop next door loomed behind it. Nancy made a face like she was going to cry for a second and with a force of will she projected Holmes on to the window.

“Good! Be gone ghost man!” she said, giggling. “Shut the door Nigel, let the bastard freeze out there!” she added, still giggling as she slipped off her stool and lay on the floor. “I’m okay, is okay. I alive!” she yelled as she passed out down there.

“Should I pick her up?” Roy asked.

“Nah, it’s quiet, leave her there. Let her look like a moron for an hour,” Marina replied.

Nancy floated around in a foggy delirium. The fog was lit by the usual amber lights and crisp sounds of splashing. There was a wetness to the veil that she recognised as the sea air. She had assumed she was too drunk to dream as she had passed out. It was likely that very thought that had been the thing that summoned it.

She had had no dreams these last few days, between the evening with Phil and the following evenings with Dink, she had found herself too distracted and soothed for them to manifest.

Still, now she was there, and she did what she always did. She tried to escape the dream before it stabbed her in the soul.

The familiar sound of bare feet on wet concrete echoed. The experience worked its way through the shield of whisky and contentment until she realised once again that it was her. She was running barefoot through the fog, towards the street, looking for someone, for anyone, to help her.

This wasn’t just a dream. It was the echo of the morning she had found her mom hanging from the beam in her flat. The morning she ran for help because there was no one in her life to call upon. The morning she needed her dead father to suddenly live again and take her hand because no one else could.

It was the day she found herself alone for the first time.

Her eyes adjusted to the fog. She stopped still. The cold on her feet was like a million tiny cuts to her now. She turned and there it was, the thing she was always trying to not look at. The shadow on the sea that

was her broken heart in the darkness finally given form. The monster that looked at her across the veil.

“Nancy. The car, Nancy!” Holmes said, for the fourth time.

She sat up with a crick in her neck. The pub was still quiet. She couldn't have been out for long, but she felt a fresh focus. Sleeping off whiskey was always the fastest way to get a clear head from it.

“What? Sorry?” she asked, remembering to use her internal voice as she stood up.

“Finally! You've been asleep for almost an hour. Took me twenty minutes to force my way back in from the alley, you dick!” Holmes complained.

Nancy lifted the flap in the bar and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

“I thought you were dead. Was going to chalk outline you and use you as a tourist attraction,” Roy said, without looking up from his book.

“I think I was,” she replied as she pushed open the back door cautiously.

The car was still there, and yes, it really was *bloody cold!*

“Holmes, this car, is this his?”

“Yeah, it's Pilgrims,” Holmes informed her.

“How do you know for sure?” she asked.

“There's a plastic turkey hanging from the mirror.”

“What does that prove?” She asked with a raised eyebrow as she looked through the windshield.

“Trust me, it tracks. You're drunk, is all. The door isn't locked.”

Nancy briefly wondered how Holmes knew as she climbed into the driver's seat.

She flipped down the sun visor like it was a cop show, half waiting for a secret note to drop out. Nothing.

She opened the glove box, half expecting a gun to be sitting in there. Nothing.

She felt around under the seat, looking for a mysterious envelope. Nothing.

"Well, this was pointless," she said with a headache and a great deal of annoyance. She twisted the lid from her bottle of water and chugged it down.

"Seems odd that he would leave it here and unlocked. Careless, or in a hurry, I suppose."

Nancy rubbed her neck and eyes. She was trying to focus on the things that Holmes was saying, but she really was very drunk, still. It was hard to force focus to the forefront. Holmes didn't seem at all affected though, which, even in her state, she knew meant *something*.

She left the driver's seat and walked around to the back of the large black four by four and popped open the boot. There was an expensive looking black case in there and a cheaper looking duffel bag. Both filled way past their capacity.

She took a breath of sobering, cold air. It was a novelty to her; she wanted to be *less* drunk for once. She used her moment of forced clarity to open the duffel bag and pulled out its contents, clothes, well-worn and a half-empty can of deodorant.

"Classy. Living out of his car."

"You can't talk, you don't even have a car; you're living out of my head!" Nancy replied in a tone that implied she had just won the argument.

She opened the other bag. A thin black laptop slid out. "Is it a crime to take a dead man's laptop?" she asked.

"Absolutely," Holmes replied.

"And that means?"

"Take it; obviously."

She flung the black bag over her shoulder and closed the back hatch of the car.

Rather than going back through the pub, she left via the alleyway. As she did, another very similar black car passed at high speed. There was a familiar white-haired tosser in the driving seat.

"Interesting," Holmes observed. *"I had wondered when they would turn up again."*

"Wonder where they are going," she mused.

"As much as I would love to follow them, you're in no condition to drive."

"I agree. I don't have a license, anyway."

She heard Holmes sigh and grumble at what a crap adult she was. She ignored him and cautiously headed back to her flat.

Nancy put the ill-gotten bag down on her dining room table and sat looking at it for a little too long.

"It's not going to open itself. Get it out, turn it on," Holmes advised.

"Shut up! I'm thinking!"

"About what?" he asked.

"Since you first showed up, I've had guns pointed at me, there have been multiple dead bodies, my flat has been trashed and the bloody media are trying to ply me for information, or sex, it's not clear...

Holmes, I feel like powering up this laptop is literally inviting more of, whatever this is, and it's scary."

There was a silence. She smelled his smoke and there was a brief feeling of coldness pass through her already cold body. She blinked as a ghostly form sat across from her. *Holmes had come to visit her for once.*

"I didn't know you could do that," she said.

"I'm not sure I'm supposed to," he said as his form struggled to stay solid. He put a ghostly hand across the table and rested it atop of hers. The cold was comforting.

"Eventually, we'll have to have a talk about how I got here, but... Nancy, I promise you, I swear to you, if you don't get to the bottom of this case, it's going to be very bad, for everyone."

"When all this is over, will you still be here?" Nancy asked.

"Tell you what, if there is any way I can stay, I will. That's the best I can promise."

"Fuck it then," she said and pulled the zip on the bag open. As she did, Holmes returned to her mind. It felt right for him to be in there again.

She pulled out the thin black laptop and flipped open the lid. The whole thing was a matt black metal. It was very thin, expensive looking. The keys were a dark grey and the screen bright as it flared to life. It showed her the manufacturer's logo briefly, a few moments later dropped her to a password window.

"Well, that was an anti-climax, wasn't it?" she said, annoyed.

"Check the bag,"

She dug around in the bag, as instructed. After a few minutes and a lot of residual whiskey fog, she tipped the bag out across the table. Things rolled and bounced out of it as she shook it.

"Yeah, that's definitely the best way of doing that; good job Nancy," Holmes complained.

She ignored him.

She checked that she hadn't missed any pockets or compartments in the black leather bag giving it a shake, to be sure. She tossed it onto the floor and started looking at her findings.

There were a lot of pens, notebooks, and a folder. Being a little more organised than Holmes gave her credit for, she pulled at the pens one by one, looking for hidden messages or clues. They turned out to be just pens. Mostly cheap disposable ones.

She was itching to look at the notebooks and folder but didn't want Holmes to think she was being too eager. Though, she suspected he wanted to see in them more than she did.

With the last pen inspected and discarded, she pulled the notebook close. She looked at it eagerly, savouring the moment. It was a well filled half sized pad with ring binding down the side. She opened the thin cardboard cover carefully, as if it was a precious artefact.

It was filled with tiny writing. Random words, half-baked thoughts, and observations without context. Line after line said mundane things that just struck Nancy as *pointless*. One line read, 'The garden has a house', another said 'The Wind is watching me.'

She flipped through the book; each page was the same ramblings about gardens and weather.

She grabbed the thick folder next. A cheap cardboard one, blue. She opened it and slid out a few pages of written notes in someone else's handwriting.

The pages were aged a little, and they were creased, like they had once been screwed up and flattened out again.

As she read, she felt a fresh chill run down her spine.

'Instructions for its summoning: Only when there have been four signs can you place one paper on another. In the middle of the circle have the body of the chosen, still living and read from them in the

order they died. When the last is read, strangle the life from the chosen until they are dead. Only then can the cleansing happen.'

"*Grim,*" Holmes said, stating the obvious.

The page had additional notes written on it, this one in a slightly heavier handwriting, different pen. It looked darker, like more care had been taken with this portion. It read 'Once the creature of the sea arrives, it will consume the chosen and grant gifts to those who hold the papers, as though tickets.' Nancy red the line over and over, making sure she had understood it correctly.

She turned the page to see a bad sketch of five squares with a stick man in the middle on a gravestone. There was something written at the bottom of the page, in the same, neat handwriting, 'If the chosen dies, we have to wait for the next sign.'

Nancy wrinkled her nose at the cryptic messages. It was all just so normal. Not written in blood or on parchment. It was written on lined paper with a ballpoint pen. When you think about things like this, you expect them to be a little grander. Nancy considered it all, making sure she looked over every mark on the page. Knowing it was how Holmes would record them in his room.

She turned to the next page.

There was a diagram, a small, intricate, family tree with little boxes drawn out and arrows with names. She stared at it, trying to work out what she was looking at. As she read down the list following the lines from person to person, she stopped... there it was, right at the bottom of the page. 'Neil McQueen,' her dad's name. She felt the chill turn to fear as she looked at it.

"Holmes?" Nancy asked through a welling of tears.

"*I see it.*"

"Did you know?" she asked.

"*Keep reading,*" he replied solemnly.

She turned the page.

This page contained a note, one that she feared was less cryptic to her than perhaps it should have been. ‘You will know the chosen by their lineage. Beware the passenger. It is an agent of the enemy.’

“Holmes. Are you an agent of the enemy?” Nancy asked with shaking hands and a nervous voice.

“Nancy. You realise these are the notes of the bad people? So, their enemy would be the good guys?” he said, almost as nervous as her.

“Holmes, you’re not a figment of my imagination, are you?”

“No... but I really don’t know much more.”

Nancy placed the paper down carefully and slowly stood up.

“Where are you going?” Holmes asked.

Nancy ignored him and walked to her bedroom. She lay down and pulled the blanket over her head.

“Nancy, there were more things in that folder. There was a lot more to see.”

Nancy ignored him. She pulled the blinds in her mind closed and silenced the detective with a force of defiant will.

PROPELLANT

Howard had been following the older, white-haired man around the streets for about an hour now. He was obviously trained well. He drove out of town, then got a taxi back. From there he had walked across town, watching his back and faking stops so he could check for followers.

If he hadn't known better, at one point. He could have sworn the man had looked directly at him. Howard was absolutely silent, fast, and despite his less than regular abilities, he was still protected by the Wind, thanks to Mike's hive mind pulling some string with... well, Howard didn't much think about what they were in touch with. Mike was oddly suited to live his life as a man of god and that concerned Howard more than it should.

Finally, the old man seemed to be getting close to his destination. He had slowed up his pace and was scoping out an old bungalow that was in a less than ideal state of repair. Howard got none of the usual 'vibes' from the place. Though he was sure that this was the destination.

Howard was painfully aware that this man was, at least, aware of the supernatural. When he visited Mike, he had asked for one of these Papers, before pulling a gun on him. Howard half smiled at the idea of someone threatening Mike with such a human weapon; which was also how Howard knew that, while this man knew a little of the supernatural, he didn't know well enough to steer clear of really dangerous things.

The white-haired man walked to the end of the street, past the house that he was so interested in and leaned against a lamppost pretending to take a call. He was checking he hadn't been followed. Howard knew the game. He would wait about ten minutes and then cautiously enter the bungalow. Given the level of paranoid he was showing, the phone was likely fake, so it couldn't be tracked. It was probably just a prop to make him appear more natural.

Howard stood quietly in his shadow and let his mind wonder. Was Mike's presence why the evening enemies were staying clear of this area, or did they know what was coming? Howard also considered that if the supernatural forces could sense the storm, then he should be able to. Maybe he wasn't supernatural *enough*.

There was movement. His prey made a motion towards the bungalow. He took a few steps and then stopped. He cocked his ear as if listening to something, then turned and carried on down the street, away from his destination.

Had Howard been wrong about the bungalow? Or had he been spotted? Was it time to follow the man, or did the bungalow need more investigation?

Then something else dawned on him, something that sent a shiver down his permanently cold spine. What if whatever the man was up-to was complete? What if a meeting, or an exchange had taken place and Howard had missed it?

Was there something in the darkness that was scarier than him?
He put one hand on his sword and the other on his six-shooter.

Mike hated this mission. He hated being under cover, he hated being stuck outside of the garden and he missed Sophia, his fiancé. When the church organisation had contacted his team about this problematic town, he volunteered to take on the pastoral role because he knew that being out of the garden would allow things to move on. Allow time to pass until the Gardener, that is, Sophia, returned. He just hadn't taken into account how unaccustomed to long stints away he had become.

Usually, he was too busy hunting and stalking to worry about time, but in this role, he had to wait day after day for the hours to pass. He had started smoking a few weeks after he arrived; the weed came next to help him keep his mood from spiralling, which was a terrible idea, but he liked being stoned. The video games helped the most. They were the best way to waste hours without noticing.

Now though he sat, feet on the desk in the little office and flicked through the old notebook. This was the sum knowledge of every *actual* vicar that had tried to deal with this mess. If they had have called decades ago, they might not have been facing something potentially world changingly powerful. Though, his predecessor would likely never have actually listened to call for help from Christians. He spared a few moments to reminisce and enjoyed a bittersweet smile.

His passengers were starting to buzz, sewing thoughts and memories together. Once they added in their own knowledge and ideas, he could almost see, almost remember the notes in the book. He allowed them to immerse him. He watched as the vicars of the past pointlessly

wrestled with the only options they had. They always had to let the chosen die, every time. It was all they could do. Mike pulled himself out of the memory. He was a killer. He would murder Nancy himself if it came to it, but he sincerely hoped he was more qualified to deal with this mess than a bunch of dead vicars were. Though, Pilgrim was probably qualified too, and look how that had ended for him.

Mike was getting melancholy. He lit a home rolled cigarette filled with his favourite spice and decided to ignore his problems until morning.

THE CHOSEN

The screaming of the bell forced Nancy to rise. She pulled open the door without checking who was there.

“Nancy, have you been crying?” Dink asked, instantly making a concerned face.

“I had a tough day,” Nancy replied, sitting herself on the sofa, and wishing she had planned ahead well enough to have dragged her duvet along with her.

“What happened?” Dink asked, sitting next to her.

Nancy was characteristically suspicious because Dink didn't simply leave when she saw her upset. Everyone else she had dated would have either instantly moved to 'making her feel better' by feeling her up, or just left.

Dink put an arm around her and pulled her in close. Nancy was not at all used to this. They had only known each other a few days and already she was letting her baggage be seen. Dink would be smarter to run.

Nancy cried a little more, but now, because someone cared and that upset her too. She had no idea why.

After a few minutes of pretending *not* to be crying, she wiped her eyes and nuzzled into Dink.

“I found something,” she eventually said.

“What did you find?” Dink asked.

“Well, the thing is, if I tell you, you’re going to think it’s fucking weird and it’s going to freak you out.”

“Nancy, you being fucking weird is the main reason I like you,” Dink said with a gentle hand on Nancy’s chin. She used it to turn her towards her. She kissed her on the forehead.

Nancy pulled Dink by the hand to the dining table.

“So... read this.”

Dink sat down and started reading it. “That’s my dad’s name right there. He was killed when I was a kid,” Nancy explained, not remembering how much she had told Dink.

“Okay, where did this come from?”

“I found it in the car behind the pub. It belongs; belonged to the first dead guy, Pilgrim.”

Nancy sat at the table, scared, as she waited for Dink to read on.

“Okay... so some people want to kill you...” she began. “Because of *who your dad was*,” there was a pause. “And they think a sea monster will come and grant wishes?” she asked.

Nancy nodded.

“Okay, I get that. It *is* creepy,” she said, before reading on again.

“Oh, this is a copy of that weird picture you have?”

“What?”

Dink pulled out the page that had been in the pile Nancy hadn’t looked at yet. She passed it to her reverently. Nancy looked at it, confused. There it was. An exact copy of her mom’s suicide note.

She went to the wall and took down the original framed version, setting it down next to the copy.

“What does ‘It’s not too late’ mean?” Dink asked, looking at the notes and sensing Nancy’s change of mood.

“I don’t know. It’s my mom’s suicide note.”

Dink went white. “Oh, my God! Nancy, I didn’t know. I’m sorry!”

She shrugged. “No reason to be sorry. It’s the least effective suicide note ever written!”

Nancy looked deeply at the pages in the folder. “I... I think this folder. It’s all... it *is* her handwriting?” she said in realisation, as she compared all the pages to the note. “The letters seem to match.”

“What does Holmes think?” Dink asked.

Nancy glanced up sheepishly. “I don’t know. I closed his blind. I’m not talking to him.”

“Why?” she asked, suddenly puzzled.

She held up the page that talked about the ‘agent of the enemy’ and the ‘chosen.’

Dink made an excited face. “He’s real!” she said with joy.

“Seems to be... shut him out while I thought about it,” she explained.

“And what are you going to do?” Dink asked.

Nancy tried not to cry. “I decided I need to know for sure,” she said.

She grabbed a notepad from by her pile of books. It was mostly filled with guesses as to ‘who did it’ that she noted down as she read her detective novels. She brought over a pen and handed them both to Dink, who was quite confused.

“Think of a number between none and infinity. I don’t know. Write ten numbers, I don’t care, just put something on the paper and go and stand by the window with it,” she asked. Getting more nervous by the second.

Dink caught on instantly and started scribbling on the pad, careful to make sure Nancy couldn't see. She took the paper and stood by the previously-never-opened-curtains, holding it up so Nancy couldn't see. She was excited about the test.

Nancy closed her eyes for a moment and pulled open the blinds. Holmes was sitting there, feet on the table and file in hand. "*Talking again, are we?*" he asked without looking up.

"Tell me what's on the note Dink is holding and I won't shut you out again," she said aloud, so that Dink could hear.

"I'm not a chimp at a circus, Nancy."

She opened her eyes, ignoring him. She projected him onto the window behind Dink.

He stood up, obviously annoyed, cigarette between his lips. He walked over to the window. He looked at the note over Dink's shoulder. "*There's the number two, two, one and the letter 'B,'. Also, it says in tiny writing 'I think I'm falling for you,'*" he said and blew smoke out of the window.

"Wait, can I smell smoke?" Dink asked.

"Sherlock Holmes' house number. Also, I think I'm falling for you too!"

"No fucking way!" Dink said, dropping the pad. "You were telling the truth! And he's not imaginary! What the fuck Nancy!" Dink said, looking around hoping to see some sign of Holmes. "Is he here now? Was that his smoke? Why can only you see him?"

Nancy felt herself grin. She had confirmation now. She wasn't mad. She threw her arms around Dink and as she looked to the window. she said, "Thank you," to the both of them.

"Now, put the bloody woman down and let's get to work!" Holmes demanded.

Nancy and Dink sat at the table, reading through the papers, trying to make sense of them. Holmes sat in his room, making notes, and adding things to his own files.

“Does he need to eat?” Dink asked excitedly. She had been coming up with new questions every few minutes since they had sat down.

Nancy mentally glanced at Holme’s for an answer. “He says he gets crisps out of the vending machine in the corridor. But he doesn’t *really* get hungry,” she said, relaying his absent-minded answer.

“Where does he get his cigarettes from?”

“His pocket,” she answered again, relaying his message, complete with snark.

“Why is he grumpy all the time?”

Nancy chuckled at his answer. “Because he has to listen to your innate prattle!”

Drink laughed. “Okay, I get it. I’ll stop,” she promised.

“He doesn’t believe you,” Nancy said, glancing up. She was pretty sure that Holmes was enjoying interacting with someone else, even if it was via messenger.

They returned to their study.

Nancy read through the notes for the second time now, from the start. They outlined a ritual to summon something. Though, the ritual seemed to hinge on strangling her to death to get the job done. Which was a concern for her.

The notes also referenced five ‘papers’ that needed to be read. At least she now had an idea what the whole ‘paper’ thing was about now. She was also concerned that this was directly related to why her father was killed and that her mom, who seemed to have written all these

things, was in the middle of it all, too. Why didn't she leave Nancy a manual or something?

The notes went on into a ramble about horsemen and salvation and had all sorts of strange quotes that a quick yahoo search revealed were from about six different religious texts and some hundred-year-old horror novels. Other than the first few pages, it was seeming more like a collection of mad ramblings than it was a cohesive text.

"None of this makes any sense," Nancy finally said with a defeated sigh. "I think someone wants to kill me because of who my dad was. That's about all I can work out."

"Yeah, it's literally nonsense. Did Holmes see anything we didn't?" Dink asked.

Nancy looked inward. "Well, did you?"

"No, actually, nothing at all."

"You better not be holding out on me, *passenger!*"

"Honestly. Nothing," Holmes said with hands up in submission, and cigarette hanging from between his lips. *"Though I am concerned at how little of it actually makes sense. If this is a sacrifice manual, it should be less abstract."*

"I think I need to see Sinclair," Nancy admitted.

"The lunatic who tried to knife you in the church?" Dink asked with nervous concern.

"Yep. Let's go visit the police station," Nancy declared, grabbing a jacket. Dink dropped into her chair as she watched.

"What, not coming?" Nancy asked, with a sparkle in her eyes.

"I can come?" Dink asked, looking less dejected almost instantly.

"No!"

"Sure!"

“Remind me again why we walked here?” Dink complained as they got close to the police station.

“To give me time to think about what I’m doing!”

A slowing van cast a shadow across the two and stopped a little way ahead of them. Luisiana and Dave stepped out of it, full camera and makeup. Luisiana winked at Nancy and blew a kiss at her.

“Friend of yours?” Dink asked.

“I owe her a bottle of whiskey,” she replied.

“And here we are joined by Nancy McQueen, daughter of the first victim of the ghost killer!” Luisiana said with as much performance and spunk as she could project to the camera.

“What now?” Nancy asked, suddenly aware that she had stepped into frame.

Luisiana looked at her through thinned eyes, glad, no doubt, to be telling her something she didn’t know. “Oh, you haven’t heard? Another body turned up today. A man wanted by the police was found, naked and tied up in the library storeroom!” She looked directly at the camera as she spoke, pushing a microphone towards Nancy for comment.

Nancy blinked at it.

“Given that the victim was one of the men who recently attacked you in the local Church, do you have comment Miss McQueen?”

Nancy, being true to herself, did have a comment, but Holmes shot her a “*Behave!*” before she could tell Luisiana where to go.

She sighed and pulled the mic closer. “When I figure out who did it, I’ll let you know first. How about that?” She said and pushed the mic away with an annoyed look, freshly loaded and pointed at Luisiana, who instantly started talking to her camera again.

Nancy dragged Dink by the hand into the police station.

The man at the desk looked quite annoyed as he took the first bite of a large sandwich before noticing Nancy. Other than him, the place was mostly empty.

“Hi. I would like to see Detective Fuckler.”

“Farker, and who are you, miss?” the grumpy officer asked, brushing crumbs from his beard and placing his sandwich down on its wrapper.

“Nancy McQueen,” she said, glancing at Dink and expecting to be recognised.

Dink smiled back, looking quite excited to be an actual part of the adventure.

“Right, leave your details on here, along with what it’s about and I’ll get him to get back to you, luv,” the man said, passing her a clipboard, complete with pen.

Dink suddenly looked less impressed. She took the clipboard and walked a little way away from the desk.

“*Call Sunglasses,*” Holmes advised.

Nancy pulled out her phone. “Sunglasses!” she said to Dink, receiving a confused look in response.

“*Yeah, call Sunglasses. We don’t know who he is, but he has been helpful so far. Test him. See if he does anything measurably useful for you.*”

Nancy fished around in her jacket pocket and retrieved the card that Sunglasses had given her. “Okay, so this is the number of the man from the crime-unit. Who may or may not be secret service. But not like Harry Potter, *real* secret service, no wizards,” she tried to explain as she dialled.

“You know a secret service agent and you’re only mentioning this now... why?”

She finished dialling and put the phone to her ear. “Well, I wasn’t sure my information came from a real source until we tested him earlier.” The call was ringing.

“Oh,” Dink said, as she noticed the man at the desk look at them suspiciously.

The call connected. “Hello, Nancy?” came the familiar voice of her overdressed associate.

“Yeah, so we have to have a talk about who you really are and why you are being so helpful later. But for now, I need some help. I’m at the police station and I want to talk to Tom Sinclair. Can you make this happen or do I have to get creative?” she said, without taking a breath.

There was a long silence on the other end. “I’ll get you in, so long as I can listen in.”

“Terrible deal, don’t take it,” Holmes said.

“Fuck it, sure,” she replied.

“I used to think only you could hear me, but now I’m not convinced that even you can.”

“I’m on the way. Give me five minutes,” he said.

Nancy hung up the call and handed the clipboard back to the officer at the desk, who was just about to take another bite of his sandwich. “I won’t be needing this. I have friends in high places, apparently!”

He shrugged and went back to his feast.

OVER EASY

“I have to go,” Howard informed detective Farker.

“What do you mean, you have to go?” he asked, one lip fighting off a snarl.

“I mean, I have to go,” Howard said, putting his phone back in his pocket. “Besides, there’s nothing to learn here,” he added, looking at the corpse as it was carried past him on a trolley, inside a black bag.

“Oh, forensic expert as well as a knight of the realm, are we agent?” Farker said in a sarcastic attack that bordered on school-boyish.

Howard smirked at the word ‘realm,’ enjoying the irony of Farker’s attack. The truth was, he could smell the blood, smell the conjured seawater that had long since vanished, as well as the oily scent of the little monster all over the corpse.

“You’ll say animal attack, like we discussed, and leave it at that, detective,” he said, sternly enough for it to be obvious that it was an order, but not quite enough to show contempt. Howard had to work hard at being ‘nice.’ He was not ‘nice’ by nature. He was serious, sarcastic and, he was well aware, far too blood thirsty.

He was pretty sure that this was the main reason he had been given this role to play. Mike was quietly exposing Howard to civilians, knowing he would learn the lesson without having to be told. These, were, after all, the people they were fighting to protect. Well, they were the people that *the team* was fighting to protect. Howard just liked morally clean murdering of unnatural things.

He ignored detective Farker's complaints and walked up the stairs out of the library basement. As he did, he pulled his sunglasses down from his forehead, resting them in the traditional place across his eyes. The dim artificial lighting of the basement was yellow and haunting. It was ideal for Howard and moving back into daylight was almost physically painful for him, especially after such relaxing light.

He had gained everything he needed from the scene and having Nancy call him meant he could stop her from getting deeper into some trouble. Also, he really wanted to know if she and her detective were as good as Mike told him they would be.

He waved a friendly hand at the annoying woman who was manning the library desk, she was still having a statement taken by one of the local officers. It was pointless; she wouldn't have seen anything, still, they had no way of knowing that he didn't suppose. She was nice enough and seemed to get a little doe eyed when she spoke to him, which he enjoyed more than he wanted to admit.

As he left the library, the two officers out front stood up a little straighter when they saw him. While he didn't love the unearned respect, he was used to people responding to him like this; it made him think of the garden, of home.

He dialled the church as he drove towards the Library.

“Problems?” Mike asked through the car speakers.

“No. Maybe. Nancy just called me for *help*,” Howard replied.

“She in trouble?”

“No, she wants to use me to get into the police station. She wants to interview Sinclair.”

There was a moment’s silence. “There’s something brewing in the Wind old man. I think we need to start moving things on. Keep her safe, but see what happens when we poke things.”

“Your soul buddies’ sense something?” Howard asked. Now driving a little faster.

“Actually, they sense *nothing*. Which is way more worrying to them, *and to me*,” There was a sound in the distance. “Someone’s here.”

“Probably Lilly. She’s due back from the garden any time now,” Howard said.

“No, I know her aura. I’ll call you back.” He had almost hung up the phone before he had finished speaking.

Howard changed gear and checked his mirrors out of paranoid habit. He wasn’t being followed, though he had a feeling in his gut that something wasn’t right.

He briefly considered going to the church. He slowed just a touch before remembering that Nancy was far less equipped for trouble than Mike was. He accelerated again, with resolve.

SUNSCREEN AND SORROW

Sunglasses, true to his word, arrived a few minutes later.
“He got here fast!” Nancy observed.

“I think maybe he drove. Not everyone insists on walking everywhere,” Dink said.

Sunglasses whipped off his signature eye wear with a smooth practiced motion and smiled at them like he was a movie star on the red carpet.

“Knock it off. We’re not interested,” Nancy said, rolling her eyes.

“He’s older than I expected,” Dink observed, to add to the scathing.

He instantly went back to looking nervous and a little awkward. “Sorry, force of habit,” he said, flashing the man at the desk an ID badge. The man looked instantly attentive and stood up straight, crumbs falling from his face as he did.

“My friends and I will need Thomas Sinclair brought to interview room two, please.” Even though his voice didn’t change or alter perceptively, there was a commanding tone to it that struck Nancy as eerie.

Crumb face nodded, “Immediately, Sir. Should I inform Detective Farker that you are here?” he asked, formally.

“No, he’s off site, and won’t be required. Just get Sinclair, as soon as, please.” The eerie tone was still there, Nancy nudged Holmes to pay attention to it too. He had already noticed.

With that said, he pushed open the door and gestured for Nancy and Dink to head on in.

“Okay, that was actually pretty cool,” Nancy complimented as soon as the door was shut.

“Thanks, that’s what I was going for. It’s the one part of the job I’m not very good at yet,” he said as they walked purposefully through the corridors. There were one or two administrators and a police officer mulling about, but they all gave Sunglasses a purposefully wide berth.

They stepped into the lift. The doors closed. “Who the fuck are you, then? Really?” Nancy asked.

Dink squeezed her hand in excitement.

He pressed for the third floor. “I should ask you that. You’re supposed to be something special!” he said.

Nancy, at Holmes’ instruction, stayed silent.

After a few seconds, Sunglasses continued. “Let’s talk to Sinclair. *We* can talk afterwards.”

“Cryptic wanker!” Nancy said in annoyance, as the lift doors opened.

Sunglasses showed them into a dimly lit room. It was exactly what she expected on the other side of an interview room. The view through

the window was familiar, as it was worryingly similar to her view of Holmes.

Dink was playing it cool herself. Looking stoic and serious, though her hand was sweaty.

Sunglasses made a point of turning off all the recording equipment in the room and pulled the plug out of the camera in the corner. He nodded to Nancy; it felt a little like he was looking for her approval. She nodded, giving it, though she had no idea why he cared.

A few seconds later, the main door, the other side of the window, opened, and Sinclair was escorted in. He was in handcuffs and dressed in the same hoodie he had on when Nancy had last seen him. The officer with him nodded at the window, though to him it would have been a mirror. Sunglasses pressed a button on the wall and a green light flashed on the ceiling.

He gestured to the side door that led into the interview room.

Nancy walked in there, letting go of Dink's hand and then realising that she didn't know what she was doing, not at all.

"I hope you have your game face on, Holmes," she said internally.

Sinclair sat upright the moment he saw Nancy. Still a scrawny little man who looked nervous. The jittery demeanour didn't suit him though; he looked like a businessman playing the part of street-urchin and would be fine once he got some slacks and expensive shoes on.

She sat down opposite him. "Still alive, I see."

"Listen to me. I need to get out of here. They are going to kill me, just like they killed Pilgrim! I'm marked to be a sacrifice!" he said frantically.

“He knows about the folder. Push him on that.”

“I found Pilgrim’s car. I also found a folder with his laptop.” Pilgrim’s eyes widened as she spoke.

“So, you know now? You know what’s happening? Get me out of here!” Sinclair demanded.

It suddenly dawned on Nancy that she was the one with all the power. For the first time, possibly in her life, she was actually in a position of power.

“Harry, have you seen that folder? I think I know less, just from looking at it,” she said, sincere, though salty about it.

Sinclair looked at the mirrored window, and then back at her. “They are watching you. Are they here now? Is that why you can’t talk?”

“Seriously, you little nut-bar, if you don’t start making sense soon, I’m going to let my girlfriend come in here and smack you about! She’s little but she spends enough time with me that she likely has a lot of anger to work out.”

“Nancy, stay on topic. Find out why he’s so jumpy. Show him you’re a friend,” Holmes ordered.

Sinclair was nervously looking at the mirrored window again.

“Right. It’s time to break down the case for me, you ratty little freak. Question one; who killed Pilgrim?”

Sinclair snapped his attention back to her. “You really didn’t read the folder?”

“Just spit it out!”

He scratched at his chin, nervously, then intently eyeballing her. “The little one killed him. To fulfil the prophecy, for the reading.”

“This is good, push,” Holmes said.

“Okay, who?” she asked.

“The little one!” he said, almost in a yell.

“Okay, calm down!” Nancy said as she felt a prod from Holmes. “Next question; what with these papers everyone keeps talking about?”

Sinclair focussed on her with a laser like intensity. “You’re fucking kidding me? You really don’t know?”

“No, I don’t know anything! I haven’t since all this started! I’m a bit pissed off about it now, *mate!*” Nancy said, in something of an outburst. She reflected his laser gaze back at him. “Now fill me in, before I leave you to whatever it is you’re scared of!”

Sinclair leaned back in his chair. Suddenly less jittery and more relaxed. “Well, that’s it then. I’m fucked, aren’t I?” he said. Nancy was about to answer him; he waved his cuffed hands in submission.

“Nancy, your dad, and his friends, when you were six years old, or whatever, fought the forces of evil. They were badass heroes who spent their lives making sure that *it* never came in from the ocean. It all came to a head that night. The last of the Papers were in the hands of the cult. They started the ritual. Your dad, he stopped them, he freed the sacrifice, and they killed him for it.” He paused, collecting his thoughts for the next part.

“Pilgrim was there. He thought your dad was one of them. It wasn’t until years later when your mom told him what happened that he knew how wrong he was. He spent the rest of his life preparing for the next time.”

Sinclair looked defeated.

“My dad was a hero? He fought a cult?” Nancy asked, awestruck by his words.

“Nancy, ask him for the details. We need details.”

“What was the cult? How did he die? How was my mom involved?”

Sinclair sighed again. He didn’t want to tell the story to her. He wanted to be left alone so he could wait for his death, but he continued

anyway. “Look, I don’t know everything, but the basics are, your dad and his mates fought the bad guys, your dad won, but they let the little monster eat him as punishment. Your mom knew that you would be in trouble, as his heir. I think, well, Pilgrim thought she used herself as a sacrifice to keep you safe.”

“A fucking sacrifice? She hung herself when I was sixteen years old! How the fuck did that keep me safe?”

Sinclair was out of shits to give, and it was showing. “Look, I’m going to be dead in a little while, so forgive me if I don’t want to go into the glorious minutia here.”

Nancy leaned back, dejected. “You’re the only person who knows anything *and isn’t dead*.”

He sighed and shook his head. He had a ‘well, fuck,’ expression. He continued. “She didn’t kill herself, well, I mean, she obviously did. But, it wasn’t that simple. Pilgrim thought she killed herself, as part of a ritual, to make you useless to them, take away your mark, or that’s what he thought. Obviously, you’re here, so it didn’t work.”

“It’s a good theory. He still hasn’t told us about the papers though.”

“Oh, be quiet! I just found out my mom didn’t kill herself for no reason. I don’t give a shit about your case right now,” Nancy said, instantly realising that she hadn’t been speaking to Holmes internally.

Sinclair leaned forward. “You got a passenger then?” he asked.

Nancy nodded.

“Your dad had one too. You all get one. It’s how the monster knows who you are,” Sinclair said, intensely now.

“The paper, Nancy. They are literally just that, single sheets of paper. When they are touched by the sea’s breath, words appear on them. Those are the words you have to read while the chosen is strangled to death. Then a god comes in from the sea and gives whatever is asked to the people who summoned it. The passenger is fed to it too. It’ll

give eternal life, treasures, superpowers, whatever is asked for. It's like a genie, with a wish for each person with a ticket."

Nancy went to reply, tears on her cheeks, but Sinclair cut her off.

"Here's the real kicker. Pilgrim and me, we were called conspiracy theorists. Laughed at by everyone, but we saved lives. When pilgrim met your mom, it was like a fucking veil was lifted. He could see it all. The things people can't. Anyway, I can't see anything like that, I'm just normal." He had an accepting look on his face and sighed. "At least when it comes to kill me, I won't see it coming."

"Why do you think you're going to die?" Nancy asked, trying to pull herself together.

"Pilgrim's passenger. He wasn't a detective like your dad's was. Pilgrim's was a mystic, could see the future. Said that I would die in a sanctuary of justice, with a portal of reflective water watching me." He glanced at the mirror again. "So, I guess, any time now."

Nancy found herself waiting for Holmes to chime in. He was sitting at his table, considering what had been said. "*Who has the papers?*" He asked, Nancy repeating it for him.

"Your dad's old team. They have one; the bad guys now, I suppose. They still have one. We thought, based on what your mom told Pilgrim, that there was one in the church. She had one. We were pretty sure there was one stashed in the library. That's a long story. There's one more too, but no one has seen it since the night your dad died."

"If they don't have all five, they can't summon the thing?" Nancy asked.

"They're smart. They wouldn't be letting the little monster pile up sacrifices the way it has been if they didn't think it was time."

There was that name again, the *little monster*. Nancy considered it.

"*Nancy!*" Holmes said, reacting to something he had seen that she hadn't.

The lights went off. The room was in complete darkness for a moment. Nancy stood up instantly, backing away. Her eyes began adjusting to the darkness, as the moon outside the window made its light known. Nancy was suddenly aware of water at her feet, then a torrent of it flooded in from the window she had just been looking out of. A moment later, the lights came back on.

“What the fuck!” she screamed, trying to scramble to her feet, soaking wet and freezing cold in a dry room.

Sinclair was lying on the table, naked and pale. He was tied by the arms and legs, like how Pilgrim and the man from the newspaper basement had been found, and soaking wet.

The mirrored window was already smashed, and now Dink was climbing through it. “Nancy, what happened?” she asked, helping her up. A moment later, Sunglasses entered too, massive gun drawn and checking every angle.

Nancy was just now realising the extent of her wetness. She had been soaked through in a matter of moments. Her brain was having issues decoding the events that brought her to this point.

“I’m fine. Is he dead?” she asked, pointing at Sinclair, and spitting up salty water.

“Dead,” Sunglasses confirmed.

They heard noises of distress from the corridor and water pooled at the bottom of the main door to the room.

Dink insisted on hugging her, despite her being soaked. “We were banging on the door, and the window. We couldn’t get in.”

“What?”

Sunglasses stood next to the door, listening and clutching his gun. “You closed the door, and the room went black. We couldn’t get in or see what was happening. After a few seconds, I shot out the window.”

"I don't understand. One second, I was talking; then I was wet, and he was dead," Nancy said. Looking at Sinclair's corpse.

"You in there, Holmes?" she asked, aloud.

"Yeah, I'm here. As confused as you," he replied.

More sounds came from the corridor.

"We need to find out what's happening out there."

"Hey, Sunglasses, nice gun," Nancy said, still tasting salt water. "You still pretending to be a regular copper?" she asked.

He glanced at the gun in his hand, a thing which looked incredibly natural in his grip, though the gun itself looked like it should be in a cowboy's hands, not a modern-day law man. "Let's talk about this later," he said, tilting it side to side.

Dink was poking Sinclair's body. "He's so cold; and clammy," she observed.

Sunglasses peered through the door carefully. The sounds of concern flooded the room. They all listened for a few seconds. There was a lot of activity and shouting. Too much for Nancy to parse.

"They're all wet. All of them. They just blinked and were wet," Holmes said.

"And you have super hearing now, do you?" Nancy asked.

"Yes. Well, no, I don't know... I can pull out the voices is all."

"Who are you talking to?" Sunglasses asked, glancing back from the slightly open door. She had a feeling that he knew exactly who she was talking to.

"Imaginary friend," Nancy said.

"Brain ghost!" Dink added gleefully, still investigating the corpse in front of her. A curiosity that Nancy noticed and found more than a little attractive. She was also aware of how fucked up that thought was.

"I can hear a lot of commotion, but it's safe, just a lot of police and admin; all scared that they're suddenly wet with no explanation. No danger, as far as I can tell," Holmes reaffirmed.

"Okay, Holmes. Good work, thanks," she said to him before loudly proclaiming it to be safe outside. "Now put the gun away, Mulder."

Sunglasses did as he was told and pulled the door fully open. The lights in the corridor were flickering; the ceiling was dripping wet. "Wonder why Dink and I aren't wet," he noted.

A man in a suit ran past the doorway, squelching as he did.

"If it weren't for Sinclair being dead, this would be comical," Dink said, glibly.

"Fuck him. Prick tried to stab me the other day!"

Sunglasses glanced back at her disapprovingly. Nancy and Dink stuck their tongues out at him.

"I can't believe it; she was normal when you met!" Holmes complained.

Nancy internally reminded him that the afternoon she and Dink met, they were making out over a corpse, within ten minutes. Holmes conceded on the normality.

DAUNTING DUNGEONATRY

Lilly had returned to the garden, after yet another run-in with the small almost invisible monster. She was feeling beaten enough that home was calling. The moment she appeared in the forest next to the little grassy area, she felt better. She started, hobbling and bleeding at first, then, by the time she reached the wall, she was feeling better, better enough that she wondered why she was so worried. By the time she got to the back door of the old white house, she was feeling back to her normal, fight ready self.

She wanted to get back to the fight, but there were rules here. No one could leave the garden until they had got a good night's sleep and, at the very least, a snack before leaving. Lilly knew that breaking these rules would make whatever magic worked in the garden less efficient upon her return. Meaning the difference between it healing a fatal wound and, well, it not.

It was quiet in the garden, just one or two hunters setting out on missions. she exchanged supportive nods as she passed them. The

truth was, she wasn't very confident around them. They all seemed so skilled and worldly. Whereas she knew she wasn't as good as them, not yet. She also knew that they didn't like her much. They referred to her as "Howard's pet," behind her back. He had told her. Howard heard more than anyone seemed to realise. She didn't mind the insult much. She knew that they were likely just jealous because he had been willing to train her, and no one else.

There was a perception among the others that she was special in some way, that he had chosen her because of some difference, or mysterious destiny. The truth was, Howard had agreed to train her because he thought she was going to get herself killed and he didn't want a partner. He had chosen her because she wasn't at all a natural at this. Howard had been shocked when she turned out to be 'not bad' with the whips and daggers. He seemed confident that she would 'do okay' which annoyed him no end. Howard wasn't a mean man, he was just too honest for his own good.

It was a few months afterwards that she had discovered the reason for his glibness and distance. His condition. She had only been told because Mike had made a point to inform her.

She had resolved to be less impressed with him after that. Being a legend when you're just a normal hunter is impressive, but when you're, well, what he was, it was less impressive. Howard seemed to approve of her lack of interest in his gift. Or was it a curse? She couldn't remember how he had phrased it.

She had finally made it to her room. She was on the second floor and starting to feel very sleepy by the time she made it there. This was

another effect of the garden, something about it left you exhausted after first arriving. She had assumed it was about the exchange of energy used to arrive, whereas Howard had told her it was just the ‘mysterious and ancient magic’ at work. Probably the same thing, she assumed.

Her room was small and there was a window at the foot of her bed. Not that it made sense, given where her room was in the building’s layout. She had learned to not worry about such things.

The room was kitted out with the same antique furniture as the rest of the rooms, but she had swapped out the lampshades and bedding for far more modern accoutrements. She closed the blackout curtains and lay face down on top of the covers. The sleeping was the best part. When you slept in the garden, it felt like going to heaven.

She closed her eyes, knowing that she would wake up at just the right time, with no need to worry about setting an alarm. She just basked in the relaxing midday light coming through the bottom of the window and the soft bed beneath her.

She loved the garden.

HOLDING OUT FOR A...

Nancy, Dink and Sunglasses rolled in through the front door of the pub. Nancy went to the bar while her companions secured a table. As usual for that time of day, it was relatively empty.

“It raining outside?” Nigel asked. Nancy shrugged at him, taking two bottles of wine from the fridge behind the bar. She also grabbed three glass pint-mugs and a bag of cheese nibbles.

She dropped the booze and nibbles off at the table and returned to the back of the bar, where she shamelessly took off her wet clothes and put one of Marina’s spare coats on.

“Usually, people just put a tip in the jar!” Nigel observed, after doing a good job of diverting his gentlemanly eyes... mostly.

She returned to the table a few seconds later, looking like she was ready to go flashing strangers in the woods.

She sat next to Dink in the booth, opposite Sunglasses, who was taking this entire afternoon in his stride.

“Okay, James Bond, spill it,” Nancy demanded as she poured wine generously into the pint mugs and slid one towards him.

Sunglasses looked at them sternly. “What did Sinclair tell you?” he asked.

“No. Don’t deflect. Your team of arse hats has done less investigating than this bottle of wine! You have a box of fucking knives in your little crime-unit front, and you all have military footwear. Now ‘fess up’ or I go back to avoiding you,” Nancy said, taking a refreshing gulp of wine.

“They have knives?” Dink asked excitedly.

Sunglasses took a drink of his own and thought about what she had said for a few seconds. “Short swords. How did you know about them?”

“My ghost told me.”

“Right. And the footwear?” he asked.

“He’s a well-educated ghost.”

Sunglasses took another drink. “The whole crime-unit thing is a cover.”

“No shit,” Nancy said, snappishly.

“*Will you please let the man talk!*” Holmes complained.

“When the first body turned up, we learned what was happening and decided to wait it out; with a good view of the sea. Our plan was to kill anything ‘spooky’ that tried to come ashore. The swords are just a small part of the arsenal we have. If that thing appears, we’re going to send it to hell in little, tiny bits.”

“So, you work for the government?” Dink asked, now taking a gulp of her wine.

“No, we’re... We, err, were hunters of sorts... I can’t tell you, not really,” he said. Now a little less refined, and probably far more authentic.

“*He had police clearance... Also, find out why he’s so interested in you.*”

“Who do the police think you are?” Nancy asked, without questioning Holmes’ guidance.

“Our organisation, has some resources, got ourselves credentials that make us out to be part of the Royal guard.”

“Interesting choice of cover.”

“And why are you so interested in me?” she asked.

“Because our sources say that if you die, the beast arrives. You seem nice. I don’t want you dead. I do want to know if a monster will come in from the sea *if* you die, though.”

Nancy found herself oddly amused by his honesty. “I mean, same, really,” she said, honestly.

“And your organisation, tell me more,” she demanded.

“Now there’s a secret that’s not mine to tell, sorry.”

“He’s telling the truth. All of it,” Holmes said. She could feel him behind her eyes, staring intently at secret-agent Sunglasses. *He was sure.*

“This is much more exciting than I expected my day to be. But are we in trouble? We left a corpse back there.” Dink asked.

“No, as I said; they think I’m with the Royal Guard. They won’t even as much as ask me to move my car. They certainly won’t dare consider me a suspect in a supernatural murder,” Sunglasses explained.

“Ask him about his cover some more. I don’t know who this Royal Guard is,” Holmes asked.

Nancy was wondering too. “My brain ghost wants to know who the fuck the Royal Guard are, aside from the people with big hats on the nut crackers.”

“My boss set up the cover story. It is supposed to be a covert arm of the government that looks into freaky things on behalf of the monar-

chy. According to all the paperwork, we're above basically all laws and answer only to the king, God bless him."

"And this checks out?" Dink asked.

"Seems to, as far as the local prats have been able to find out," he replied, drinking more pint-wine.

"That's the first lie he has told us," Holmes noted, writing something down.

"Which bit?" Nancy asked, internally.

"I don't know, but there was something, off about it. I'll think on it and get back to you."

A shadow crossed them as Nigel sat down. He had brought with him a fresh bottle of wine and tossed Nancy and Dink fresh packets of cheese nibbles. "Busy afternoon?" he asked.

"Yeah! We were there while a ghost murdered someone and I got soaked by magic water!" Nancy said, gleefully accepting the bag of nibbles.

"New friend?" Nigel asked, eyeballing Sunglasses.

Sunglasses just shrugged. Nigel continued the eyeballing. After a few seconds, he pulled out his fake secret service badge and made sure to 'accidentally' show the grip of his gun as he did.

True to form, Nigel grunted and returned his attention to Nancy. "Ghost murder?"

"Yeah, we went to visit that Sinclair fella. The one who tried to knife me the other day."

Nigel nodded after a moment, as if trying to place which knife toting loon she was talking about.

"Anyway, I was talking to him, and then the lights went off and, like, a second later, I was soaking wet, and the dick was dead on the table, naked and tied up!" Nancy explained.

Nigel looked terrified and baffled by the story. “Sorry, say that again,” he asked.

She did.

“And you thought coming to the pub after this was the right move?”

Nancy nodded, looking around. Dink and Sunglasses half nodded, wondering what else they could have done.

“Nancy, one of your best friends is a priest, and you thought you should come here before visiting someone who is *literally* trained in this stuff?”

“Vicar,” Nancy corrected. “Still, bloody good point you raised there, Nige.”

Sunglasses rolled his car to a halt in the carpark of the Church.

There was a suspiciously familiar black cruiser parked there already. Nancy instantly panicked. “That’s the car that the white-haired gun toting wanker drives! He’s in there!” she said, terrified.

“Shit, what do we do?” Dink asked. Scooting down in the seat to hide.

“Dink, this car has blacked-out windows. No one can see you. And, guys, this is literally what I do for a living. We talked about this. I do this professionally. I’m fantastic at it.”

Nancy considered this point for a moment. He *was* actually the perfect gun toting loon to be hanging out with. “Should we call for backup or something? From your pals?” She asked.

“You think I need to call my guys in for a couple of geriatric old pricks with pea shooters?” he asked.

Nancy and Dink both agreed that it was probably a good idea. “Yes!”

“I’m really trying to be nice here, but you two are idiots,” he insisted as he left the car and pulled his gun from his jacket. “Stay here. I’ll check it out.”

“Ignore him. Get in there!”

“We’re not actually staying here, are we?” Dink asked.

“God, no,” Nancy replied, checking the glove box for more guns, finding none.

She hopped out of the car, still wearing only the coat.

“You look a bit silly,” Dink observed. “And it’s a bit... you know, *bot*. If I’m honest.”

Nancy unzipped her coat a little. Now she knew someone was paying attention, it seemed to be appropriate. Though, she was suddenly aware of how terrible her hair was and regretted not pit-stopping at home first for hair and makeup... and clothes.

They left the car just as they watched Sunglasses, professionally check the door and then disappear into it, moving with a trained fluidity of motion and a confidence that implied competence.

“Well, he seems nice,” Dink said as they snuck up the path, less professionally, and less competently.

“Yeah, he seems okay. Seemed like a right smug prick when I first met him,” Nancy replied. “Actually, we should go around the back,” she added, pointing to the side of the church.

They scurried along, following the wall closely, looking like children playing spy games.

“I don’t want to sound needy, but with the hot news presenter, the secret agent and the brain hottie, I feel a bit like a consolation prize,” Dink said, in needlessly hushed tones.

Nancy stopped the ludicrous spy walk and pulled Dink closer to her by the hand. "Luisiana Kent is a vapid harpy. Sunglasses is a professional psychopath and besides, too old for me. Holmes is great, but hardly a hottie, more like a brother. You are maybe the only person I have ever met who would embrace all this absolute nonsense without so much as a second thought. You have nothing to worry about, Velma Hall!" She kissed her on the nose the moment she finished talking.

"Awww, you remembered my name!" Dink replied, grinning widely. "I didn't know if you had or not!"

Nancy laughed, though quietly. The last person she had 'dated' she had purposely got his name wrong to screw with him and he hadn't cared. With Dink, she had memorised every detail she knew about her and even so, had still managed to look like she wasn't paying attention. Nancy really was terrible at relationships.

"Dink is cuter!" she said, distracted by voices. They cautiously ventured around the corner, where the voices were louder. The back door to the church was open, and so was the newer office cabin.

"Those are not voices of anger. Someone is having a conversation. I think it's safe," Holmes observed.

"Holmes thinks it's safe, let's check it out," Nancy relayed.

Dink nodded. "Well, get him to go first then!"

"That's not a bad idea. Put me on the window of the office. I should be able to see in from there."

She did as he advised, gesturing with her hand, trying to give Dink a visual clue as to what she was doing. "This is all going to be a lot easier now you're not being an arse, Steve!" she said aloud.

"Yeab," He agreed. *"Go on in, Mike is talking to some people. There are guns, but they're all pointed down."*

"Safe," Nancy said, and stopped doing her stupid stealth walk.

She strolled into the church, remembering to pull Holmes back into his normal residence as she passed. She still wasn't sure how that worked, but if she didn't get shot, strangled, or eaten by a monster, she would figure it out.

"Hi, guys!" she bellowed as she strolled in, trying to appear casual, but also very aware that Sunglasses and White-hair both had guns in their hands.

Mike turned to her. "Nancy! Great, I was coming to get you! Come on in."

"If you point that gun at me grandad, I'll get Mike's boss to slap the shit out of you!" she said, pointing at him intently.

"Fine, but you have to keep your camera to yourself this time!" he said, gesturing with his gun hand, in a way that struck Nancy as supremely natural, and quite terrifying.

Dink came in behind her.

"Oh, and she brought her friend too, isn't that nice!" White-hair said, annoyed.

"Girlfriend, actually. Not that I should explain myself to you, because, from what I hear, I'm the chosen-one or something!"

She heard Dink add a cute "Aww," of agreement at the word girlfriend and took it as an endorsement of her feelings.

"Girl, you are chosen to be the bloody sacrifice to a sea god. Not really something that gives you any bargaining power, is it?" White-hair pointed out.

"Wait, you and Mike are friends now, or something?" she asked, getting herself back on track.

Mike nodded and lit a cigarette. "His mate from the other day; not the one I stabbed, the other one. He turned up dead this morning. Changes things."

“What happened?” Nancy gasped, suddenly realising where she had seen him driving to in such a rush recently.

White-hair scratched his chin with the barrel of his gun in an unsettling way. “My other guy. He was found dead in the library basement. Naked, wet, and all tied up.”

There was a silence. “When something like that happens, figure you need an expert, and who better than a man of God? So, I came here to make amends.”

“See, Nancy, Nigel was right. Normal people don’t go to the pub. You know how fucked up it is that none of us thought of coming here?” Sunglasses said. Also comfortably gesturing with a gun in hand.

“Sure. Yeah. So... Mike, we saw the water ghost too. Killed Sinclair in basically the same way. I got soaked.”

Mike looked at her coat. “Is that why you are dressed like a hooker on the way to work?”

Nancy zipped her coat up higher again. “Yes... actually it is... This time.”

“Well, no one gets you in the Big-guy’s house. You’re all safe for now, I promise.” Mike’s words removed a layer of stress from the room.

“Wait, so you’re not trying to kill Mike now?” Nancy asked, suddenly remembering that grandpa White-hair was a bad guy.

“I never wanted to kill anyone. I just needed the Papers, and, I know that Mike here knows exactly where to find one.”

Mike’s poker-face was excellent. He didn’t so much as acknowledge the accusation.

“Anyway, I came here looking for it. I figured I had to start somewhere and as soon as I heard Pilgrim was dead, I knew someone was up to no good. Me and my boys, we never believed your dad, but we owed

him one and figured we would come, look for these bloody Papers and burn them, just in case.”

“What changed your mind?” Dink asked.

“Well, my mind isn’t changed. But once you see an old friend dead and bound... well, maybe your dad was right girl,” he said, staring at Nancy. “I thought coming back and being a tad more reasonable was the right thing to do. Turns out, Mike is alright.”

“If the Papers could have been burned, I think your dad would have tried that.”

“That’s a good point, so would mom. Do you think they left a list of what they tried in the notes folder? Maybe we missed it?” Nancy said, aloud.

“What are you talking about?” White-hair asked. Looking around to see if he had missed something.

“She has a brain ghost,” Dink said, as if it was any explanation at all. Mike and Sunglasses both shrugged.

“Damn, I guess you’re more like your dad than I thought,” he said.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“He was always talking to himself too,” White-hair said.

“Mike, have you got one of these Papers?” Nancy asked.

Mike considered the question over a puff of his cigarette. “Nancy, I won’t lie to you. I got one. But I would die before I told anyone where it is.”

“Okay then, no problem. We win. If they can’t get all five Papers, there can’t be a ritual. That’s what all the notes say, right? And if there is no ritual, no one is going to strangle me to death. Great work guys. Now let’s all go home and get fucked up on the good whisky!” Nancy said, clapping her hands to signify a job well done.

“Luv, are you forgetting the fucking ghosty that’s murdering people? You think it’s just going to blow over?” White-hair growled.

“If the paper could be burned, don’t you think that someone would have already done it? I mean, people of the organisation, or the church, have been dealing with the sea daemon every twenty years or so since the Middle Ages,” Mike said, somewhat annoyed at the accusation of ineptitude.

“Make him explain more. He’s holding back, Nancy. He must know more. He said ‘organisation,’” Holmes said, as always, supplying detached logic.

“Thanks, yeah. Good point,” she said, again forgetting to internalise. “Holmes thinks you need to keep talking, Mike.”

Mike nodded in agreement. “Come on, let’s go sit in the office. At least it’s warm in there.”

“I’m not leaving the church,” White-hair said firmly. “You said it was safe in here, God’s house and all.”

“The other office is on consecrated ground, too. It’s fine,” Mike said, turning to leave.

White-Hair sat on a pew and spread his arms out across the backrest. “No. I’m not dying for you, not for any of you. I’ll stay here until all this is over if I have to.”

“Suit yourself,” Mike said, and strolled out of the church. Everyone else followed him.

They sat in Mike’s office, where it really was warmer. Sunglasses was quiet, but given the endless talking between Nancy and Dink, it was hardly surprising.

He was sitting casually in the armchair that sat in the corner of the office, his odd antique gun on the coffee table next to his feet.

So far, Nancy and Dink had rehashed the entire series of events at least twice and were now starting on the logistics of how Holmes got into Nancy's head. They were sitting at the desk opposite Mike, who looked very distracted.

"What were you doing when he appeared?" Dink asked.

"Drinking."

"Obviously."

"What does *he* think about how he got there? Where did he come from?" Dink asked.

"Well?" Nancy fired at Holmes.

"Honestly, I don't know. I remember vague impressions of my life and then I was here. It's been my side project, ever since I realised that I couldn't remember."

"He's playing the amnesia card," Nancy announced to the room.

"Well, if he doesn't know stop bothering him," Sunglasses remarked.

"Right, so, I have one of the Papers; we have to assume whoever is trying to summon the creature has one too. Which means there are three unaccounted for," Mike said, rummaging about in his desk draw.

"Yeah, that brings me to the next thing, Mike. How come you're all casual about this? I know horror movies and comic books make out that the church knows all about this stuff, but you talk about Jesus and loving people. I sincerely doubt that your part of a secret Church of England cabal, or a bloody Knight Templar. You're too stoned to be a knight," Nancy rambled.

Mike eventually reappeared from inside his draw and put an old book on the table, also he had found a half empty bottle of vodka, which Nancy eagerly accepted.

"Ominous," Holmes observed, ominously.

Mike looked annoyed that he was about to be required to explain himself. He looked over at Sunglasses. "This is your fault, isn't it? Did you tell her things?"

"Also, ominous."

Sunglasses made the 'little bit' gesture with his finger and thumb.

"Okay, so, no, obviously I'm *not* part of a secret order of vicars sent by the King to safeguard England for all. I am part of a different organisation. But, I was told about the fucked up history of this town by the previous occupant of the church, and he was told by the one before," Mike said.

"He's holding back a lot, there's more to that story," Holmes said somewhat sternly.

He passed Nancy the book, which contained handwritten accounts of the summoning and even notes about the villains from each attempt to summon the monster.

"Okay, could have done with this a few days ago," she said, passing it on to Dink.

Mike shrugged. "What was I supposed to say? I wasn't even sure it was going to happen. I mean, it could have been a brilliant work of fiction for all I knew. It wasn't until you told me about your imaginary friend that I realised something was going to go off."

"That was a lie too. He knew it was real."

Dink was looking intently at the pages of the book. She was particularly interested in a sketch of the church found in the early pages.

"Wait, the book talked about Holmes?" Nancy asked.

"No. But everyone chosen to be a sacrifice has something called a passenger. Each time, it does its damndest to stop the sacrifice getting, well, you know," Mike said, strangling an imaginary foe.

"Okay, and what happens to the passenger when the sacrifice is averted?"

"I'll let you know when one survives," Mike said with an apologetic shrug.

"Wait, no monster has come in from the sea. You said that this has been going for hundreds of years, right?" Nancy asked.

"Wow, you *were* listening!" he replied.

"Mike, if this has been going on for hundreds of years and no sea monster has arrived, that means that the good guys have always won. Every time. But you're saying no sacrifice has survived. How does that work?" she asked, already imagining the answer.

"Well, some killed themselves. Early on, the vicars killed them the moment they were identified, which always worked, obviously. One time, the passenger killed the chosen, or so the story goes."

"Mike, I knew some people wanted to strangle me to death, but there's *always* someone wanting to fight me or fuck me. I'm used to that. But you're saying my only option is to let a sea monster come to town, and be killed, or be dead before they can use me to summon it?"

Dink looked up from the notebook, quite perturbed.

Nancy looked around to see Sunglasses' brow furrowed and his hand on his gun in a suddenly less friendly way.

She looked back at Mike, who was considering her words. "I mean... there are always options. Let's call that the last resort, should we?"

Dink sighed. "Oh, for heaven's sake. You're all idiots. All we have to do is get rid of *one* of these Paper's and the problem goes away, right?"

"*Yes, we established that it's not that easy, Dink,*" Holmes said, relayed by Nancy.

"No, we established that medieval morons and local vicars couldn't burn it. I own a construction company. I can literally lose it in a building foundation tomorrow morning," Dink said.

Mike was less impressed than Nancy. "If you could destroy it, the little monster that kills people might vanish. But if you hide it, it'll

just hang out, *forever*. It's killed the four sacrifices now and they don't expire. They are valid forever. Other than that, it'll just start hurting people for fun until *you* get sacrificed, and it goes."

"What's the criteria for that, Mike?" Sunglasses asked.

"The criteria? My friends tell me it's never killed or hurt anyone who didn't know about the papers. Other than that, anyone is fair game."

Sunglasses stood up, holstering his gun, finally. He walked out of the building, presumably to check on the geriatric white-haired toss pot in the church.

"That explains why Mike didn't tell you all this when you met him," Holmes said. *"I was a little suspicious about that, but looks like he was trying to protect you via the armour of ignorance."*

Nancy internally nodded at the observation.

BALLISTIC REALISATIONS

Since finding himself inside Nancy's head, Holmes hadn't had much reason to leave. He was aware that things were not quite how he thought they should be. His memory was mostly flashes of images that were occasionally accompanied by a flurry of sound. Very little made sense to him, that was, outside of Nancy and the mysteries that seemed to smother her.

It was the reason he stayed *with* her. Whenever he left, he found his mind losing focus. When he was with her, he had all of his faculties. The things outside, he knew, needed investigation, but he could never remember why. He had resided himself to take a notebook the next time he had chance to venture out there.

He occasionally risked a visit to the corridor, and the storeroom in the next room along. As long as he left the door open, it wasn't too bad. Whatever force kept him close to her it allowed him this one little luxury.

He was pretty sure he was there the day her dad died, but his memory of that was almost abstract. He had a memory of being outside her apartment and looking at him. Though the context was lost. He recalled being terrified though, which was concerning. He had resolved to not tell Nancy about this. It seemed cruel to taunt her with fragments.

He looked now, out of the window in his interview room, and saw through her eyes. He didn't really 'know' how the window worked. It just did. It was the view from her eyes, unless he, or she, moved it with intentionality.

He could manipulate the playback too. It was like an old VHS recording, but instead of a remote control, he just had to think really hard. Was this his power, or hers? Was this place part of him, or part of her? Then there were the concerns he had about what he could see out in the corridor.

He decided not to think about it and got a bag of prawn cocktail flavoured crisps. He also got a can of fizzy red pop out of the machine just outside the door. It tasted awful, but it was that or coffee. Sometimes he wanted a change, no matter how sweet and artificial it tasted.

He put his feet on the desk and looked on through the window. She was still talking to Dink. Holmes was entertained by how often she glanced at the woman's chest. It was impressive that with all this going on, she was still preoccupied with her libido.

He also knew that she was starting to sober up, the window looked sharper when she was sober. Not that he had got to see much of it in that state.

A sound from outside startled him a little. It was like something large had hit the building outside, but that wasn't possible. He was alone. He had investigated the first few times he had heard it, and each time he had lost his memory of it. Whatever was making the sound would require that he ventured far enough away from Nancy that he would lose the memory of it. Last time, she thought he was sulking. He likely was, but that wasn't why he had been gone so long.

The sound had started to terrify him. The only saving grace was that it was on the outside of the corridor window. He had no reason to think that the building wasn't safe. He just wished the window out there wasn't frosted.

He checked the door anyway. There was a little hand lock he could twist to make sure it wouldn't open from the other side. When he had first arrived, it was on the outside of the door. Stopping people getting out. He had changed it at some point. Things obeyed his will here, though he wasn't sure how that worked either.

The sound echoed through the building again. He turned up the volume on Nancy's window with a thought and tried to ignore the sounds outside. Being stalked by a sound wasn't any fun. Maybe one-day he would be free to explore *and* remember.

God, the red pop was terrible. It was always a mistake to turn away from coffee, he considered.

RICHARD LOCOMOTION

Dink was still looking at the sketches and notes in the handed down notebook while Nancy and Mike tried to rationalise a solution that wouldn't end with Nancy's demise.

"Grandad's gone!" Sunglasses said, reappearing in the doorway outside.

"What?" Nancy asked, instantly adding, "Good, fuck him," realising she didn't care.

Mike opened his laptop purposefully and started tapping a button on his keyboard that she knew cycled his cameras.

"What's up?" Nancy asked. "He's gone. Does it matter? He's a dick."

She leaned over the desk to see what he was doing. He was rewinding his cameras.

"He's in my basement!" Mike said annoyed, he stood up and casually picked up a bat from next to his desk. A mean, old looking bat. He looked confident with it.

"Mike?" Nancy asked, watching him stride out.

Dink and Nancy gestured to each other, deciding if following him was a good idea or not.

Then, from outside, they heard him sternly command. "Howard. He's in the basement."

Nancy and Dink were now looking at each other, puzzled by his tone.

"*He's the one in charge; you bloody moon-cakes!*" Holmes pointed out, rolling his eyes at their inability to read a situation.

Nancy quickly ran out after him, Dink in tow.

"What do you mean, he's in charge?" Dink asked as Nancy repeated the line, running through the short church corridor after them.

"He ordered him! Also, how else would he have known Sunglasses' name?" Nancy explained in hushed tones.

"Howard huh? If my name was Howard, I would be looking for a cool nickname too," Dink replied.

Nancy put a hand up to let Dink know she was trying to be stealthy. They slowly edged towards the door that Nancy knew led to the basement and the grow-room.

There was shouting coming from the bottom of the stairs; the door was ajar. "*I will* shoot you, old man," Sunglasses yelled in a commanding tone.

"Yeah, and I'll shoot you back, then we're both dead, you suit wearing prick!" yelled White-hair in return.

Nancy and Dink edged in through the door, staying low. Nancy knew the room was well lit and was counting on the foliage for cover.

Thankfully, the hum of the climate control obfuscated their sounds of entry.

They hid behind a large plant, both poking their heads out from either side like cartoon characters.

Mike was patting his bat threateningly but didn't *actually* make a move to use it. Nancy wanted to believe it was more of a prop than a weapon.

Sunglasses was standing tall, heroic looking, with his gun out straight pointing at White-hair, who had apparently kicked a hole in the foil coated wall at the back of the room. Nancy could see a dark void behind it.

"Holmes, can I get you in there, to look around?" she asked, internally, for stealth.

"I don't think there's enough visible space. I really don't understand how it works, Nancy."

Nancy decided it wasn't worth risking. She knew Holmes sometimes needed 'down time' and she wasn't sure if he could be injured if she fractured the illusionary window.

"You're not going to find it. I'm not that dumb," Mike said smugly. "Though I think all the cold air coming in from the hole in the wall may have fucked these plants!"

"Oh, I think I'll find it. Good plan though, Mikey. Use one secret room to hide another. Thing is, I was down here a long time ago and I know the dirty little secret these walls are covering. I think you're just scared that your toy soldier here will change sides once I have another Paper."

He turned and kicked at the wall again. A large piece of the plaster board fell away.

"You want me to shoot him?" Sunglasses asked.

“This is a church; we don’t shoot people in church, Howard!” Mike replied with a vein of sarcastic anger.

He marched toward White-hair, bat in hand. “Now get out of there, you silly old git!”

White-hair, pointed his gun, with both hands at Mike. Mike however, without hesitation, took another step.

“*Cover your ears,*” Holmes advised.

Nancy pulled on Dink’s jacket to get her attention and motioned to cover her ears. Dink followed the action without questioning.

White-hair pulled his trigger. The sound, even though Nancy was shielding, was like an explosion in the small room, echoing around it and shaking the walls. Nancy winced with pain, instantly realising what the sound meant. She stood up, looking at the scene.

Mike kept walking. The gun was fired again, Nancy covered her ears again just in time, though she had a feeling that Holmes had somehow assisted her with the foresight.

Mike kept walking. He hit the gun out of the man’s hand with his bat and then with the other hand smacked him square in the face, with the form of a man who had thrown many a punch and despite his slovenly lifestyle, it looked like a well fuelled impact because White-hair fell down like a sack of potatoes that had just discovered gravity.

“Holy shit Mike! You’re bullet proof!” Nancy yelled. Ears ringing.

“What?” he yelled back. His own ears in a worse state than hers; he didn’t have the luxury of a hand guarding the brunt of the noise.

She turned back to Sunglasses who just shrugged, looking unphased by the sound. “Wanker!” Nancy yelled. “He’s bullet proof!” she added, for drama, pointing at Mike.

“What?” Sunglasses said, with a knowing smirk.

There was movement as the sack of man-potatoes on the floor moved. Mike bent down and smacked him again, viciously, thankfully, without a bat.

After a couple of minutes of standing around, rubbing their ears pointlessly, everyone slowly stopped yelling.

“Mike, your bullet proof!” Nancy said, this time yelling with excitement, not requirements.

“No, I’m not! He must have missed!” he replied.

“At that range?” Dink asked, unconvinced.

“He must have. Otherwise, Mike would be dead!” Sunglasses explained.

“Does that explanation seem off to you?”

“Yeah, that must have been it,” Nancy said, feeling almost dazed by the statement. She shook off the feeling and added, “Mike’s your boss?”

“We don’t have ranks, not like that,” Mike said. Still fingering his ear as if it helped.

“Oh, fuck off Mike, you’ve been the boss for a long time now and you know it!” Howard, Sunglasses, whatever his name was added. “He thinks he’s good at undercover work, which is a joke. What gave him away?”

“Holmes was already suspicious about how confident you were when Papa-white-hair turned up. We heard a gunshot while we were outside but there were no bullet holes in the church. I knew there was something sus about that. Then you called Sunglasses ‘Howard’ when you left the office. He had never told any of us his name, so it was all pretty obvious, Mike,” Nancy explained as she edged closer to the hole in the wall.

“No, Nancy. That wasn’t obvious! You’re like Sherlock bloody Holmes you are!” Dink said, running over to kiss her, proudly.

“I had help,” she said, tapping her forehead.

Mike just made an “uh, huh,” sound and turned his attention to his plants.

Sunglasses dragged White-hair away from the wall and, true to his cover story, he cuffed him, just as he was coming around again.

Nancy took her opportunity and used the light on her phone to take a look at what secrets lay the other side of the wall.

“Oh... Well, that’s boring,” she said.

The other side of the fake-wall was just a cavity and a stone-wall. She stepped through the hole and looked around. It was large old bricks that matched the main church building. Mike had constructed his grow-room quite a bit smaller than the original footprint of the basement.

“*Red herring, I assume,*” Holmes informed her.

“What?” she asked, as Dink scrambled through the hole to join her.

“*I think he built it smaller, put a grow room in it, so he had an excuse to be secretive, but people would assume he hid the Paper down here as soon as they saw it, because it was smaller. It’s genius really. It’s so elaborate. There was no way people looking for the Papers would miss it,*” Holmes said, taking guestimated measurements of the room in his notes.

“Your blanking, what is it?” Dink asked.

“Holmes just informed me that this was intentional misdirection. That it was designed to get the attention of people looking for the Papers.”

“He’s right. Also, I figured out where he hid it,” she said, pleased as punch that she had got there before Nancy.

“Don’t tell me. I have an idea. But I think Mike is right; *best not to know.*”

Dink took Nancy's hand in hers. "Nancy, you think he may be right?" she asked. The room was all but pitch black. They were standing in the light that streamed in from the hole in the artificial wall. Nancy's phone throwing a beam of light at the floor; she had forgotten it was turned on. They looked for a moment like they were under a spotlight on a tiny stage.

"About me dying?" Nancy asked, taking Dink by the waist.

"Yeah. Mike thinks you may wind up dead at the end of all this?"

Their eyes met, Nancy looking up slightly at Dink, who was looking vulnerable and scared, even if she was hiding it well.

"Yeah. I think he might be right too, Dink. Sorry," she replied.

"Sorry! You're apologising to me!" she said, suddenly higher energy than she was a moment ago.

"Yeah, I only just found you and I may have to go soon. Kinda feel bad for leaving you alone."

Dink looked quizzical. "Aren't you scared?"

"Scared? Fuck no! I spent my whole life thinking I was alone; thinking my mom killed herself and my dad was a random victim. Now I find out that as fucked up as it is, they both died to try and protect me, from an epic sea monster. That's awesome, Dink. Sea monsters are real!"

Dink laughed for a moment before remembering the gravity of it all. "I mean, it was all pointless if you die though, right?"

"No!" Nancy replied. "We all die eventually. All any of us are doing is holding on for a few more days until we can't anymore! And these last few days, they have been brilliant, Dink. Maybe even the best! I've been mostly sober; I've had an adventure that made me feel like I was worth something. I met Holmes, who is both an annoying big brother, and the best therapist I could ever have! And... I met you. You were the best bit," she said, with the final few words being even more charged

than the ones before. "I know it's soon, but there's a good chance I'll be dead in a few days, so I want to just say..."

Dink grinned and kissed her with fire and emotion. She pulled her in close and lingered on the moment. Nancy grabbed her bum. As they parted lips she said, "I know... Me too, Nancy."

They grinned at each other in the half darkness. Both wishing they were alone with one another, rather than being a few feet away from a bulletproof vicar, a geriatric psychopath and... whatever the hell Sunglasses was.

"Okay! All this is great. But how the fuck did your girlfriend work out where the Paper is before me? How!" Holmes complained, breaking the moment in two.

Nancy laughed and grinned.

"Is he talking shit about me?" Dink asked. "He's talking about me isn't he?"

"Only nice things," Nancy admitted.

After some arguing, they had made their way back to the main room of the old church. White-hair was on a pew, hands cuffed behind him. He was sporting a very grumpy face and a swollen jaw from where he had been righteously smacked in the head for waving a weapon around.

Nancy was now wondering if it was more for interfering with Mike's plants than it was for doing anything particularly dangerous, now that she knew nothing was hidden down there.

"There have already been four deaths. We had Pilgrim, Nancy's dad's old police partner in the basement of the old newspaper building, Sinclair and now Grampa's pal. Doesn't that mean there is enough

for the summoning now?" Sunglasses said, casually sitting down next to the cuffed man.

"Does that mean no-more supernatural deaths?" Dink asked. "So, it's safe outside now?"

"Yeah, for everyone except Nancy," Mike said, lighting up a cigarette, sitting on the slightly raised stage.

"What?" Nancy asked.

"I mean, all the corpses have been provided. I don't know exactly what's supposed to happen next, but I don't think we can assume you're safe, Nancy."

The recently tenderised old-meat that was White-hair started laughing. "Shit, me! I thought you understood all this! You don't have a clue, do you?" he said, laughing. "Look, Christ, this isn't that hard. There are enough corpses now. All we got to do is get the Papers and strangle that bitch," he eyeballed Nancy as he said that part, "Then read them. That's it. Nothing more to it. Kill the barmaid, read the Papers and get anything you ask for."

"How come all this is happening now?" Holmes asked, poignantly.

"Yeah, Holmes wants to know, what started all this off? Why now?"

White-hair wiggled his still-swelling face and pursed his lips. "Me and my guys have been keeping a close eye on this town since your dad died, hoping we would get a chance to be the ones in control. When Pilgrim turned up dead, we knew it was time. I figure Sinclair would have known, but he's dead now too. Once we figured out that it's all real, well, we all wanted a taste of that."

"Bollocks, you're too dumb to work it out. Who are you working for?" Sunglasses replied.

White-hair just looked back and pushed back a smile.

Nancy considered that perhaps Pilgrim's laptop held all the answers, if only she could get into it.

“Well, bollocks to you all. I need a drink and then I need to get a good night’s sleep. I’m going the pub, then I’m going home,” Nancy said indignantly.

“*Not smart, Nancy. Listen to your friends,*” Holmes said almost commandingly.

“Piss off, detective innards. No one asked you!” she said aloud.

Dink tried to grab her hand. She pulled away and stormed towards the door. Being fuelled by a combination of fear and defiance, she had resolved that come what may; she was going to the bloody pub.

She opened the door at the front of the church, quite aware that Sunglasses had asked Mike if he should stop her. From the silence, she assumed he had waved for him to let her go.

A wind from outside blew inwards and there was a thunderous roar to accompany it. Nancy was literally blown backwards, hitting the floor. It took her a moment to realise what had happened. She heard gunshots.

“Nancy, get away from the door!” Sunglasses ordered. She rolled without thinking, assisted by Holmes. The gunshots fired again.

She finally got her bearings and looked up to the door. There was something there.

SOMETHING IN THE WIND

At first, she could only see a flash of movement as Sunglasses fired his gun again.

“Howard, give me the other gun!” Mike demanded.

Nancy scurried away from the door in a frantic backwards crawl. Dink, selflessly run towards her to help her up.

“What the fuck was that?” Nancy screamed.

Sunglasses fired again, this time Nancy got a proper look at the thing. It was about five feet tall and moved like a dog, but its mouth opened as wide as its head. Rather than fur, it was sporting white skin with a yellowness around its mouth and eyes.

It was distinctly fishy in nature, its limbs being gangly and long.

After a few moments of muttering, Mike fired his gun. The monster was blown back from the doorway. He said something else in a commanding mutter, if there is such a thing, and the doors to the church closed themselves with a gust of wind.

“We’re good,” Mike said.

“*Did he just shoot a monster with vicar magic?*” Holmes asked.

“What the fuck! What the actual fuck was that fucking thing?” Dink asked, squeezing Nancy’s hand like it was precious.

Mike took a drag of his almost burned-out cigarette and then flicked it away. “I’m not a vicar,” he said, putting the gun in his belt. “And there’s no such thing as *vicar magic*.”

“What!” exclaimed everyone in the room, except him and Sunglasses.

“Yeah, the church decommissioned this place when the last vicar left. Too spooky for them. They handed it to me to fix the problem.”

“We agreed we wouldn’t tell them. If you tell them much more, the Wind won’t cover it,” Sunglasses barked.

“That’s my call, not yours.”

Sunglasses, checked his weapon and then, looking far cooler than he had when he was *trying*, he slipped off his jacket and threw it on the floor.

“Our job is keeping her alive,” Mike shouted.

“Was that the sea monster?” Nancy asked, still freaking out about Mike’s superpowers, the freaky monster and all the gunshots.

Sunglasses shrugged. “A sea monster, little one.”

“Okay, who the fuck *are* you then, Mike?” Dink asked.

Nancy smiled, noticing that White-hair had rolled under a pew, as if that would help him hide from a monster.

“I don’t work for the church, but I am one of the good guys, sort of. My group predates the church. They call on us when uncomfortable things need doing,” Mike said while he was tracing a sound around the outside of the building with his eyes. “We hunt monsters.”

“How come we could see that monster?” Sunglasses asked.

“Holy ground, that’s why monsters are usually ordered to not set foot on it,” Mike replied.

“I have a better question!” White-hair yelled, as he wriggled back onto his pew. “How the fuck did you send it packing with my gun?”

Nancy raised an eyebrow at him and before Mike could answer, she yelled, “Wasn’t you listening? He hunts monsters!” as if it was the most reasonable explanation in the world. She turned to Mike. “So, God helps you, right?” she asked.

Mike nodded. “Sure, why not!”

She looked back. “God! You stupid fuck!” though she almost didn’t get to finish the sentence as the back door flew open and a blur of motion zipped up the wall and across the ceiling.

“Don’t look at it,” Mike said, in a stage whisper. “It thinks we can’t see it.”

“What?” Nancy asked. “You just shot at it,” she said, trying not to look up.

“That thing is marginally more intelligent than a cow. It has no idea how things work. The only reason it’s not attacked us is because it’s trying to conjure water and it’s not working. It can’t work out why.”

“Okay, then, what *do* we do?” Nancy asked.

“We wait until it comes down here to eat us anyway and I beat it to death with my bat,” Mike said, brandishing a bat suddenly.

“Mike, the monster shook off bullets. Your bat isn’t going to do shit to it!” Dink said, trying to whisper unsuccessfully.

“No! Bullets that I blessed knocked the wind out of it. A bat, made of wood from a daemon realm, that was blessed by a wraith-priest will mash its brains in!”

“*Sorry, Wraith-priest? This is getting absurd!*” Holmes observed.

“What the fuck? That’s not very Christian of you Mike!”

“Nancy, I’m not a vicar. I told you; I hunt mon...” He was cut off as the monster dropped from the ceiling into the middle of them.

Driven by training and reflex, Sunglasses offloaded into its head without a second's hesitation. He only stopped when his hand cannon made a clicking sound instead of a 'boom-boom' sound. It had echoed around the room.

The fish-wanker stumbled. The bullets were impaled in its skull but didn't break the flesh. Mike swung his bat like a pro, bringing it down with righteous fury across its face. He swung over and over, each time putting as much force as he could into it.

Everyone backed away as the viciousness of the attack grew. Eventually, Mike was just standing over it, repeatedly bashing it. Its skull made a pop sound and yellow blood spewed from its eye sockets and mouth. It's skin still not torn or open at all. Mike gave it one more smack for good measure.

He turned, flicking the yellow ooze from his bat. "Good job! Score one for the good guys!"

Everyone remained silent until Dink broke the moment with, "Fuck!" and a flood of suddenly emotional tears.

"I mean, he got the job done!" Holmes said serenely.

"I did!" Mike replied.

Nancy comforted Dink, hugging her tightly. Though she did nod in approval at Mike and gave him a sincere thumbs up.

"Wait, he can hear me!" Holmes said, suddenly realising that he had missed something.

"Yeah, that was gross, Mike. I expect this behaviour from me, not you," Sunglasses said, with a look of disgust on his face. He edged closer to the monster and kicked it. It didn't move.

"Thanks!" Mike replied, taking Sunglasses gun from him. He took it in his hands and muttered some words over it.

"What are you doing?"

Mike ignored him for a moment while he finished his muttering. “Blessing your weapon. Makes it slightly more effective against these beasties.”

“I thought you said you wasn’t a vicar?” White-hair said, still on his pew, but now looking like he was about to cry himself.

“I don’t know how much time you have spent in a church, but vicars don’t beat monsters to death! They ask for donations to fix roofs and feed you shitty wine and crackers.”

Everyone looked at him blankly.

“I hunt these things. Look, it’s complicated. We usually hunt vampires, but shit got a bit fucked up recently and now we have this crap to deal with.”

“*Works for me,*” Holmes said, as if it was enough of an explanation. “*Explains why he was such a shitty vicar.*”

“Fuck you Holmes! I was an average vicar!” Mike said, pointing his bat at Nancy.

Nancy nodded in agreement at the statement. Dink pulled away from her, obviously trying to master her emotions. “Sorry, I’m okay now. Does this mean it’s safe outside?” she asked.

“Until the next sundown, yeah. Another one will be spawned from the Candiru. The err, the big one,” he said, using Sunglasses discarded jacket to clean his bat.

“You know what it’s called?” Nancy asked. Realising that Mike had been holding out more even more.

“I know lots of things, just nothing that helps us right now,” he replied in an annoyed tone. He was obviously getting annoyed with the questions, which was a little grating, given that he was literally the only person who had any idea what was happening.

“How come you can hear Holmes?” she asked, pushing her luck for one more answer.

“It would honestly, take too long to explain, and I promise, I’ll tell both of you as soon as we get out of this mess.”

Nancy and Dink walked down the road towards the pub. Nancy was insistent that it was the right place to be, though she knew, on some level, that she only felt like that because of her dependence on the things it offered her. For the first time in her life, she wished she didn’t need it in that way.

Sunglasses, trailed behind them. He knew well enough to give them space to talk, but he wanted to make sure Nancy was under his watch until she got back to town. Holmes had told her that this no-doubt meant that she was likely being watched by his team. This had probably been the case since all this started.

There was some quiet comfort to her in knowing someone was watching, no matter how creepy it happened to be.

“Sea monster,” Dink said. As they walked.

“Mike’s a monster hunter,” Nancy replied.

“I’ve seen two hundred percent more corpses since I met you,” Dink said.

“My mom killed herself to protect me,” Nancy pondered.

“I had never seen a gun before, not in person.”

“My dad was killed by a cult.”

“How do we unpack all of this?” Dink asked, slowing, just slightly in the windy afternoon air.

“We get a drink, we talk it out and we get ready for anything, I guess.”

Dink sighed loudly. "I'm onboard. Just so you know, it's fucked up, but I'm with you until the end."

"Why?" Nancy asked, looking at her intently, still walking.

Dink reached out and took her hand. "Because, I've never met anyone like you, not ever. And... And I know this is messed up, because I'm scared shitless, terrified, and shell shocked, but... Nancy, this is the most awesome thing that has ever happened in my life! It's fucking mental and amazing and exciting, and yes, we're all probably going to be eaten by a sea monster, but *damn it!* I'm into this!"

Nancy laughed. "You're right! That's really messed up!"

Dink laughed, taking her hand with interlocked fingers.

Nancy bit her bottom lip and grinned. "I don't think I would be getting through this without you, so thank you!"

Nancy felt Holmes make a "*hmmm*," sound in response to the interaction. She wasn't sure what it meant, and she didn't care, not at all.

They stopped outside of the door of the pub. Sunglasses glanced up the road. "Okay. My team is watching you. If anything happens, just hide and keep yourself safe. Both of you!"

They both nodded in grateful agreement.

"Mike says you're good until tomorrow night. Make sure to be back at the church before that!"

They nodded again.

"Wait, should we be worried about the bad guys stealing me away or something?" Nancy asked.

"We have no idea who they are. If anyone tries to take you, my team will kill them. No questions asked. Actually, if they do, that would be great! It's only sea gods we're actually worried about... And Vampires, but that's just business as usual."

“Sure it is,” Dink said, not sure if it was a joke. She pulled Nancy into the pub.

As they entered, the noises and warmth of the place made the last few hours feel instantly like a dream. This was normal, this was safe.

Dink leaned into Nancy, from the side. “I don’t want to be an overbearing girlfriend. I’m not trying to change you, but you can’t get blasted this evening. Just *happy drunk*, okay?”

Nancy looked back. “Oh, obviously!”

Dink had lost count of how many shots Nancy had had. She was well on the way to wanked herself. There was a thrill in drinking your problems away when you knew there was a secret organisation of monster hunters watching your back. If they couldn’t take out the big wet murderers coming for you, then, well, you may as well be shit faced for the end, right?

“There is no way you can afford any more drinks, and I’m not footing your tab for this bloody binge!” Marina said, bringing one last bottle of wine over. “This is it, your cut off now you pair of party freaks! Also, is that my coat?”

Dink, who was still at the *functional* stage of drunk, handed Marina a credit card. “Just put it all on here!” she said, taking the bottle off her. “I don’t want anything to ruin our night. If a sea monster can’t, then the bill shouldn’t!”

Marina took the card and raised an eyebrow. “Honey, Nancy’s tab is already more than she earns in a week, you think your card can keep up?”

“I can afford it. Just pay off what she owes and call it clean, will you?” Dink said, drinking wine from the bottle.

“I mean, if you’re sure!” Marina said, worried that Dink would regret this in the morning.

“It’s fine! Honestly!”

Marina vanished with the card. She wasn’t against letting Nancy off with the tab, but if someone was willing to pay, there was no way she would refuse. She wasn’t stupid.

Nancy was vaguely aware that there had been an interaction and had no idea how Dink had convinced Marina to not cut her off, but she was pleased. *Very pleased.*

NO TIME FOR LOVE

Dink enjoyed looking at Nancy. She was like fire. She had dealt with dead parents, Marina's cooking, alcoholism, depression, sea gods, fish monsters, brain ghosts, and still, she burned with love, passion and freedom, she burned brighter than any person Dink had ever known.

She had realised moments after meeting her, that she loved her. She had imagined what it would be like to know someone like Nancy when she was alone, many times.

A woman without an agenda, a woman who wanted nothing and lived for the moment. A woman who was beautiful and free and best of all, it seemed like might love her back, no questions asked.

When she was imagining her perfect woman, it didn't include a sea god, monsters, brain ghosts and all the drinking, that was true. But Nancy made all the danger, fear, and trauma worth it. Nancy was Dink's fire, and she would burn along with her, if she would let her.

She was exactly one drink closer to black-out-dunk than she had ever been before. She was at that *nice* point where she could still think,

but, the world outside of her head was fading into the background like when you are a child, falling asleep while all the adults talk, a warm, safe feeling of oblivion was tugging at her.

Dink closed her eyes for a moment, knowing that nothing bad could happen on this strange, magical evening, and tomorrow was a long way away.

She thought about all that Nancy must have been through before she met her. About all that she herself had been through too. All the sadness, loss and unhappiness that Dink had thought was so deep, so serious. It wasn't even hand luggage to Nancy's baggage. Yet, Dink had a feeling that Nancy would tell her something wise and caring if she told her this thought; or she would shove a drink in her hand and tell her to try to ignore it. Both solutions were equally useless, overall.

She worried that she was likely going to lose this wonderful fire of a woman; and lose her soon. She had only just found her and now she would be taken away.

Maybe she could go wherever it was that Nancy was going, wait, no, that was the drink confusing her.

Why was the booze in this pub so much better than everywhere else?

She took that next drink and was swept into the void that awaited at the bottom of every bottle of spirits.

DAY OF THE DEATH

Nancy woke up, head thumping, mouth dry and room spinning. She had a vague recollection of Dink telling her not to get blackout drunk, then getting blackout drunk. The confusing, unsettling void in her brain resulted from the evening that she had known she was looking for when she agreed to ‘behave.’

She reached around on the floor next to her bed for a water bottle that she knew would be there. Eventually finding it and lifting it to her lips just enough to draw from the bottle without spilling it on herself.

She lay back down, feeling marginally better. An arm reached out from under the covers and embraced her. She had a vague flashback to getting home with Dink in tow, but as a force of habit, she lifted the blanket to check it *was* who she thought it was.

Dink screwed up her barely awake face and receded under the covers at the onslaught of light. Nancy, while no more comfortable with the daytime streaming in, was at least more seasoned to it than Dink. She worried she was a bad influence on the wonderful woman.

Not that it would matter.

Not after today.

Nancy embraced the grumpy, sleepy, Dink and then closed her eyes.

“Holmes?” she asked, appearing in his room.

He stepped in through the door as if it was a coincidence. She knew it wasn't. She tried to get a peek through the doorway as he slipped in. There was definitely a corridor out there, one that matched the aesthetic of the room.

Holmes looked at her. He was displeased.

“You were too drunk to notice, but I stopped bothering to try to talk to you last night.”

“You're right I was. What did I miss?” she said, refusing to apologise for drinking away her worries. Also, she felt far too rough to engage in any lengthy discourse.

“I wanted to bounce some ideas around with you. But between the drinking and, I assume, the sex, it seemed like you may have forgotten that your life is in very real danger.”

Nancy summoned a strong cup of coffee, something she was starting to get quite good at in the room. She spared a thought to lament that she couldn't summon coffee outside of this imagined room.

“I wanted to talk to you about that,” she said.

Holmes sat down and started unpacking a folder he had obviously been working on.

“I've decided that if it comes to it, I'm going to kill myself.”

Holmes looked up at her, and then back to his papers. *“I thought you may have made that decision.”*

“If the bad guys get to summon the monster, then they get wishes and the monster gets to come ashore, right? That can't be good for this town, or you know, the world, I suppose,” she said, in a half-rehearsed speech.

“And?”

“What do you mean ‘and’? ‘and’ it’s not fair for me to allow that to happen by being too selfish to die!”

Holmes wasn’t even looking up at her. He just kept on messing with his file, laying bits out on the table, presumably for Nancy to, at some point, inspect.

“I just told you that I’m going to kill myself and you won’t stop messing with your bloody papers!” she said, head still pounding and far too sleepy to be this indignant.

“Okay, so what’s your plan? No one will help you, so I assume you’re going to jump off something?” he asked.

“Well, I assume so too. Not really figured it out yet,” Nancy replied as she sat down in the chair opposite him at the little table.

“You could hang yourself, like your mom did. That would be poetic, I suppose.”

Nancy didn’t like how into this Holmes was.

“Maybe I could drink myself to death. That could be a good way to go for me; live by the booze, die by the booze?” she said, pondering the idea of being dead.

“Right, okay, fine, you should do that. Or, and this is just a thought, how about you stop planning for failure? Puzzle this out with me and we might be able to kick this thing’s arse. So we can get back to being a fun barmaid, detective duo?”

“You think we can beat it?” she asked.

“Nancy, things like this, it may seem like we can’t win, but that’s the scam the bad guys are running. They make it seem like all is lost, and it shatters your confidence. All we have to do is kill a sea monster or destroy these papers, that’s it.”

Nancy considered Holmes’ words. She drank her conjured coffee and then placed her head on the desk, trying to think through the fog and to the wisdom of his words.

“You know, Nancy, Mike sounds like he knows a lot about this, but we still need to study the file. We have Pilgrim’s research, years of it and some of it is in your mother’s own hand. Mike seems to be good at killing monsters but we’re detectives. Let’s play our strengths!”

Nancy wiped a tear from her face and only then lifted her head. “What you working on anyway?” she asked.

“I mean, the file. Wasn’t you listening to anything I said?” he asked, as grumpy as ever, though this time Nancy had a suspicion it was more forced than usual.

“Alright, are we whining or are we detecting?”

“Detecting!” he corrected before handing her papers and pictures he had been studying.

She looked at the notes. As she read down them, she stared to see the pattern he had found.

“The locations aren’t symbolic, are they?” she asked, as stab in the dark. Holmes lit a cigarette and put his feet on the desk in his best attempt at arrogance.

He slid her the rest of the file. *“Read, deduce, do not guess.”*

She did.

The first corpse was on the beach in front of her flat, the day after she had been thinking about her dad. It was Pilgrim Marston. Someone who, it seemed, may have had all the answers.

The second corpse was in the basement of the newspaper building, where she had expected to find something. And it was the body of her dad’s police force partner. A man she would liked to have perhaps known.

The third corpse was Sinclair, someone she was literally interrogating at the time of death. Someone who had secrets to tell.

The fourth corpse was someone she hadn't given a second thought to. But, he likely knew White-hairs plan's and maybe even have been willing to tell her something.

The victims had all been people who could have told her something that may have helped her.

"Okay, I follow this logic, but we know the monster's, the little monsters that is, they are so dumb they can't even tell when someone can see them. There's no way they choose targets this accurately. Mike said the only criteria was that the person who dies knew about the Papers. Why these people, why not Mike, Dink, hell, even Nigel, or Roy, they know about the Papers, even Louisiana."

Holmes nodded in agreement. "*Which means someone was choosing the targets, to cut you off from information.*"

"Okay, but who?" Nancy asked.

"*Where was granddad grey-top's mate going when he died?*"

"I have no idea. I'll go find out. Stay here," she said, as if he *could* go anywhere.

She opened her eyes in bed, feeling a lot less hungover, now she was fuelled by purpose. To her surprise, she was alone in bed.

"Dink?" she called.

She suddenly heard the sounds of vomit from the bathroom and remembered that Dink was not quite as seasoned as her in the ancient art of binge drinking.

She smiled to herself and went to check on her.

Nancy didn't have to wait long. It was no more than a single ring before Sunglasses answered.

“Are you okay” he asked, with urgency.

“I’m fine, just a bit hung over. Can you find something out for me?”

“Whatever you need,” he replied earnestly.

“The last victim, the old wanker said he appeared in the library, dead, right? So where was he supposed to be?” she asked.

“I got my guys to check that already. We don’t know, his car wasn’t far away at all, actually. It was just outside those little cottages at the edge of town.”

“Thanks, *Howard*,” she said, hanging up.

“*Interesting, there’s only one person who we know out there, isn’t there?*” Holmes observed.

“Why, mister Holmes, did we miss a trick?”

“*I think we did.*”

Dink came in from the bedroom, looking stunning as usual, now she was less hung-over. Nancy was so busy staring at her that she almost didn’t hear the commotion on the landing outside her door.

She broke her loving gaze and went to investigate. Marina, grocery bag in hand was shouting at a tall bald gentleman in a black overcoat. He literally looked like every nightclub doorman she had ever met.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“This gorilla won’t let me in!” Marina said.

The man stood with a hand up, not at all apologetically refusing to let Marina pass.

“You one of Howards guys?” Nancy asked.

The man turned to her. “Yes, miss McQueen. I have been instructed to watch over you this morning.”

Marina was getting more irate by the moment.

“*Check him,*” Holmes advised before the man had even stopped talking.

“Got any ID?” Nancy asked.

The man raised his eyebrow at her. “Err, no, miss McQueen,” he said, confused at her asking about his now unrequired cover. He did however open his coat slightly to show the handle of a small dagger where she would have expected a gun to sit.

“I am from Howards team, I assure you, miss,” he said, with a confused, unprepared tone.

“Well, I’m convinced!”

“What the fuck are you involved in, Nancy?” Marina asked over the man’s shoulder.

“Well, officer... err,” Nancy hesitated.

“Layton,” he said, standing up straight.

“Well, officer Layton, I appreciate the guarding. Or whatever it is you are doing, but would you mind letting Marina in? She is, after all, my oldest friend, and the only reason I don’t starve to death.”

The man smiled a little. “Sure. Sorry, miss.”

Marina, hearing this, bullied past him, muttering, “Wanker!” as she passed.

He suppressed a laugh and turned back to guarding the empty landing.

Nancy closed the door, re-opening it a moment later. “Thanks... by the way.”

“No problem, miss. It’s what we do.”

She closed the door again, wondering who exactly was paying all these wages while she listened to Marina complain as she briefly greeted Dink and started on breakfast in the kitchen.

“Is this going to be like the last one?” Dink whispered, remembering the previous omelette.

“Oh no, it only ever gets worse.”

Dink looked terrified as she sat herself at the table, waiting for her torture to commence.

Nancy sat next to her and started reading Pilgrim's file. She had decided to re-investigate it in the hopes that she had missed something.

The sounds and smells of bacon sizzling started filling the air.

"So, what are you into this time, Nancy?" Marina asked from the kitchen doorway, cigarette in her hand.

"Monster hunters, supernatural murders and possibly a new lead," Nancy replied.

Marina, hearing his, came to sit at the table.

"Nancy, that sounds a bit like something you might say if you were... having... let's say one of *those* things." Maria was trying to be delicate and not talk openly about her breakdowns in front of Dink. It was, of course, a total failure. It really was nice of her to *try* though.

Dink put a supporting hand on Nancy's leg and cut in before she said something angry that she would regret. "Marina, I know how it sounds, but Nancy isn't struggling right now. I know it could sound like it, but there's a man at the door from the Royal Guard. The bodies are real and there's even a news team in town trying to cover this story. Nancy drinks too much and makes bad decisions but she doesn't need you to step in, not the way you have before."

Marina looked like she had been slapped. Dink had been firm, direct, and essentially diffused everything that she was about to say.

Instead of answering Dink directly Marina just said. "Bacon is burning." She ran off to tend to the sliced dead pig in the pan.

"That was bloody brilliant, Dink!" Nancy said, both touched and stunned. "I didn't know you knew about Marina, and the doctors."

Dink gave her a confused smile. "Nancy, you're a mess. It wasn't hard to work out. Assuming we don't get killed, I'm here for the long-haul, *if* you want me to be."

Nancy devolved instantly into suppressed tears and an “Awwwww,” sound. Dink had repeatedly made commitments to her in ways she didn’t feel she deserved.

They were still hugging when Marina returned, with a large tray and a stack of bacon sandwiches. The bread, this time was normal sized and the bacon, while crispy, looked, *actually okay*.

“Marina, this looks great!” Nancy complimented, reaching over to grab one.

Dink followed suit, inspecting it suspiciously. They both bit down eagerly as Marina said, “I added a bit of curry powder and sugar to give them a wake-up kick!” by which time it was too late.

“It’s like there’s something wrong with her,” Dink said as they walked down the street. “I’m not joking. It’s like her taste buds are broken. She’s totally normal and together, but then thinks *that*, is acceptable!”

“*I swear, even I could taste that!*” Holmes said, supportively lamenting the inedible bacon sandwiches.

They had been loaded up with an interesting mix of flavours. The sandwiches were cooked, mostly acceptably, but then Marina had used her own mix of curry powder and caster sugar as essentially, a dusting. It was to say the least, unsettling.

“And she cook’s every morning?” Dink asked.

“Most mornings, yeah. She likes doing it and, the times I have gone a bit, you know, wrong, it’s always been in the morning, so now she uses it as an excuse to check on me.”

Dink looked back, Mr Layton was still following them. He was *not* a talker. He had hung back enough that they could likely miss him if he wasn't built like a wardrobe.

"I think it would send me over the edge! How do you eat it every day?" she asked.

"You get used to it. It becomes a game. I mentally chronicle all the ways she finds to mess up food. Still, she does clean the kitchen really well!"

Dink remained unconvinced. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"Cottages, just about here actually," Nancy replied.

"And why are we going there?"

"I need to see Luisiana Kent!" Nancy explained.

"The news lady? Wait, she's the one who tried to sleep with you!"

Dink sounded annoyed. "Nancy, I'm not into three-ways!"

Nancy laughed at the very idea. "No, nothing like that. I think she maybe controlling the monsters that have been killing people is all."

Dink stopped. "What?"

A brief argument was beginning to flare up between them. Dink was annoyed at how Nancy was walking them into danger without so much as a passing warning.

Nancy made the argument that they were already in grave danger and their location didn't much affect things. There were excellent points being raised by both parties.

They were getting so 'into' the argument that they almost jumped out of their skins when a little voice said "Hi."

Luisiana, with a coffee cup in hand, leaned against the gatepost to the little cottage. She looked 'made up' and was ready for a camera. Nancy tried and failed to not spare a thought for how good she looked in her pristine white shirt and brown leather jacket.

"Hi," Dink said, backing away a little.

“Tread carefully. No reason to show out hand too soon,” Holmes advised, obviously getting ready to pay attention to every minor detail of the interaction.

“Lou,” Nancy began.

“Don’t call me Lou,” Lou interrupted; Nancy ignored her, obviously.

“Lou, are you by any chance part of a cult that is trying to have me strangled to death, to bring a sea monster to shore that grants wishes?”

“Amazing, it’s like you get stupider every day!”

Louisiana slurped her coffee with no reaction to the question. “No. I’m not with them.”

“You don’t seem very surprised by the question,” Dink noted.

“Who are you again?”

“Oh, sorry!” Nancy said, “Dink, meet Louisiana Kent, minor internet news sensation, a bit of a bitch, in a good way. And, Lou, this is Dink, awesome building maker, or something, you already met her, outside the police station yesterday. Anyway, she’s *my girlfriend*.”

Louisiana sighed and rolled her eyes at the introduction. “I’m not surprised. All of this was on Pilgrim’s mental website, along with a bunch of other supernatural ramblings. Thing is, a lot of the mad stuff he’s written about has turned out to be, at least, partially true, so I’m not surprised.” She took a sip of her coffee. “Look, Nancy, I really like you, you’re fucked up, and that’s fun. But if I can get to be on the scene when all this stuff kicks off, then that’s very good for my career. And, if the sea monster happens to be real, well, that would be a cherry on top!”

Nancy couldn’t help but enjoy Louisiana’s honesty. “You realise the only way a monster comes to shore is if I die?”

“She’s not being entirely honest,” Holmes said, studying her, through Nancy’s eyes.

Luisiana sipped the last of her coffee, in a very menacing way. Then said, “Why *you*? What makes you so special?”

“Brain ghost and epic lineage. Apparently, my dad had one too. It makes me a highly sought-after commodity... to sea monsters.”

“Fair enough,” Louisiana said, dryly.

“Nothing she just said is entirely true. She knows more than she is letting on. Push her on something.”

“So, if you happen to hear anything about the cult?” Nancy asked.

“I’ll let you know, if you do the same.”

Nancy, turned to leave, noting Dink intently glaring at Luisiana. She poked her to get her attention. Just as she began to walk, Nancy turned back. “Oh, and one more thing, if you don’t mind. Where do you think Candiru would come ashore?”

Luisiana shrugged. “I would think the beach outside your house, but I doubt it’s real, so don’t let it keep you awake at night.” She tossed the remaining drips from her cup onto the lawn and strolled back inside the cottage.

“Leave now. That was good confirmation, but she’ll realise any second.”

“Let’s go, now!” Nancy said, dragging Dink with her as she set off at quite a pace. She waved at the guard following them and pointed behind her. He nodded and pretended to be on the phone, watching the cottage closely.

“Well, that was pointless, wasn’t it?” Dink said, wondering why they were in such a rush.

“Candiru, Dink. She never so much as raised an eyebrow at the monster’s name!”

Dink added an “Ohhhhhhhh,” as they walked towards the town again.

JUSTIFICATION OF JUXTAPOSITION

Howard had been on the phone with detective Farker for at least half an hour. There was a bet between the hunters in the fake office, as to how long now before he hung up on him.

It has started as a casual conversation and had escalated to Farker questioning everything about the team's cover story. Obviously, it was falling apart once Farker's, actually keen brain started drilling him.

The cover story of being something about the royal something or other, was a real organisation and the credentials were also real. Though, real in the sense that it was made up by another troupe of hunters about a hundred years prior and somehow was still going.

The actual details about who Howard was, his history and his training were all made up. The only reason Farker hadn't arrested all of them was because the cover organisation had far more power than the local police.

Howard was trying to answer the challenge to his skills in ways that began with “I don’t want to talk about it with you,” and had now got as far as “I work for the military, now fuck off.”

It was a testament to Farker’s skills that he had kept Howard playing the game for so long.

The line finally came though. “Look, it’s as simple as this. I outrank you, anyone you could possibly call, and their grandma!” and with that, Howard slammed down the phone.

The four hunters, who had been idly listening in with glee, scattered like scared children.

“Nancy still safe?” he barked to the room.

“Just had a report come in. Layton is still tailing her. For some reason she’s headed to the library again, we think,” a nervous looking young man replied.

“Of course she is. Couldn’t just stay home could she!” he complained.

“Anyone seen Lilly recently?” he asked.

“No, sir,” the same man replied. “She hasn’t come back from the garden yet.”

Howard considered the oddity of this. The garden usually compressed time between visits. You could come and go and only a few minutes would pass. Now, though, it was working in unpredictable ways. That usually meant trouble was brewing. The garden always knew more than everyone else.

He rubbed his stubble for a few seconds, lost in his thoughts. His decision made, he stood up and loudly said, “Hunters, there’s something in the air. I don’t like it. Stay armed and ready for anything. Have someone watch the shoreline. I want you to be ready for anything. ‘A-game’ please guys!”

There was a flurry of muted excitement. Hunters preferred to be in combat than doing boring undercover work. Even newer hunters like these wanted to use their skills.

“Oh, and will someone please eject that pratt from our front door!” he said, pointing at where Mark was likely still stationed. “I’m going to find Nancy before someone tries to kill her or something.”

LIBRARY OF REVELATION

Nancy was pondering why people were so easy to trick when you wanted to separate them from the information they had. She wondered if there were some innate need people had to confess secrets. Perhaps holding on to them was bad for the soul. Perhaps it was the confessing of secrets that *cleaned* them when it was so likely that everyone concerned would be dead soon.

They were almost back in town; they had said little since leaving the cottage. Dink was half expecting that she would have to sprint away from a crazed Luisiana. Nancy was more confident in the promise of her guard and hadn't given it much thought. She was, however, in a silent conversation with Holmes.

Holmes had been going over the timeline of events and couldn't work out the connection to the locations. Had Pilgrim known where *all* the Papers could be found? What were the connections between the places and how had Pilgrim discerned them so well?

Nancy had subconsciously headed towards the library, which was, as it turned out, exactly where she wanted to be.

“Okay, what do we do now? Walk in and say, ‘hey I want to see the basement! We’re super into corpses,’” Dink asked, trying to be the sobering voice of reason.

Nancy never liked sobering voices; she ignored the point.

“You got a plan?” she asked Holmes internally as she glanced at Dink, assuring her with, “Just leave it to me, will you?”

“We suddenly have access to Mike’s resources, why are we not using them to get where we want to go?” Holmes asked.

“Because that would be raising my profile and we do not want the bad guys knowing we are onto them!”

“You literally just told that Luisiana woman that you *were* onto her!” Dink replied. Nancy suddenly realised that she was talking out loud.

“She’s right, you know.”

She ignored him and walked in through the double door of the little library, confidently striding towards the counter, where the smug librarian was waiting for her.

“Oh, hello again!” Nancy greeted. She was vaguely aware of Dink hanging back.

“Hello, dear. Back again I see,” the prudish woman replied. Bursting at the seams with gossip, but still pretending she was too good to share it.

“I’m so sorry I haven’t been back in a few days, it’s been quite the week,” Nancy said, trying to remember the character she played last time she visited. “But from what I hear, my week has had nothing on yours. You have had it far more traumatic, haven’t you?”

The woman did her little excited gossip-wiggle and looked around the library, making sure they were alone. While there were actually a

few people mulling about, they were all far back enough for her to speak in hushed tones. “You wouldn’t believe a body was found in the basement! Can you believe it? A dead body!”

This was going to be easier than Nancy expected.

A few minutes later, Nancy returned to Dink and informed her that she had the keys to the basement.

“No way! There is no way you convinced that literal librarian to let us poke around in the crime scene!” Dink said, impressed *and suspicious*.

“Whatever. It’s this way,” Nancy replied coolly. Walking towards a staircase at the back of the entrance hall.

“Wait, you really did convince her? That’s mad. What did you say to her?” Dink asked as they descended the well-lit staircase.

Nancy unlocked the small door that said ‘Staff Only’ on it and flicked a light switch.

“Woah!” Nancy said, surveying the room.

It was a small warehouse of books with a slightly wider main aisle. There were some books piled up on the table. Holmes pointed out to Nancy that the bottom row of bookshelves had water damage on them. She grunted in recognition and looked up the next aisle across, where she found left over tape on the floor that was somewhat reminiscent of a human in shape, even though someone had tried to peel it off.

“This is real creepy Nancy, what are we looking for?” Dink asked, looking over her shoulder.

They were both startled by the sound of the door opening, to see Sunglasses letting himself in behind them.

“You took your sweet time,” Nancy said. “I could have been strangled already by now!”

“I wish! Might have got to see a sea god!” he said, grinning. Dink shot him an annoyed look. Nancy smirked at the comment.

He closed the door behind him. “What are you hoping to find down here anyway?” he asked.

Nancy walked up the aisles checking the bottoms of all the shelves as she did. “I have a theory, actually,” she said proudly as she walked.

“*You? I think you’ll find it was my theory,*” Holmes said, annoyed. Nancy told him that no one would know it was his idea unless he ‘pissed off out of her head and told them himself,’ to which he rolled his eyes.

“Do share,” Sunglasses asked, comically readjusting his tie every time he bent down to inspect the shelves with her.

“She’s really good at figuring things out. Go on, Nancy, drop the bombshell before I strangle you myself,” Dink demanded, not really understanding why she was checking things either.

Nancy found what she was looking for on the third stack of shelves in. She pretended she hadn’t and carried on checking. Showmanship was something all the best detectives were good at. She had no intention of breaking the tradition.

“Well,” she began. “Let’s assume Sinclair was right and Pilgrim did have a passenger, like I do with Holmes, and let’s assume that it really could see the future. Well, that means that he was visiting places. But maybe he was doing it knowing I would find out.”

Dink and Sunglasses nodded in agreement, as they mulled over the idea.

“When he was here, witnesses said ‘Newspaper’ clearly, not ‘papers;’ I didn’t misunderstand, and they didn’t misremember. He was telling me that there was going to be a body at the newspaper building. He is very much solving this case with us, but from the past.”

Her audience nodded in agreement again.

“Well, why would he even be here?” Dink asked.

“Because he wanted to tell you about the body that he knew would turn up?” Sunglasses surmised.

“Sort of, but maybe the bodies were not quite as straightforward as we think.”

Her audience was looking annoyed at her now.

“Mike says that the monster only kills people who know about the papers, right?”

They nodded, waiting for the revelation.

“Guys, that’s not entirely true. The monster kills people near the Papers. It doesn’t matter what they know. The little monsters appear in the water, and the water appears near the Papers.”

“Interesting theory,” Sunglasses said. “What about the one that attacked us in the church?”

“Mike has one of the Papers there, specifically in the sealed up well under the new office building.”

“Oh, my fuck! You did figure it out!” Dink said excitedly. “I was looking at that sketch for ages before I realised where the office cabin was.”

Nancy shrugged, “Holmes noticed it right away, and then pretended he didn’t, thinking it best for me not to know. What he forgets is that I have lived here my whole life. I went to the church when I was a kid, I knew the old well used to be on that spot.”

“*Well played McQueen,*” Holmes complimented.

She grinned at his recognition and then put herself back on track with her detective's revelation. "The body was in the Newspaper basement. Dink's client having it pulled down was what kicked all this off, she was about to fill that old basement with new concrete, I assume?" Dink nodded at her proudly in response to the query. "Well, that's what made whoever is behind this, act when they did. It was now or never. That's when Grandad-gunman got a hold of the Paper down there, losing his first henchman in the process."

"Good theory," Sunglasses agreed.

"Then there's the police station corpse, which proved to me that Howard here has one neatly folded up in his jacket pocket."

Sunglasses nodded, "What gave it away?"

"You constantly check your jacket. I had assumed you were worried your holster was on show. Then when you took off the jacket at the church yesterday, I noticed which side you wear your gun on. You were checking the opposite side," she said.

"Why did he take his jacket off then?" Dink asked before giving a side eye to Sunglasses, suspiciously.

"Misdirection. Make it seem unimportant. Then if shit went wrong, and he got taken away, or killed the Paper would still be hidden, but easy for Mike to go and get later."

"You really are smart, Nancy. When Mike told me you were something special, I was dubious, but yeah, I stand corrected," Sunglasses complimented.

"But the body here?" Dink asked.

Nancy was thrilled to be able to look like a genius and casually pulled a book from the shelf. She tossed it to Dink. "There's one hidden in there."

Dink looked at the side of the book. It was unmarked with nothing written on its spine at all. She opened it to find an envelope in a pocket,

inside the front cover. “How did you know? You didn’t even look at it!” she asked.

“I followed the shelves. That’s the only book with that level of water damage. It’s been soaked through; the rest have been splashed, that one was bathed.”

“But what about the body outside your flat?” Sunglasses asked as a follow up.

“Well, I have the last Paper, don’t I?” Nancy said confidently.

They all stood for a moment in silence. Dink slipped the paper out of the old envelope in her hand. Nancy watched her unfold it. A smile hit the corners of her mouth. “When did you figure out it wasn’t a suicide note?” she asked.

Without looking, Nancy knew what the Paper was. What it said. It would be a crisp white sheet of paper with ‘It’s never too late’ written on it in fine black pen. The note on the wall of her flat was never her mom’s suicide note. It was one of the Papers. It had been part of her mom’s ritual to keep the beast at bay for just a little longer. To give Nancy time to grow up, to become ready for it. She couldn’t tell her because, like everyone else, she thought that knowing would make her a target.

That was the saddest part of the whole thing. Her mom had known that it would look like suicide, and it would make Nancy angry and hard. But it was better than the alternatives.

Nancy took a selfish moment to let an elusive emotion surface. The memory of her mom dying filled her mind, and she remembered that morning again, as though it were fresh. She breathed deeply and forced the practiced control of years of trauma to prevail. She buried the moment deep in that place she never looked.

“Right, now we have the big reveal out of the way. I need a quick stop off to get a bottle of something strong and wet. Then we go see

Mike, as promised, and figure out what the fuck we do with all this information. Oh, and Dink, that's *your* Paper now. You do with it whatever you want. But you keep it safe, okay?"

Dink put it back in its envelope and nodded reverently. "With my life, I promise."

Nancy headed for the door. She stopped next to Dink for a moment. "With *my* life too, if it comes to it." She carried on past; Dink understood.

"*That was a mistake, she won't be able to make that trade,*" Holmes said. Nancy ignored him.

The Frog was getting busy already. Nancy realised she had no idea what day it was, but was probably already out of her planned time off. Marina would likely think that Nancy had just flaked out with her new girlfriend and not mentioned it.

She greeted Roy, who was still at the bar, despite the time, and grabbed a bottle of whiskey from behind the counter. To her shock, Dink paid for it. "There's a habit that you'll soon break!" Nancy said with a smirk as she thought about how much money she would likely cost Dink if she kept it up.

"Where's Nigel? He not helping with the rush?" She asked Roy, who was looking like he was failing at keeping up with the slightly busier than usual afternoon.

"No, he has an internet *thing* related to his other life," Roy explained. From time-to-time Nigel had to have meetings with his publisher, for his collected volumes of his blog. Something that still baffled Nancy.

She was about to leave when she saw Marina frantically cleaning up tables and barely managing to keep a hold of the glasses in her hand.

“I can’t leave them. They’re two people short and it looks like it’s going to be a busy one. I think I have to help,” she said apologetically.

“What!” Sunglasses grunted, with an annoyed tone.

“Nancy, there’s an evil cult trying to kill you, and a sea monster. You really think it’s wise to be ignoring all that?” Dink asked, trying to sound sweet and supportive, but it came out far more “*for the love of God!*” than she intended.

“I get it, but this is my life. When all this sea monster and strangler cult stuff is over, this is where I’m left. And, honestly, I can’t run out, not with them thinking I’m just going to get fucked-up and fall asleep. I have to help.”

Dink took the bottle of whiskey from her and sat down on Nancy’s usual bar stool.

“You can’t be serious!” Sunglasses said through frustrated and gritted teeth.

Dink pulled him in close by the tie. “Look, you know what she’s going through. She is the one whose life is in danger and nothing bad will happen if you do *your* job *Howard!* This could be her last night alive, and if she wants to spend it pouring drinks, we are in support. Got it?”

Sunglasses was suddenly more agreeable.

Nancy stepped behind the bar and, like a switch was flipped, she turned from reserved and serious, scared for her life, into her truly honed and practiced ‘*barmaid*’ persona. She wiped down the bar, took three orders, and struck up two conversations in a matter of seconds. It was really very impressive *barmanship*.

“Nancy, you’re an idiot, but I respect you. I don’t know why. But I do,” Holmes said, *mostly* supportively.

IRON (BATZ) MAID

Nancy had done a good job. The pub was emptying out under its own steam now, as midnight approached. Marina poured one last ale for a regular and announced that she wanted to go to bed; everyone should “sod off.” There was grumbling from the back, but overall they were all ready to leave anyway, or so it seemed.

“Thank you for coming to my rescue, Hun’,” Marina said, hugging Nancy with tired arms. “That could have been a lot worse without you.” She leaned in, looking over at Sunglasses and Dink making a beer mat house while they waited for Nancy to be relieved of duty. “Nancy, you’re not screwing both of them, are you?”

Nancy laughed aloud, making no attempt to cover the question. “Oh my gosh, Marina! What is wrong with you?” she looked over at her two friends. “You really think either me or Dink would lower ourselves to sleeping with someone who dresses like that?”

Dink added to the laughter. Sunglasses on the other hand, looked down with a comically sad expression, straightening his tie, “Hey! This is part of the cover, usually I dress like a badass!”

“Cover?” Marina asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, Howard here, is a sea monster hunter who is going to help save me from a cult and a... well, a sea monster.”

Sunglasses sighed and downed the rest of his pint. “We’re just called ‘Hunters.’ we don’t *just* kill sea monsters, Nancy.”

“Why do they call you Sunglasses?” Marina asked as she wiped down the bar, waving to a customer as they stumbled out the door.

“Because he wears sunglasses. Marina, I don’t have time to learn everyone’s name!” Nancy interrupted before he could answer.

Marina shrugged in acceptance.

The little bell on the door chimed as it opened again. “Sorry, we’re closed,” Marina said before looking up to see that no one was there.

Sunglasses, jumped to his feet and pulled out his gun. Thankfully, all the customers had gone. He nervously scanned the room and fished out his signature eyewear from his pocket.

“*It just crossed midnight. The little monster is here,*” Holmes said, coldly.

“Marina, get to the back room and lock the door, grab Roy, take him with you,” Nancy ordered. Roy was in the kitchen, loading the dishwasher and drying glasses.

There was a sound of crisps crunching from the edge of the room to the right. It had stepped on the debris from the evening’s drunkards.

“Well, shoot it then!” Dink demanded.

“What the fuck is going on? There’s no one here!” Marina demanded.

Nancy, just now realising *why* Howard always had the sunglasses to hand, asked, “You can see it!”

“Yeah,” he replied, now fully focussed and in *Hunting* mode. She should have guessed earlier that there was more to his glasses than just fashion errors.

“What? How can you see it? This isn’t holy ground!” Dink asked as she started trying to push Marina out of the bar and into the back room, where it was marginally safer.

“There’s nothing there!” Marina protested, just as a table was knocked over and the debris of cheese and onion crisps started vanishing. “Bloody hell!” she added.

Everyone ignored her.

“It likes crisps!” Sunglasses said, confused.

“Nancy, give the invisible monster his carbs please,” Dink requested quietly, as if there was any chance at all that the monster didn’t already know they were there.

Nancy started opening bags of crisps and throwing them across the room. The contents of the bags were spilling all over the floor. Clean patches began appearing as it crunched around the floor.

“Why the fuck haven’t you shot it?” Dink asked.

“Because this thing doesn’t pierce the skin, all it’ll do is piss it off... We need to wait for my people. They have things better equipped for this, like Mike’s bat!”

“Why doesn’t he have a magic bat too?” Holmes asked, annoyed.

“Well, call them then!” Nancy said, running out of crisp packets to throw.

“They would have been watching us this whole time. They’ll be here soon. It’s what we do.”

Dink finally managed to get Marina to start leaving when the main door opened again. Nigel walked in, swinging a cane and wearing a very nice, tailored coat.

“Good evening, no, sorry, good morning, everyone!” he announced with a cheerful swagger.

The crisps stopped crunching. “This place is a mess! What the hell did you guys do in here?” he asked, looking around at the floor with disdain.

“Sir, I know this sounds mad, but we are in a lot of danger right now,” Sunglasses said, with his gun firmly trained on the monster, or so everyone assumed.

“I don’t think getting crisps on my shoes constitutes *danger*, you dramatic weirdo!”

Nancy couldn’t help but snigger at his precisely delivered, well-mannered insult.

“*Something isn’t right here,*” Holmes said, frantically flicking through his notes and staring up at his window, and via it, out of Nancy’s eyes.

“Listen, Nigel, I need you to leave slowly. There’s more going on here than you realise,” Nancy said. “Trust me, I’ll explain later.”

Nigel started straightening his coat and looking around the messy old pub. “Well, if Howard would put the gun away, it would be a lot less dangerous!”

Nancy was hit like a brick wall with a sudden wave of realisation, just before Holmes noticed the same thing. “*Nancy, we never told him Sunglasses’ name.*”

Her face must have given away the realisation, because he sighed, and his kindly expression faded to a stone-cold glare of contempt.

Time seemed to slow as he lifted his cane and pointed the handle at them. With a flick of his wrist, it released a silent flash and a wisp of smoke. Sunglasses dropped to the floor instantly. Blood pooling in front of him.

Dink and Marina made noises of objection and horror. Nancy just crouched down and checked her friend’s wound. He had been shot by something in the centre of his forehead. Killed instantly.

“Nancy... Now is not the time for emotion. Now is the time for smart action,” Holmes said, obviously trying to push back his own wave of horror.

The chattering and screaming of Dink and Marina was nothing but a background track to her torrent of realisation. She picked up her glasses and forced herself to stay strong. She also slipped the gun out of his hands as she stood up.

Without hesitation, she pulled the trigger. The gun pushed back in her hands in an unfamiliar way. She almost dropped it with shock.

The bullet had, however, sailed through the air directly towards its target. Considering that Nancy had never even held a gun before, she had done a wonderful job.

The target was far less concerned than she had expected. He simply looked at her with an evil, loaded smirk and a cocked head.

“Sorry, Nancy. The Coat is charmed. The shield motif would have given it away, had Howard there been paying attention to me, rather than my friend,” Nigel said. His voice now tainted with a venom she had never heard from him before.

“Careful, Nancy. This man fooled even me. He’s good at this.”

“What the actual fuck is going on?” Marina demanded.

“He’s cold. He’ll kill any of you given a reason. Don’t give him one.”

Nigel rolled his eyes. “She really is thick, isn’t she?” he said, banging his cane on the floor. As he did, a light rippled across the carpet and the furniture. As it passed where they knew the monster to be, it was brought into view. The scrawny little froggish imp was blissfully unaware of the happenings around it. It was still Hoovering up crisps like they were the greatest thing in the world.

“What the fuck is that?” Marina now demanded, agog at the little monster. “There *is* a fucking sea monster!” she added, still agog.

“That, my dear, is not the sea monster. That is its little helper,” Nigel said. “The sea monster is an awe-inspiring god of death and hate, something that you will soon be privileged to be one of the very few humans to see.”

Nancy shot the gun again, this time aiming for his head. It did literally nothing to him. It was like the bullet had simply vanished before it hit anything.

Nancy knew what needed to be done and, again without hesitation, she put the gun under her own chin. She would not give Nigel the satisfaction of her hesitation. She intended to pull the trigger the moment she thought it was lined up.

Before she had a chance, he flicked his cane again. The gun was ripped from her grasp, almost taking her finger with it. She scrambled to pull the trigger as it left but couldn’t quite keep hold long enough.

She nursed her hand. The gun landed with a thump on the floor next to Nigel. “Don’t be a child, Nancy. I have had literally a decade to plan this. You’re not messing with an amateur.”

“Where’s Sunglasses’ backup?” Dink whispered, still staring at the terrifying little monster.

Nigel let out a laugh that sounded like an old movie villain. “Oh, sweet stupid Dink. I already killed them all.”

“*He killed an entire team of Hunters?*” Holmes asked, disbelievingly.

“See, the thing is, you, Mike, the dearly departed Howard there, you all made one fatal calculation error. All your information led you to believe that there was only one little helper.” As he finished his theatrical statement, he tapped his cane once more. Again, a light rippled across the room. This time, nothing was revealed.

“Yeah, that only impresses if it’s more than a light show, you prick,” Nancy said.

Nigel smiled, opening the door behind him. There were two more of the creatures roaming around outside. Eyes slightly red in the moonlight.

“There are two more guarding the back door, and I sent three to the church to rid us of Mike. The last two are likely eating the remains of Howard’s team for the next hour or so.” He looked incredibly smug with himself as the realisation of just how fucked they were, set in.

“The really sad thing is, I planned for a much harder fight. Turns out the Hunters are far less impressive than they used to be. No idea what happened to them, but I had planned for a force of nature and instead we got a prat in a suit and five of his underwhelming friends. They didn’t even have properly enchanted weapons. Just goes to show what a reputation can get you.”

“Holmes, what’s the plan?” Nancy asked internally.

“Still working on it. For now, just keep him talking. Maybe he’ll give something away.”

“You don’t have all the Paper’s, you haven’t got shit!” Nancy said, sternly.

Dink squeaked behind her in either fear or admiration. It was an unclear squeak.

“While I know, it’s a tired expectation for a villain to unpack his plan. The truth is, I’m actually rather proud of this one,” Nigel said. “You see, there have been a massive amount of moving parts to keep in line, but here’s the bit that may impress you. I was behind all this the last time too. I killed your dad. Your mom killed herself to protect you, from me! I ruined your entire life, Nancy. It was me, *all of it*. I even started adding a little magical something to your drinks to make you dependent on it faster. I am the monster that made you!”

Nancy felt a wave of anger and rage, the likes of which she never knew she had. She moved to run at Nigel. Bullets may have had no

effect, but she could use her fists on the old wanker; she would enjoy it too.

He grinned as she motioned to move and with a wave of his cane, she dropped to the floor, suddenly exhausted.

“What did you do to her?” Dink asked, crouching down to tend to her.

“I won, dear. I won,” he said, sitting down at a table. “You have a Paper, I have my own, and the one from Nancy’s home. There’s one in the dead man’s pocket and the last one is in a secret room in the church basement. I win. All that remains is the killing of her.”

“You don’t have mine! I’ll die before I hand it over!” Dink said with a heroic resolve.

“Oh, shut up,” he replied. He waved the bottom of his cane and Dink felt something in her pocket. A circle appeared in the air in front of Nigel. He reached in and Dink felt his hand in her jacket. She grabbed at it as he pulled an envelope through his little portal.

“You can see why I won, right? I’m good at this!” Nigel said. There was a subtle tiredness in his eyes, though, something that he was fighting hard to suppress.

“Nancy... Nancy, I know a lot is happening, but he had to sit down. He’s running out of juice. You need to make him use his power some more. Also, he doesn’t know where the last Paper is. We have a chance, now fight for it, Mooncake!”

Nancy felt like she had just run a double marathon and then climbed a mountain. But she didn’t need to be told twice. *There was a chance*; and if she had a chance, she could live long enough to murder this bastard in the coldest blood she could muster.

She pulled on her reserves and pushed herself up from the floor. She struggled against the artificial fatigue and with Dink’s help got to her knees. “Bullshit.”

“What?” he asked, confused.

“Bull... shit,” she reiterated.

“Sorry, are you not following? Howard is dead, Marina is *so* scared she literally can’t move. You’re on the floor and your girlfriend had to help you sit up. Mike is likely dead by now, and so are all the little Hunters. *You, are fucked, Nancy.*”

“Oh, all that is true, but what’s bullshit, is you not being an amateur. Because, I know for certain that you didn’t think of everything. You missed a honking great big thing.” She was lying, of course. Buying time and trying to think on her feet, well, knees. She had nothing.

“Nancy, what could I possibly have missed?” he asked.

Nancy stared at him while internally she screamed. “I got nothing, Holmes. Literally nothing.”

The silence had gone on slightly too long before Holmes gave her a lie to tell.

“I don’t have the passenger anymore,” she said, laughing. I sent him into Mike, and you just killed him!” she laughed, to add a level of mania to the desperate lie.

“That’s not possible,” he said.

At that moment, she projected Holmes out of herself and onto the wall behind him.

He stood up and waved his cane around in the air. He mumbled and banged it on the floor. A flash of light pulsed out from it. Nancy felt nothing, but she was aware that Holmes glowed a little on the wall behind him.

“Where is it?” he demanded.

“I sent it away!” she said again. Holmes nodded at her with satisfaction.

Nigel sent his pulse again, stepping cautiously closer to Nancy, yet, ironically, farther away from the very thing he was seeking to expose. Holmes glowed again.

“You can’t just transfer a passenger. That’s not how this works, Nancy!” he said angrily.

“Do you see my passenger, Nigel?” Nancy asked. As she was finally able to struggle all the way to her feet. Dink supporting her.

“No, No I don’t...” He banged his cane yet again and stepped even closer to Nancy. Nancy felt the fatigue leave her.

“She *does* see it though, doesn’t she?” Nigel said, as he saw Dink staring at the wall, which from her point of view was rippling with light, outlining Holmes’ window. Nigel turned just as Holmes glowed again. Nancy leaped at him, fists in a frenzy. He fell to the floor and the little monster that had been ignoring them snarled.

Dink pulled Nancy off of Nigel and into the room behind the bar. She slammed the door closed and started pulling random things in front of it.

“I saw, him! I saw Holmes!” Dink said, still frantic.

“Will someone explain what’s happening?” Marina asked, obviously having issues dealing with the revelations.

Nancy ignored her and, with a force of will, pulled Holmes back into her. This was the first time she had tried it without being able to see him, but it worked, just as it always did.

“*Good job, Nancy! Great job!*” he complimented.

“We’re not out of it yet. That prick has enough monsters to keep us in here until he recharges,” she said, only just regaining her usual energy.

“Nancy?”

“All we have to do, is stay alive until Mike comes for us, right?” Dink asked, as she made Maria sit down on the kitchen stool. “I can’t believe Howard is dead!”

“*Where’s Roy?*”

“He said he killed Mike!” Nancy replied.

“*Where is Roy?*” Holmes repeated, now raising his voice.

“Mike’s a badass, there is no way he got killed by some little frog men!” Dink said with confidence.

“Wait, that’s a good point. Where is he?” Nancy asked.

“Where’s who?” Dink replied.

There was a polite, *fake*, cough from the edge of the room that lead to the upstairs. “I assume she is talking about me,” Roy said, gun in hand.

“Roy! What the fuck are you doing with a gun?” Marina said, still not quite following what was happening.

Roy raised the weapon to point at her. Nancy stepped in front of her, grabbing a cutting knife from the counter. “Shoot her and I’ll slit my own throat before you finish pulling the trigger, you rat fuck!”

Dink ran to Marina and hugged her as she started sobbing with fear and confusion.

“Fine. But if you try anything, I will kill her, and your bitch,” Roy said. Like Nigel, he had dropped the charade that was his old personality. That mask was gone.

“What now?” Nancy asked, clutching her knife with a killer’s intent. She was trying to work out if Dink and Marina would make it out alive if she killed herself there and then.

“*Knock it down a notch Nancy, so long as you’re breathing, it’s not too late. There will be a chance, we just have to wait for it,*” Holmes said, with a fire of his own in his voice.

Nancy recognised the wisdom of his words and lowered her knife. Roy sat down on the stairs, gun firmly pointed at her.

“What now?” Nancy asked, again.

“Now we wait,” he said. With an infuriating smugness. “Then we all take a walk to the church, and I watch one of the monsters strangle you. We could do it ourselves, but we thought it would be a better story if we make a monster do it. May even take a photo,” he smiled widely. “Then Nigel and I get a couple of wishes fulfilled.”

“There are five wishes,” Nancy commented, taking a moment to glance back at Dink and Marina.

“We’re not idiots, Nancy. We’re not going to let the monster loose. We’re going to use the last wish to return it to the ocean. Then we get what we want. The monster goes away, and no one knows. It’s likely that it’s been done before, given how long all this has been going on for.”

“Okay, what happens to Dink and Marina once you’re done killing me and Holmes?”

Roy made a fake chuckle sound for effect. “You have no idea, do you? Yes, we’re killing you, but that passenger of yours is a Wraith. It can’t be killed. Its energy will add to the beast’s power. With every one it absorbs, it becomes more than it was before. As for your bitches? I was planning on shooting them both. Marina has been an annoying noise in my ear for years now. I’ll kill the other one because I quite like watching pretty girls bleed out.”

“Oh, we’re ending this fucker before we’re done.”

Nancy felt her anger boiling, along with Holmes. While he held the gun, neither of them had a way to vent it. She was, however, forming something close to a plan.

The door to the kitchen shook for a moment before pushing against the barricade with enough force that simply flung the obstacles out of the way.

Nigel stepped in. He was visibly annoyed. His expression was not of the calm and calculated master villain that had originally entered the pub. He had a little monster crouched at his feet, like a well-trained dog.

Nancy was aware of Holmes' suddenly piqued interest. *"It's brava-do. He's running a grift. This guy doesn't have a clue!"*

"He still has a gun, a magic stick and control of the monsters, so yeah, I think it's a bit more than a grift, you dopey twat!" Nancy replied, this time careful to make sure it was internal.

"How is he controlling them? Find out!"

Nancy, still clutching her kitchen knife, pointed it at the wizen predator. "What's up, Nige? You need to keep your guard dog close in-case another little girl wants to smack you up?"

"Nancy! This is serious!" Dink said through gritted teeth. Nancy glanced back and winked at her. Dink rolled her eyes, not much in the way of objection, but it was all the opposition she could muster.

"To think, I almost felt bad that I was going to have to strangle you!" he said, standing upright to project his most intimidating self.

"Roy here was about to shoot me, you know!" she lied.

He snapped a look at Roy, who responded with a glance; just as Nancy had hoped. She took her opportunity and with a little assistance from Holmes, she threw her kitchen knife right at him. Neither of them were particularly skilled in the art of knife throwing; the blade hit Roy in the shoulder and his gun went off. The sound was explosive in the quiet kitchen. The bullet hit the cupboard next to Nancy's head. She looked across to the hole in the door and back at Roy with a grin.

“Watch what you’re doing you idiot! If she dies so do we!” Nigel snapped with genuine rage. He waved his cane around like he was honestly considering ending Roy there and then.

For Nancy, getting killed was not an outright loss. The main thing was to stop these bastards getting their wishes. If they were going to kill her and her friends, at least she could rob them of their prize in the process.

Roy snarled at her and pulled the knife from his shoulder. The idiot instantly started pissing blood. Contrary to what action movies inform you, pulling a knife out is not smart.

Nancy laughed. “Score one for team-hottie.”

“Hey Roy. You want to throw that back? I think I could really nail it with another go.”

He pointed his gun at her with a shaky hand and the anger across his face showed no restraint.

“Calm down. She’s bating you!” Nigel snapped. He was right, of course. She was, but she also knew how to bait *him*.

“Wow, this is a bit like watching someone’s grandad play Gandalf in the local theatre production. You are doing a fucking terrible job too!”

He snarled again; he twitched the head of his cane towards himself. Nancy actually sparked with energy as she felt like she had been suddenly electrocuted. She fell rigid to the floor, screaming.

“Nancy! Nancy, hold on, listen to my voice, don’t focus on the pain! You need to stay conscious! You can’t fight if you pass out!” Holmes said, trying to use his influence over her to keep her awake.

She didn’t quite lose consciousness, but it was close. Her whole body was shanking in spasms as Dink rolled her over to check on her.

“Nancy! Nancy, are you alright?” Dink yelled through the mental fog that Nancy was fighting through.

“I think... I think I just pissed myself a little,” Nancy informed her as she slowly regained control of her twitching limbs.

As the world came back into focus for her, she realised that Marina was on the floor too. “What... is she okay?” Nancy asked as she tried to talk with her still twitching tongue.

Dink glanced back. “She passed out. She’s about as good at fighting geriatric wizards as she is at cooking,” Dink tried to joke as she pulled Nancy to her unsteady legs.

“Fuck you, Nigel!” Nancy barked as her body regained its composure.

“I can do that as many times as I want without it killing you. I can do it to her too,” he said, pointing his cane at Dink.

“Okay, what do you want?” she asked.

Roy threw a pan across the room in anger as he tied a cloth around his still bleeding arm. “I want to not be stabbed! You bitch!”

“Oh, stop being a baby! You almost shot me in the head!” Nancy barked, still trying to push his buttons.

The beast next to Nigel’s feet looked like it was getting twitchy too. Nancy wasn’t sure of the implication, just that there was one.

“One of your friends is already dead. How many more are you going to kill by acting like a child, Nancy?” Nigel said, in spiteful spitting words.

“He’s desperate. Go along with him. We can’t save Howard, or his team, or even Mike, but we may be able to save someone.”

Nancy had almost forgotten about Mike. *Mike...*

VICARAGE OF WATZ

Nancy, Dink, and Marina were told they were walking to the church. They stepped out of the pub, and into the street. The four little monsters out there all scurried around. Looking at them and twitching like they were holding back their natural instincts to attack. Nigel stood behind them.

“You know the way,” he demanded as they cleared the doorway. The night-time air outside was soupier and more foreboding than usual. Nancy had lived her entire life in this town, on this street. She knew something was different. The rain was just starting to spit, and the wind was making the ocean claw at the sky. It felt like the set of a horror movie and on some level, she was enjoying the theatre of it all.

The monsters backed away from her as she moved; they seemed to be absorbed by the night as they did. Whatever ability Nigel had used to make them visible faded.

“Where is everyone? How did no one see the evil frog monsters?” Dink asked, looking around and realising that every single light in the street was off. Even the streetlamps were off, the only light coming

from the milk-bright moon that beamed down on them, reflecting across the ocean outside the pub.

“I don’t know, but it can’t be good,” Nancy replied. She grabbed Dink and Marina by the hands and started walking. She knew Dink was okay, she was a fighter, and she had known this was all coming, in some way. Marina, on the other hand looked a mess. She was on the edge of breaking down into tears. It was only the promise that Nigel was waiting for an excuse to kill her that kept her quiet and moving.

“Don’t worry, Marina, I’ll get you out of this, I promise,” she said.

Marina pulled her hand free from her. “You’re the reason for all this. I don’t know what you fucked up this time, but we’re not getting out of this.”

Nancy felt herself begin to cry, hearing the words. Thankfully, the rain was coming down heavy enough that it was likely no one could tell; other than Holmes, of course.

“Don’t let her get to you. She’s scared and from her point of view, this has all come out of nowhere. Dink was expecting it. She chose this. Marina is a civilian and we need to make sure she gets out of this alive.”

Holmes’ words were caring and warm. Nancy knew he was right, and regardless of how Marina felt, she needed to, wanted to, keep her safe. This was her goal now; get Dink and Marina out of this. No matter the cost to her. She was resolved.

They arrived at the church. They hadn’t seen a soul on the walk down there. Nigel’s projection of domination was intensified due to the lack of witnesses.

The rain was getting heavier. The wind, on the other hand, was already a gale, it had been ever since they left the pub. A storm was in the air, and it was going to be a big one.

They stood at the wall, which marked the entrance to the churches properly. Nigel clinked his cane on the floor. "Go on. And don't get any ideas, girl."

Roy was nursing his shoulder, still glaring at Nancy. He was looking forward to the part where she was strangled to death; she could sense it. He would probably volunteer to do it himself, after the knife incident. Though, the cowardly little runt was likely too delicate to *actually* do it; he was more the sort to sit on the side-lines wanking himself off while someone else did the dirty work.

"Move!" Nigel ordered, in response to Nancy stopping at the threshold of the church land. He was brandishing his cane like it was a gun. Maybe it was. Its uses were numerous and strange enough that at this point, Nancy wouldn't discount it doing anything. She planned to take it from him and use it as a club to beat the prick to death. If she got so much as a sniff of a chance, she would. Unlike Roy, she was quite happy to do her own dirty work.

"No sense over thinking it, he's either dead or alive, knowing won't change it," Holmes said, speaking about her fears for Mike.

She took another begrudging step, the gravelly driveway sodden wet. It felt unnatural under foot. Dink and Maria followed Nancy with only a momentary pause.

An electric buzzing sound filled Nancy's ears; she almost jumped out of her skin as she saw the yellow lightning gathering around one of the formerly invisible monsters that had just stepped onto the gravel. The electric pulse made the creature writhe in pain. Another sound joined the first as another creature was lit up like a slowly roasting marshmallow.

“What’s happening?” Marina asked, with panic in her voice.

“*Bloody good job, Mike!*” Holmes yelled in victory, punching the air in Nancy’s mind.

“Did Mike do this? He’s alive!” Dink said, half excited, grinning and looking on as another little critter lit up.

Nigel and Roy stood feet just outside of the threshold. They hesitated, looking at each other nervously.

“I wouldn’t risk it if I were you gentlemen,” came a booming voice from the entrance to the church in front of them. Everyone’s attention snapped to see the source.

Mike stumbled to the door, holding his side, and sporting the sort of wounds that made it look like he had just walked away from a plane crash. The glorious bastard was even dragging his bat behind him.

“If you take one step onto this holy land, the lord himself will strike you down with furious and righteous vengeance. So, please do come call my bluff, you fucking wizard prick,” he said, the booming tone leaving him for a bloody cough about halfway through. “Do you feel lucky, punk?” he said, spitting a thick red bile onto the church steps. “Go ahead, make my day.”

“*Get inside now,*” Holmes instructed.

“Why? Didn’t we just win?” Nancy asked.

“*Nope, he’s bluffing.*”

Nancy caught the eyes of her companions and nudged them towards the church. She was careful to walk slowly enough that it looked arrogant and calm, but fast enough to get to the safety of the building. Her companions were already beginning to relax, thinking they were safe.

Nigel growled and flicked his cane. The magical projectile being caught in the same yellow electric fence as the monsters had been. It just added to the cacophony of subdued screams and static pops.

As they got to the door, Nancy made sure to be the last inside. She turned back to Nigel and Roy. "I always liked you, Nigel. But I *will* kill you before this is over!" She shut the door behind her just in time to see Mike collapse on the floor.

He coughed up some more blood and dropped his bat. Marina snapped out of whatever fear and trauma induced trance she was in and was at his side almost instantly.

"*Secure the building,*" Holmes ordered. "*Marina will see to him; you have to lock us down.*"

"Yeah, you're right," she replied.

"What did he say?" Dink asked.

"Told me to let Marina tend to Mike. We're going to secure our fortress," Nancy replied, almost cheerfully.

"You got it," Dink replied. She grabbed Nancy by the shoulders and kissed her passionately. Nancy responded in the usual way, *with hands*.

"What?" she asked as Dink released her.

"Well, if we end up dying, may as well get one last one in!"

Nancy sniggered at Dink's gallows humour. She really, *really*, hoped they could find a way to get out of this alive.

They were wise enough to stick together. Nancy was even wiser and picked up Mike's bat. They secured the front door with the familiar castle-key that was still in the back of the lock and then ran around to the back for the two smaller doors.

The church was old and had a very simple design. One large room at the front, a long corridor behind with a door at each end, adjoining to three small rooms and the basement steps on the east side. They split off the moment they were in the corridor, each securing a different door.

They both noticed the trail of almost dry black and yellow ooze that they knew to be the blood of the little monsters.

“Already locked!” Dink yelled,

“Same,” Nancy replied.

They worked backwards checking the rooms. The trail of blood led into the middle one. Nancy stood poised to use Mike’s bat.

“*Careful, blood doesn’t mean dead,*” Holmes advised.

“Open it,” she said with a nervous resolve. Dink pushed the door from the side and dashed clear of it. Nancy stepped in, grunting and ready to swing.

She lowered the bat. There was a pile of three dead monsters, all with exploded heads. The smell was oddly sweet though, like someone had stood on a yellow fruit of some kind.

“Well, that’s gross.”

“You’re telling me, I don’t think I’ll ever look at a pineapple the same way again!” Dink replied.

“Oh my gosh, yeah, a pineapple! That’s what it smells like!” Nancy agreed. “Hey, I bet you a bottle of vodka that you couldn’t eat a whole one!”

“*What is wrong with you?*” exclaimed both Dink and Holmes in unison.

Nancy smiled; she was pleased that she hadn’t lost her sense of humour in all of this. She closed the door and strolled back into the main room with Dink.

“How is he?” she asked, seeing Marina and Mike sitting on the floor, backs to the door.

“I’m fine. Didn’t expect two of them at once, wasn’t ready for them,” Mike replied. “That said, I don’t think I’ll be much use to you. I think I broke a couple of ribs and one of the little fuckers bit my leg. Other one clawed my side real good.”

“Yeah, but you killed them *really good!*” Dink replied with a respectful nod.

“Holmes wants to know if you could be somehow infected by the bite or scratch,” Nancy relayed.

“I know, I can hear him. Thanks for the concern, Holmes. I know monsters, these ones don’t turn people, they are just nasty little assassins. I’ll be fine.”

Nancy found it odd for someone to address Holmes directly. Made him feel somehow even more real than he already did. She wanted to ask how and why Mike could hear him, but felt like it was a topic that would matter more when she wasn’t in mortal danger; also, he didn’t look like he was in any condition to chat.

She turned her thoughts inwards. “*What?*” he asked.

“Nothing, just... What do we do, Steve?”

He put down his note paper and turned to his board, where he had sketched out the church and its land with a marker pen.

“*I wish I could be out there with you, Nancy. I really do,*” he said, with sincerity. Then, as if he had simply switched off his emotions, he laid out the situation in a cold, clinical way.

“I’m not sure how Mike is doing the magic fence thing. When we saw Nigel use magic, it tired him out. Mike looks okay, other than his beating. There’s a lot of juice leaving this place to power the fence. He’s got to be powering it somehow, but it won’t last very long, and I think if Nigel turns off his own magic crap for a second, he could just walk right in. I’m pretty sure Nigel knows that, or at least if he doesn’t, he’ll be close to working it out.”

Holmes paused, lit a cigarette, and continued.

“The doors are solid, strong wood, the walls are stone, but the windows are basically paper. As soon as the fence comes down, he’ll send his little pig wankers through the higher ones, and they’ll rain down on us like napalm. Safest place is the basement, but it’s also got no escape route. It’s now just a matter of time before we’re fucked.”

Nancy opened her eyes, Dink was looking at her, waiting for a revelation. Nancy didn't have the heart to tell her quite how screwed they were.

"Mike, how are you powering the magic fence?" she asked, ignoring Dink's wanting expression.

Marina was putting a cigarette in his mouth, and her own, while looking in his pockets for a lighter. "Nancy, can't you see he's been through hell? Leave him alone!" she demanded.

Mike glanced at her with a raised eyebrow, then back at Nancy. "Buildings like this one soak up worship over the years. They work as batteries. Your detective friend probably figured out that it won't last forever. To put it mildly, it's like an explosion, lots of energy released all at once, but it's over quickly."

"How long?" she asked.

"About another ten minutes, I would guess."

She consulted Holmes. The basement was still looking to be the best option, even if it was making them into fish in a barrel.

"You got any more tricks?" she asked.

Marina finally lit his cigarette. He took a satisfying drag from it. "Howard has some fancy weapons in his fake cop-shop. He knows the stakes. Should be long enough for him to get here, by my reckoning."

Nancy felt herself go white. "You don't know, do you? Howard he..." she said, taking his sunglasses from her pocket and showing him. "Sunglasses is dead. Nigel took out his entire team and used his cane thingy on him. Shot him in the head. He's dead. I'm, sorry."

Mike laughed with an ironic grimace. "Oh, and did Nigel take the time to check that Howard's team was dead or just send out his monsters and tell you he killed them?"

Nancy and Dink exchanged looks. "He sent his monsters, I think."

"And Howard? He was just lying there when you left him?"

“Yeah, that’s right. Why does it matter? He’s dead, Mike.”

Mike nodded to Marina and put his arm around her. He began to struggle to his feet, with her help. “It, ugh,” he said, holding his ribs as he stood. “It matters for two reasons. One, Nigel told you I was dead, and he was wrong as fuck about that. And two, until I see Howard’s body myself, I choose to ignore this information.”

Dink shook her head in annoyance or confusion. “We’re not lying to you! How stoned are you?” she asked.

“Holmes recommended the basement, I assume?” Mike asked, still using Marina as support.

“Yeah, he’s concerned about it being a kill box, though,” Nancy said.

Mike sucked on the cigarette hanging from his mouth and then spoke through pursed lips. “Yeah, he’s right. But we only have a few minutes, so we have options. Let’s get down there and barricade the door before this place runs out of juice.”

“Kill box?” Marina asked. Now not at all dazed and hiding her fear well. Partly because she had a purpose, she was looking after Mike; looking after someone was something she could understand.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you safe, I promise,” Mike said, with a cheeky wink that was far more confident than it had any right to be.

“What does he know?” Holmes mulled.

“He knows there’s no point being a twat about it, is what he knows. Now let’s get burrowed in. Nigel needs me alive, so he can kill me himself. So, if I sit next to the door, he can’t risk exploding it, right?”

Mike nodded gleefully.

They started towards the basement.

BASEMENT AND OBLIVION

The basement was still a well-lit grow-room with an ominous hole in the wall. But now it was somehow claustrophobic. Nancy knew that this was the beginning of the end for her. She wasn't sure how it would 'go down,' just that it was indeed, 'going down.'

They had dragged the heavy plants to the inner door at the bottom of the stairs, then piled up the tables behind them. Mike messed with the air conditioning, setting it to 'human' instead of 'weed,' in part to keep the room from getting stuffy, but, also to evacuate the smells of the many plants he had in there.

As they moved the plants, Nancy took one of the cross necklaces from the edge of one of the pots and put it around her neck. Dink raised an eyebrow at her.

"Covering all bases, is all," Nancy said.

There was a supernatural ripple through the air as the church's power reserves ran dry.

“Well, that’s it, I guess,” Dink said, looking around with an accepting tone.

Nancy pulled out her phone and started tapping out a message.

“I swear, if you’re playing candy crush, I’m going to slap the shit out of you,” Mike said sternly.

“I got a few things to sort out, and as you have the Wi-Fi all tripped out for gaming, it’s a good a time to do it as any. Not had a lot of downtime recently, between all the monsters, murders and mayhem.”

“*Nancy, I have an idea!*” Holmes said. Nancy moved her attention to the inside of her head. As excited as she was for someone else to be able to hear Holmes, she had come to value their privacy. She listened for a few seconds before eloquently responding with. “That’s fucking genius!”

She darted over to Mike. “The cameras in the church. Do they record? Are they on the internet?” she asked.

“Obviously!” he replied, as if it was a stupid question.

She handed him her phone. “Username, password, and website. Type it in here right now.”

Mike did as she asked. “Not sure you’re going to need a recording of this, to be honest, Nancy. And I certainly don’t want to replay your death over and over... Wait, maybe I will. Depends how impressive it ends up being!”

Marina responded by covering her mouth in horror. Dink, on the other hand, had to stifle a laugh. She was still terrified, but Mike and Nancy’s grim humour always got her.

“No, you tit. I’m sending the login details, along with a ‘help’ message to Luisiana. If I must die, at least I can do it on the news, and more importantly, no matter what happens, Nigel and Roy won’t get away with this!”

“Not sure you can call a vicar a tit, to be honest, Nancy.”

“Shut up, Holmes.”

“He’s right, you can’t call a vicar a tit,” Mike said as he enthusiastically typed the details that Nancy had demanded.

He passed the phone back. She looked at the screen, which read ‘W33d_1\$_Gud’

“Mike, your password is ‘weed is good?’ really?”

Mike shrugged while Nancy hit send. She then returned to typing out another message, this time to Mark, Phil, or whatever his name was. This one was a clear cry for help. Hopefully, after the last time she sent a request for backup, he would take it seriously.

There were sounds from the corridor.

Nancy typed a message to Nigel. This one, she kept a secret.

“Nancy, what was that?”

Nancy ignored him.

Even though Nancy watched Nigel and Roy on the camera feed, on her phone, the knock at the basement door made her jump. It somehow connected the ethereal images on the screen with the real, tangible terror in her gut.

Her phone blinked with a message from Nigel. It simply said ‘deal.’

“Okay!” she shouted as loud as she could. The furniture against the door began to shake.

“Nancy?” Dink asked. “What’s happening?”

“I bought you time. Wizard or no wizard, this fuck can’t get away from here before a news van and the police all turn up. All I need it a little bit more time. If they show up, he may not get chance to kill you all.”

"You're right," Holmes said, with resolve.

Mike grunted in disgruntled recognition of her fucked decision. Marina started sobbing again.

"I love you," Dink said, with a stoic expression that was fighting back her emotions.

Nancy smiled. "Stay alive, and look after these two for me," she said, as the furniture was pushed aside by a supernaturally opened door.

Nancy stood, bat in hand, and planted her feet in the best super-hero stance she knew how to muster. "Don't take another fucking step, Nigel."

"We'll wait by the main door. The one down there will seal when you leave, as agreed."

"I assume this means you used the last Paper to bargain?" Mike asked.

"Yeah. I'm not sure he'll honour his end but... time, you know?"

He grunted in approval.

Nancy passed the bat to Dink and backed out of the room, letting her gaze linger.

The moment she crossed the doorway, it swung shut. Without testing, she knew they wouldn't be able to open it, for now, at least.

True to his word, Nigel was waiting at the main entrance of the church. He stood in the doorway, coat billowing in the breeze, little monsters sitting in wait in each corner. Roy sat on a pew, looking exhausted.

“If the last Paper is down there, I’ll kill them getting to it. Stalling will just make their deaths more personal,” Nigel said, pointing the head of his cane at her. As he did, his coat rippled with a faint glow.

“*Look at Roy,*” Holmes noted. “*I think I may know where he’s getting the extra juice from.*”

“Leave them alone. That was the deal,” Nancy said as she touched her neck, wondering which one of them would strangle her to death.

“Where is the last Paper?”

“It’s in an old well, under the new office, out back,” she replied with honesty. She knew she was going to die, she knew that Nigel had won the battle. If he and Roy were true to their word and would use their last wish to send the monster back to the sea, then at least no one else would die, other than her. She also knew that despite her own death, Luisiana and Phil would arrive at some point and all the killing would be exposed.

Funny thing was, for the first time since she could remember, she hadn’t thought about getting hammered. If by some miracle she survived, she would, most certainly, need a drink.

Nigel strode past her, towards the back, where the new office was. She ignored him. He knew she wouldn’t run. He would kill her friends, kill Dink, if she tried to leave. He really had defeated her.

Roy looked at her from his seat. He looked like shit.

“He told me that I get to strangle you, remember that!” Roy said with exhaustion.

“Didn’t think you have the balls, to be honest,” Nancy replied.

“I always told him that I wanted to be the one to do it. I’ve been looking forward to it. Never expected you to give up like this, though,” he sighed. “Sort of a turn off.”

“Oh, fuck off, you messed up wanker.”

He smiled a creepy smile in reply. She knew he would do it. The smile told her. She really was sure he was too much of a coward until that moment.

She shrugged and walked back towards the new office.

"That was fucking creepy, but I think it tells us something," Holmes said.

"What?" she replied, internally.

"Nigel doesn't want to do it himself. I wonder why."

"Twat probably doesn't want to put his precious cane down."

"The twat doesn't want to put down his cane!"

There was a silence, as they both considered this.

It should have been shocking to see the office shaking, but the reality was, at this point, very little would have surprised Nancy.

The office shook violently. The windows shattered and the foundations it rested on cracked. And yet, it did not budge. After a few moments, it stopped.

"What's up Nigel? You too old to perform?" she snarked.

He looked at her with intent hatred. She glared back, with a similar expression. Their eyes locked for a moment before he snarled and flicked his cane towards the office. It responded like it had been hit by a truck; flipping over, spraying glass and wood everywhere.

"Shit!"

Nancy didn't so much as blink.

He turned away from her and marched towards the foundations where it had been. The floor was a patchwork of massive stone slabs.

In the middle, there was a smaller stone. It was dark and hard to see. As Nigel approached it, it was lit with a glow.

“Where the fuck did he get that juice from?” Holmes asked.

“You see any of those little monsters about still, Holmes?”

“No, why? Oh, I see.”

The assumption was that he had sacrificed some of his little army for the power he needed to assert himself. Nancy wondered why he didn't just use her. Perhaps, she mused, there was more preparation required than simply deciding to *use* someone as a battery. A small but comforting realisation.

Nigel waved his cane and the stone in the centre of the foundation slid up and then, with a wave, it slid to the side and fell to the floor with a thud.

“Do you know what I'm going to do with the power, Nancy?” he asked, as a small metal lock box floated up out of the hole.

“I don't give a shit!”

The lock box opened and then dropped back down the hole. Leaving a single rolled piece of paper in the air. It was tied with string and looked older than the others had.

“I'm going to become a God,” he said.

“What?” she asked.

He took the paper out of the air. The wind started to rise again, as if in response to his actions.

“Roy is going to ask for eternal life and all the money in the world. He thinks too small. I'm going to ask for the power of a God! Then, as a God, I'm going to rule this world now, and forever!”

The wind raised again. Perhaps it was a coincidence, or perhaps he was doing it himself, for dramatic effect, Nancy wondered.

They were both distracted as two lights came into view on the road by the side of the church. A road that was only visible because the office had been flipped out of the way.

“Luisiana, or Phil?” Holmes asked, excited that at least more people were finally coming.

The vehicle was large, was it a van. Nancy felt her heart sink. Unless she was smarter than she looked, Luisiana was likely going to get killed. They hadn’t exactly got along great, but Nancy liked her, most of the time.

“It’s not her,” Holmes said dryly. *“Engine sounds too tuned to be her old van.”*

The large vehicle stopped and Nigel, ignoring Nancy almost completely, strolled towards it.

Nancy followed.

The headlights went off and her eyes adjusted as she walked closer, it was a large black cruiser. The old white-haired git got out of the driver’s seat.

“You prick!” Nancy yelled with venom.

He looked back and waved with a snarl across his lips.

“Nigel knew the Paper wasn’t in the basement down there the whole time.”

“Fuck!” Nancy exclaimed in anger.

“You have the bodies, I assume?” Nigel asked.

Grandad-double-cross nodded. “Yeah, took me a bit longer than expected, but all four are there. Did you find the last Paper?” he asked.

Nigel nodded. “Good...” There was an eerie pause. “I need someone to kill the bitch, Roy is going to do that. And I have to read the Papers. But I don’t *actually* need you for anything, you know. Not now I have bodies.”

Nigel looked quite pleased with himself, and he flicked his cane, putting a bolt of energy in white-hair's head, the same as he did Sun-glasses earlier. The man dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Nancy wasn't proud of being pleased, but this was at least one less thing for her to worry about.

"Corpses in the back of the car, all the papers in my pocket and the chosen sacrifice standing in front of me. I think it's time for me to take what I have worked for!" Nigel said, with a performative booming voice, speaking up above the gathering storm.

VACATING DESPERATION

“**W**hat are you doing?” Marina asked, tears running down her face.

Mike ignored her, struggling to gather enough energy to fight through the pain. He stepped through the hole in the back of the room and fell to his knees.

“Mike, mate, I don’t think we can hide back there. It’s not like he’ll not see us and just assume we escaped. He’ll look in the fucking hole at the back of the room!” Dink said, half ignoring his desperate attempt to become invisible.

“Just come and help me!” he said, with a commanding tone.

Marina stepped through the hole, trying to distract herself from her imminent death.

She helped him to his feet, and he stumbled the few feet to the back of the little cavity. Dink followed, just to see what he was up to.

He reached up and screamed as his broken rib shocked him.

“Reach up to the top brick there, the little one. There’s a wooden rod hidden there. I need it,” he said, holding his side and speaking through bloody lips.

Marina supported him and shot a look at Dink, who rolled her eyes and did as he asked.

There was a gap next to the little brick he had gestured to. She pulled, and it slid out with ease. It wasn’t actually a brick, she realised as she pulled it out. It was a brick sized wooden box, with a brick-like front.

“Open it, take out the stick,” Mike ordered.

She did. Inside was a wooden stick that was about two inches long. It looked like it had been widdled and then painted. It had a green ribbon tied to one end and tiny engravings on the other.

“What is it?” she asked.

He ignored the question, instead looking to the other end of the wall. “Another one is over there, get it.”

Sure enough, at the other end of the wall was another box, and inside another stick. This one had a blue ribbon attached to it.

He coughed and fell, he was too heavy for Marina to hold up on her own and they both fell to the floor in a controlled collapse, against the wall.

Dink hadn’t seen many people as badly beaten as Mike had been. She knew that despite his very manly efforts to hide it, he wasn’t far away from passing out. She thought that if he didn’t get to a doctor soon, he may very well not wake up again.

“Take the green one in your left hand,” he said, forcing the words out with the last of his strength.

“Strike it from above with the blue one.”

Dink did it. Nothing happened.

Mike coughed. “No! Do it again, try and break them, keep the green one still. Smash them!” he said before closing his eyes, perhaps for the last time.

“What the fuck is this supposed to do?” she asked.

Mike didn’t answer.

She hadn’t got any better ideas, so she did as he asked, smacking the sticks together like she hated them. On some level she enjoyed working out some anger.

The sticks struck each-other with enough force to snap them.

Dink couldn’t process what had just happened. She was lying on the floor outside; she was surrounded by trees and bright sunshine was streaming in through the canopy of leaves above.

The air was crisp and clean; she felt suddenly, amazing.

She pushed herself to her feet and saw Marina being helped to hers by Mike. Mike who was looking suddenly far less injured.

“What the fucking fuck just happened?” she yelled, looking around, with literally no idea how she got there.

She looked down and realised she still had the sticks in her hand. “What are these?” she asked, throwing them on the floor.

Mike laughed, picking them up. “Void keys,” he said, as if that explained it.

Marina looked around with an almost angelic face, filled with joy. Like Dink, she had no idea what had happened, but she wasn’t in a basement anymore and no one was trying to kill her. She wasn’t one to question good fortune.

“Come on. I’ll explain it all over breakfast!” Mike said, walking away like he knew where he was going.

“Breakfast! Nancy needs us!” Dink yelled angrily.

Mike turned around, walking away still. “Dink, we have all the time in the world, trust me.”

Her and Marina exchanged glances.

“Well, I could eat!” Marina said with a shrug.

They followed for a few minutes before the trees ended and unveiled a massive white house that looked like it would fit well into any historical drama Dink had ever seen. Around it was a huge garden with a large gazebo in the middle. A man happily frying something in what looked like an open-air restaurant.

The garden had a waist-high wall that stretched all the way around the perimeter. There were white metal tables and chairs set up in little groups and even some people playing cricket off to the side.

Dink realised they were standing at a gap in the wall, indicating that Mike had known where they were going.

“Have we time travelled?” she asked, agog.

Mike glanced back at her with a raised eyebrow. “What? No! Time travel isn’t possible! Welcome to the garden. We’re in a pocket dimension.”

“Oh,” Marina said with a shrug. “Can I smell bacon?”

Mike chuckled again and started striding towards the kitchen tent.

The man with the frying pan greeted him excitedly. He was a muscular Asian man wearing a tabard and no shirt. His long black hair was tied into a ponytail. As they got closer, Dink saw that he had a large knife tied to his arm and there was a gun on the counter next to him.

“Seriously, Mike, where the fuck are we?” Dink demanded.

A small woman with a cropped white t-shirt and jean-shorts ran over to them. Dink couldn't help noticing that she had a rope-like sash that looked out of place.

"Lilly!" Mike said cheerfully, while taking a massive bacon sandwich from the man.

"Where the fuck are we? And who the fuck *are* you?" Dink now screamed. Marina, on the other hand took a sandwich.

The woman, Lilly, smiled warmly at them. "This place is called the garden. It's the place our group uses as home. It heals us and gives us all the things we need. Don't worry about Nancy, time outside the garden doesn't pass at the same rate as it does inside."

Mike guided them to a table where they all sat, Dink was pretty sure that there weren't enough chairs there the last time she had glanced over. Just as they sat down, a man brought a tray containing a teapot and cups and another brought a large tray containing *more* sandwiches.

"Eat, and drink, please. Before you start getting tired," Mike said with a caring voice.

"Why would I get tired, I'm not a child!" Dink replied, with muted rage that was still behind her layer of bafflement.

"Seriously, Dink, try the sandwiches!" Marina said, looking oddly content.

"What have you done to her? Is she stoned?"

Lilly laughed. "Not everyone is cut out for this place, if you're not meant to be here, it puts you in a dreamlike state until you leave. Just ignore her. She's very happy, I promise!"

"Start talking!" Dink said, furious but honestly quite hungry. She took a sandwich and waited for an explanation.

Mike took a sip of tea. He looked a little strange, this gruff man with a tiny fine china teacup.

“I’m sure Lilly will explain more, but the basics are this. We hunt vampires, daemons, and whatever else comes up. It’s what we do. This place is our home. While you’re here, no time will pass outside, well... mostly no time, the garden has a way of making things happen at just the right moment.”

Dink realised that she was distracted by the sandwich, this really was the best thing she had ever put in her mouth. “How is this so good? Also, are you literally telling me you had a magic house in a magic forest and you never thought it maybe a good place to bring Nancy, away from the lunatic trying to kill her?”

This time it was Lilly who replied. “Time doesn’t work properly in the garden. If we bring the person at the centre of the mess here, we can’t leave again until she does. It locks the garden. It’s really complicated, but if she comes here while this is all unresolved, it never gets resolved. But, as soon as the sea god problem is solved, she’s welcome to come here.”

Dink took a sip of her tea, also amazing. She didn’t usually like tea. “So, what, Marina and I just hang out here until it’s all over?”

“Yes,” Mike replied. “Not that it’s going to seem like that to you. Things in the garden happen with perfect timing. Once you wake up, I would think it will all be taken care of.”

“Why do you keep saying that? I’m not tired!” she said, yawning. And then, realising she was yawning. “Shit!”

CRYING FOR THEM ALL

This was it.

Her plan had failed. She had assumed her sacrifice meant that Luisiana would see it all on camera and expose him later. She had also hoped that Phil would arrive with sirens blaring and save her friends just in time.

She would have been dead, but Nigel wasn't going to get away with anything. In hindsight, it was a stupid plan. She considered that she had always been a bit stupid. Of course, he would wish to be a god. Who wouldn't wish for that? And once he was a god, he wouldn't be stoppable at all. Not ever.

"Why did you let me do this, Holmes?" she asked.

"Because you had hope, which is more than I had for you," he replied. *"I think I can kill you before he does the ritual. I mean, I don't want to, but... We don't quite know what will happen if you die; at least he won't win."*

"Do it," she said without hesitation.

She felt something in her seize up as Holmes stopped her heart from beating. Her entire body went rigid, her last act was to be a gleeful smile.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! You really think I didn’t think of that?” Nigel said, irritated. He pulled a small black stone from his pocket and threw it at her. As it sailed through the air, it exploded into a black cloud and enveloped her. For Nancy, time slowed down as she heard Holmes cough.

She was then, suddenly aware that it wasn’t him that was coughing; it was her, her inner vision blinded by her outer discomfort. She dropped to her knees and started panting violently and against her will. With each breath of the cloud she felt Holmes scream, as the very air she was breathing was burning his skin. And then she knew, it wasn’t her who was dying.

After a few seconds Holmes fell, passed out, bleeding from his pours.

“Holmes!” she yelled, trying to reach inwards. The smoke cloud forming pushed her out of the room and back into her own perception again.

“What did you do to him, you fuck?” she screamed, still out of breath and shook by what had happened.

Nigel stepped forward and tutted at her. “You stupid girl. You should have tried suicide much earlier. Wanting to stay alive was your biggest weakness, you know. You should have asked him to kill you the moment you learned about all this!”

Nancy dropped to her knees, defeated, and broken. She was cut off from Holmes. She had been the one to hand Nigel the last of the Papers and now she was going to die. She could hear Roy stumbling her way. Exhausted but eager.

The rain started to fall. “Fucking great,” she thought, though on some level she knew it was a sign that the beast was coming. The march was beginning.

“Prepare her!” Nigel demanded.

Roy, with a sudden surge of motion, grabbed her by the scruff of her jacket collar and pulled her to her feet. Nancy was vaguely aware of a scream from somewhere in the darkness as one of the little monsters died to give Roy his newfound energy.

He pulled her towards the graveyard that they were already at the edge of. She stumbled, though she didn’t fall as Roy still held her collar tightly.

“Where are you taking me, you prick?” she yelled.

“You know, it’s that mouth of yours I hate the most. What happened to the days when women were respectful?” he said, with a growl in his voice.

“Respectful? You’re planning on strangling me, you fucking cum!”

Out of the darkness and the rain, a figure moved. Was it a little monster, or was it help? Nancy wasn’t sure, but she knew that anything that slowed down her death was good for her. Protecting her friends wasn’t worth the price of Nigel becoming whatever it was he would become, once he wished for godhood.

She decided to fight. She slammed the heel of her boot down on Roy’s foot and then with all her might she pulled him forward, rolling him over her shoulder like some kind of movie ninja.

She realised Holmes was still in there, guiding her actions. She may have been cut off from him, but he was still there for her. Whatever had happened to him, he was still there, right with her.

Roy grunted with shock and pain as he struggled, trying to fathom where it all went wrong.

“Holmes?” she asked, sprinting away into the darkness. Knowing he was there, was enough to push her, to give her a glimmer of courage.

“You ready to fight a monster? I wish I had that bat,” she said to him, wishing he could respond.

A shadow within the darkness caught her attention. “I’ll assume you said yes to the monster fighting!” she said, as she felt a push within her, forcing her into a fighting stance and twisting her body to the side, ready to throw a punch.

She was terrified, but also had faith that Holmes wouldn’t let her die.

“Stop being so dramatic, Nancy!” came a voice from the shadow.

“What?” she asked, feeling the fighting stance drop. “Who’s there?”

A figure formed in front of her. Or was it just stepping out of the shadows? She wasn’t sure. She was jumpy and her adrenaline was high, so she stepped back, almost not realising what she was looking at.

“Sunglasses!” she yelled, instantly regretting it, realising she was giving away her position. “You’re dead! I saw you die!”

“I don’t die easy, Nancy,” he said, stepping fully into her view. He was dressed differently than he had been before. The suit was gone. He wore a loose-fitting rugged jacket and boot cut jeans, with footwear to match. His six shooter was hanging from his belt. He wore an old brown satchel and an expression of someone you didn’t want to fuck with.

“What happened? How are you still alive?” she asked in hushed tones.

“Where’s Mike and the others?” he asked in reply, ignoring her question. He looked around in the darkness as if he could see clearly.

“The basement of the church. Nigel sealed them in there. Mike’s been badly beaten, and, Sunglasses; he did something to Holmes,” she explained, a little too fast.

“Okay, that’s good. The basement is exactly where Mike would want to be,” he replied. “And don’t worry about Holmes, he can’t hurt him.”

A sound from the darkness startled Nancy. She scurried behind Howard. Knowing that the safest place to be, was behind the man with the gun and the killer attitude. “How do you know Holmes is okay?” she asked.

Howard pulled a sword from his satchel, a sword that was far too large to have actually fitted in there. He spun it around with a skilful flurry. He glanced back at her as if telling her it was time for him to stop holding back. “Nancy, Holmes is a wraith. You can’t kill a wraith. Believe me, we once destroyed an entire dimension to test that theory.”

Nancy was about to ask what that meant and in a flicker, Howard vanished into the shadows.

“What’s happening?” she asked herself, or possibly Holmes.

There were sounds of growling and screaming in the darkness for a few moments before Howard emerged from the shadows again. He was wiping his blade with a rag and looking pleased with himself.

“It’s safe. We need to go and distract Nigel for a bit. You ever wanted to be bait?” he asked.

“What, *are* you?” she asked.

“Nancy, I’m a vampire. Mike is an ascended hunter, and this is what we do.” His words were confident and regal in delivery. He was different than he had been before. Like his old personality was a mask that hadn’t fit him quite right.

“How do I know I can trust you?” she asked.

Howard raised an eyebrow. “You shouldn’t. I just told you that I’m a vampire. Trusting me is stupid. But what you should do is trust Mike, and *he* trusts me.”

That was good enough for her. “You said something about bait?” she asked.

“Come and get me then, you dick end!” Nancy yelled as she confidently walked up the main path to the church.

Nigel appeared at the entrance, looking actually, a little nervous. “And here I was,” he shouted, “trying to decide which of your friends to kill first.”

“Yeah,” she called back. “I almost run off, better for them to die, than you become a god, but then I thought, hey, I don’t have a lot to live for anyway, why not see what it’s like to be dead instead?”

He looked confused. She was imagining Holmes, telling her to tone it down and not oversell it.

“I really hope Sunglasses knows what he’s doing,” she muttered to herself, hoping Holmes was waiting for the perfect moment to emerge again.

“Get in here, Nancy, before I decide to burn down this building, basement and all,” Nigel said in almost a scream.

She strolled in, desperately trying to look relaxed and nihilistic, but inside her there was a fear that went as deep as her soul. Just a few days ago she wouldn’t have cared about death; she was on the way to drinking herself there anyway, then Holmes and Dink showed her that there was still love and joy in the world. All she had to do was get through this evening.

“Kneel down,” Nigel ordered, pointing at the stage area.

She did as she was told. He pulled something from his pocket and flicked it at her. Her hands were pulled behind her back and bound by

some magical force. She wasn't surprised. He would need to keep her from running. He wasn't stupid. He knew she had some final rebellion planned, he just wasn't sure what it was; neither was she, to be honest.

"Roy just went to the basement with the last three of my little friends, and he's going to kill them," Nigel said, grinning and leaning against a pew.

"You were always going to kill them, weren't you?" she asked, without looking up.

"Yes. I was actually quite pleased they were all locked away. When they die, it will make the monsters stronger and then I'll take their life force. It's all worked out nicely."

There was a silence shared between them for a moment. Nancy had to have faith that Sunglasses knew what he was doing. She didn't have any choice.

"Can I have Holmes back now?" she asked, without looking up. "I want to say goodbye."

She heard him groan with annoyance. "Fine," he exclaimed, before banging his cane on the floor.

She felt her inner sense of place return like a foggy window had been wiped clean. Her head stung with pain as it all flooded in.

"*Nancy? Nancy, are you there?*" Holmes yelled as his window to her returned to its normal focus for him.

"Holmes!" she said internally. "I was so scared. I thought he had hurt you."

As she focused on him, she could see that he looked sickly and weak, but he was there, and she could talk to him. "Are you okay? Did you see, Sunglasses is alive!"

Holmes sat in his chair and lit a cigarette. "*Yes. It was a struggle, but I never left you.*"

Nancy was suddenly pulled out of the conversation by yelling. "They're gone!" Roy called, flanked by his three little monsters.

"What? I sealed the basement. How are they gone?" Nigel asked, almost spitting with rage.

"I don't know, but the basement is empty," Roy replied, cowering.

Nancy looked up, half grinning. "Oh, no! Who could have seen that coming?" she asked, pretending to know more than she did, in hopes of rattling him.

Nigel sneered at her. "Roy. Kill this bitch, now, please."

Roy marched towards her, without hesitation. His monsters surrounded her. He stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. He leaned down and with a sincere pleasure in his voice, he whispered in her ear.

"Cry for me."

He closed his grip around her neck.

A few thoughts filled her mind as this happened. Firstly, where exactly was Sunglasses? He had promised to be ready to strike. Second, where had her basement dwelling friends absconded to? And finally, why was she, on some level, pleased it was about to be over?

The pain of being strangled was quite unpleasant for a few moments before it was released suddenly. A wet thump sounded next to her. She took a gasp of air and fell to the floor, hands still bound. She found herself looking squarely at Roy's unconscious face. "Sunglasses?" she asked as she felt a strong arm pick her up from the floor.

There were three very dead little monsters lying around her. "You work fast?" she said, as she felt him snap whatever magic bond held her hands behind her.

"Had to wait for the monsters to be looking at you. Sorry for the wait," he said calmly.

“You’re dead! I killed you!” Nigel screamed from the edge of the old church. His coat was glowing orange with power and his eyes an electric blue. He finally looked like the mad wizard he was. His feet left the ground, and his cane began to move like a snake in his hands.

“That’s not good,” Sunglasses said from behind her.

“Well, kill him or something, will you?” she said with a visceral fear.

“I’d love to, but I can’t!” he said, standing in front of her to block whatever it was that Nigel was about to throw at them.

“What? Why? Just go and stab him or something!”

“I can’t kill a human. Despite appearances, he *is* human.”

“*In what world is that wizardy wanker a human?*” Holmes chastised.

Nancy internally agreed with him and glared at Sunglasses from behind as a flash of light left Nigel and hit them head on. Sunglasses tilted his sword as if to block, but the force knocked them both on their backs.

They struggled to their feet to witness the now very wizardly, floating, glowing, Nigel, wave his hand and blow the front of the church into rubble. The dust was countered by the storm almost before it got chance to plume. The sound of the falling rocks and roof tiles quickly paled in comparison to the might of the weather.

He pulled something from his pocket and release it into the air around him. Five glowing blue pieces of paper began to drift in circles. He began to read something from their glowing text in a language that she didn’t understand.

“Well shit!” Sunglasses said.

"Yeah, that about sums it up."

Nancy almost jumped out of her skin as another figure spoke.

"Yeah, that does about sum it up," said the voice.

Nancy screamed in response to seeing Mike appear next to her. She threw her arms around him in joy, before realising that something had changed. He wasn't dressed in his usual hoody and slacks. He was wearing a red shirt with a lace up collar and rugged worn jeans. He wore two red blades on hooks at his waist and an armband with knives on it on the left side.

With this new look and new confidence, he looked like a different person; all his wounds were gone too.

"How did you get here? What happened to you?" she didn't know where to begin with her ever-filling bucket of questions.

"Nancy, just be grateful he's here. I think we're about to have bigger problems," Holmes informed her, calling attention to the suddenly concerning state of the weather outside.

The rain had gone from heavy to biblical in a matter of seconds. With the front of the church missing, they were standing on the edge of it, and it was getting worse.

It was the kind of rain that came with a wave of fear, making anyone who saw it realise just how small and insignificant they were, in comparison to the might of nature, and possibly an even greater force.

"The mad bastard is summoning the Candiru, without a sacrifice," Mike said on one side of her.

"What will it do when it arrives, and she isn't dead?" Sunglasses asked from the other side.

They both looked at her with panic while mulling over the question.

"I don't think they know," Holmes said, speaking to Mike.

Nancy looked to him, knowing he could hear Holmes.

“Well, an ancient sea god has been awakened and it’s heading this way with no sacrifice. It’s not going to be happy,” he replied, raising his voice against the gathering sounds of the storm.

“Mike, where’s Dink and Marina? Are they safe?” she asked.

“Nancy, I can’t go into detail, but I promise they are in literally the safest place that exists. No matter what happens, they’ll be okay.”

She didn’t know what that meant, but she believed him.

“Hey, Mike,” Sunglasses called. “Is there even a chance your fiancé is going to turn up? We could really use someone who knows how to kill a god.”

Mike pulled his daggers from his belt and spun them into his palms with practiced skill. “Howard, old friend, I think you know the answer to that question.”

Nancy had no idea who they were talking about, but understood enough to know that help was not coming.

EYES, IN THE OCEAN'S DARK

At first Nancy thought the glow was the light of a passing plane, which would have been odd in and of itself. When she saw the other red light in the sky, a chilling, terrifying realisation set in for her. She was looking at eyes. Eyes in the night. Massive, scary, unholy, impossible eyes, looking down at them. They were attached to shadow and wind, the shape unclear in the grey on black darkness.

A shiver ran down her spine. Two eyes in the distance, attached to some massive unseen creature, and closer, in the middle of them, in the air, the mad wizard hung, glaring at her as he cast his lot.

“This doesn’t look good, guys,” Nancy breathed with a reverent wave of fear.

“Yeah, let’s be real Mike; that’s a big problem. I’m going to be needing a bigger sword,” Sunglasses said.

“Howard, I think we may have a problem,” Mike replied. For the first time since all this had unravelled, he sounded distinctly nervous.

"Nancy, I don't know what to do about this," Holmes chimed, agreeing with everyone else.

"Mike," Nancy began, "Dink *is* safe, right? I mean, no matter what happens?"

Without taking his eyes off the sky, Mike replied. "Where she is, the world could end, and she wouldn't even notice. I promise."

Nancy felt a comfort in that, even though she had no idea what it meant.

Sunglasses, or Howard as she was now starting to identify him, pulled his old six shooter from his belt and aimed it high.

"That gun's too small, too," Nancy said with a dubious eyebrow raised.

Howard grunted and fired anyway, which made the area around Nigel's groin sparkle briefly. Howard muttered something about it being worth a try and holstered his gun.

"Plan?" he barked, presumably at Mike.

"I have an idea," Holmes said.

"Really?" both Nancy and Mike replied. Howard sideways glanced at them, annoyed at his lack of involvement, no doubt.

"Yeah, he seems to be powered by souls or life force or something, right? We need to kill his power sources, literally. And he should stop being bullet proof!"

Nancy considered this for a moment. "You sure he's not being powered by the fucking sea god that's materialising in the sky?" she asked.

"No, he's right!" Mike confirmed. "The whole point of all of this was that he wanted to gain access to the beast's power, so he doesn't have it already. And, right now he's summoning it without a sacrifice, which means he must think he can still kill you, so there must be more little ones around!" Mike said.

Nigel was beginning to glow all over now and the forming shape of the beast was starting to look less ethereal by the moment.

The three of them ran from the safety of the half-collapsed church and into the torrential rain, looking for monsters to kill.

“What about Roy?” Nancy asked, glancing down at the unconscious knob.

“I’ll kill him, last, if we need to. I don’t take a human life, unless I have to,” Mike said, shouting over the sounds of the rain and the storm.

“High morals, that’s good,” Holmes observed.

“Okay, what do I do?” Nancy asked, eager to help.

“Nancy, you can’t die! Go and hide! That’s how you help,” Howard said, pointing towards the back of the broken building. “Get out of here, if you can find a way.”

A horn sounded. It was accompanied by two beams of light in the dark. They were white beams on the road.

“It’s Louisiana!” Nancy said as the van came into full view. It skidded to a stop some way across the car park and a figure holding a camera jumped out and began filming.

“Get them out of here Nancy, go with them. We’ll keep Nigel distracted,” Mike ordered, pointing for Howard to shoot at the mad wizard some more, to distract the floating nut-job from noticing the van.

Nancy did as instructed, running to them.

“Louisiana! It’s not safe!” she yelled as she got close enough, almost slipping on mud as she did.

Luisiana was climbing out of the driver’s seat, wearing a plastic yellow hooded coat. It was far too large for her. “Nancy!” she yelled over the storm.

“We need to get out of here, Lou! There’s a sea god coming!” Nancy yelled.

“I know! It’s awesome isn’t it!” she called back, as the rain seemed to get turned up another notch.

“You got my message?”

“Yeah, I saw the video. I had no idea what was happening until I saw the magic portal and then the wizard! We’re saving all the footage, but I needed some on the scene stuff!” Luisiana said with excitement in her voice. “This is career making stuff, Nance!”

“*Did she say portal?*” Holmes asked.

“Don’t call me Nance! And we have to go! This is for real; it’s going to try to kill me!” Nancy said, climbing into the back of the truck, ignoring the camera-Dave who was filming the action in the sky with glee.

Louisiana stepped into the van, closing the door and pulling down her hood. “I thought you had to be dead before the sea monster came?”

“Yeah, we all did. Turns out that I can get strangled to death any time before it gets here, apparently.”

“And it’s bad if you do? I mean, other than for you?” Luisiana asked.

“World ending, as long as Nigel has the Papers,” Nancy replied, talking a bit too fast.

“And if it gets here and you’re still alive?”

“No idea, but whatever happens, it’ll be better than Nigel getting god-powers. It’ll probably kill him and fuck off.”

“Fine, but after this is over, I get the exclusive?” Luisiana asked, pointing at Nancy and waiting for a firm answer.

“What? Yes, I mean obviously!”

Luisiana slid open the side door of the van and they were pelted with wind, instantly soaking all the expensive-looking equipment. “Dave, we’re leaving,” she said and left, moments later entering the driver’s seat.

Dave climbed in next to her. Nancy perched on the swivel seat and gripped the back of the front bench seat.

“Hi,” Dave said, passing her his soaking camera.

The van started moving with enough force that Nancy, the camera and half the equipment in the back slid around. Nancy could feel them slipping on the river of water that was coming down onto the road.

“At least we’re moving away from the sea monster, that’s something I guess,” Holmes said glibly.

“Okay Nancy, where we going?” Louisiana shouted, spinning the steering wheel as the van rocked.

“That’s a good question,” she said aloud, adding “Any idea Holmes,” in her inner voice.

“You know where Nigel lives?”

“Sun bringer avenue!” she shouted as she righted herself finally. Just in time to see a flash of lightning outline the silhouette of a massive, winged horror across the skyline.

“Oh, yeah, this is going to be fine,” she mumbled to herself.

Nancy was almost catapulted through the windscreen of the van as it came to a halt outside the small, rundown bungalow. The storm and the gloom only served to add to the ominous vibe that it was projecting.

Luisiana cut the engine and lights of the van, just as a crack of supernaturally fuelled sheet lightning lit the sky, framing Nigel's creepy little home like the poster art of a horror movie.

"Well, that's creepy," Louisiana said with a dubious eyebrow.

"This is where the wizard lives?" Dave asked, nervously.

"Yes, and his little friend. They moved in here together after Nigel's wife died," Nancy said calmly, looking for the handle to open the van door.

"Come on Dave, I need footage of this place," Luisiana said, looking around her glove box and retrieving a large knife.

"No fucking way. I am not breaking into a wizard's house. I'm staying right here."

Louisiana looked annoyed.

"*Wise man, if you ask me. I would stay here too if I could!*" Holmes said supportively.

"Grab a camera, Nancy. You got hired."

"Don't be a twat, Lou," Nancy said, getting out of the van and closing the sliding door behind her.

"Don't call me... never mind. You're fired Dave!" Luisiana said, getting out of the van.

Dave huffed in ambivalence at the firing.

Luisiana shielded her face against the storm, pulling up her yellow hood and holding it in place. Nancy, on the other hand stood strong in the wind and rain, giving no shit about her appearance, her wetness, or the wind. She looked right at the house, knowing that this was where Nigel had plotted her downfall.

"It's locked!" Luisiana called, trying the door.

"*Nancy, I get the feeling you're in a bad mood. Don't do anything nutty,*" Holmes said.

Nancy picked up a rock from the crappy little garden out front and launched it through the decorative window on the obsidian black door. Without acknowledging Louisiana's shock, she reached in and unclasped the door, pushing it open.

"Be careful Nancy, this is a wizard's home," Holmes cautioned.

Nancy ignored him and strolled in, flipping the switch.

"You were here before?" Louisiana asked, pulling out her phone and snapping as many pictures as possible.

"Never actually made it inside. I only knew the address because I had flowers sent here when his wife died," Nancy replied, looking around at the 'old person' living room. Complete with floral sofa and antique coffee table, sporting a little decorative circle of cloth.

"Doesn't seem very wizardly, to be honest,"

Nancy grunted in agreement.

The lights flickered as the storm's power increased outside. "Bet Dave is sorry he stayed in the van, now," Louisiana noted, peeking out the curtain to the outside world, where it was rocking in the wind.

Nancy ignored her and ventured to the kitchen, where there was a vague smell of too many Sunday dinners still stale in the air. It was a slightly off-white kitchen with very ugly, plain red doors and metal handles. The sink was an old, round, tin thing that screamed of the early seventies aesthetic.

Nancy opened the large refrigerator. It was packed with wine bottles.

"Nancy, those bottles. They don't have labels on them."

Nancy raised an eyebrow at Holmes' commentary. "Super important right now, thanks for the intel, detective," she snarked.

"No, you dipshit. This is a wizard's house. That could be something useful."

“Oh, shit, yeah,” she replied, pulling one of the red glass bottles from the door. She pulled a cork from it and gave it a sniff. She put a finger in to test the substance.

“For fuck’s sake, Nancy, hardly time for you to get topped off, is it?” Louisiana chastised.

Nancy took a moment to consider that drinking it hadn’t occurred to her, which pleased her, in a way she didn’t expect. “Unless I’m related to Bela Lugosi, I doubt it would do the job, Lou,” she said, passing the bottle to her. “It’s blood.”

“What the fuck does he have a fridge full of blood for?” she asked, stunned. “Wait, do you think it’s human?”

Nancy ignored her and checked the rooms. Bedroom, florally decorated, old person smell. Bathroom, Yellow plastic, original tiles and oddly, a carpeted floor. The last door led was a little office. The room was quite small, and had an old Victorian bureau desk, complete with a rolling cover and ornate little drawers.

The walls were covered in large, heavy looking old shelves, crammed with romance novels and history books. Luisiana began inspecting the books. Nancy was more interested in the desk. Especially when she sat in the chair and realised the rolling cover was locked. She pulled open the drawers, all empty.

“You think we’re going to find anything? It doesn’t seem very much like an evil lair to me!” Luisiana said, carefully checking books and returning them to the shelf.

“He wouldn’t have locked this if he had nothing to hide in here.”

Nancy grunted in agreement again and looked around for a ‘tool’ to open the desk. She saw a large brass lamp with a floral glass shade near the back window. She pulled off the shade, tossing it on the floor and then pulled at the cable so hard it toppled the shelving unit it was atop of.

“Nancy!” Louisiana scolded at the mess she had made.

“Lou, this is the house of the wizard that’s trying to kill me and become a god, I’m not too worried about fucking up his stuff!” Nancy said, flipping over the lamp in her hand and using it as a baton, beating the lock on the front of the rolltop desk.

“Good point,” she muttered and started tossing books on the floor.

Nancy hit the desk again with the lamp. The base came off as she did, but the wood around the metal lock gave out. She tossed the lamp shaft on the floor and pulled at the rolling cover. It opened.

“Any chance there’s a magical off-switch hidden here?”

The desk contained an aging laptop and a pile of papers. Nancy powered on the laptop, which came on faster than expected, requiring no password. It was open to a half-written letter, which Nancy instantly recognised.

“Wrong secrets!” she said, annoyed.

“What the fuck does that even mean?” Louisiana asked, ceasing her bookshelf search.

Nancy checked the letters, to be sure, but as expected they were all printed emails of people’s problems. “Nigel is Betty, of ‘Betty Makes It Better’ fame.”

“Well, that’s not good!” Louisiana said, stunned.

“Hardly a loss to the world, given that he may be destroying some of it later today! Priorities Lou!”

“No, you don’t understand, the ‘Betty Makes It Better’ website was one of the people supplying information about this town, and the Papers to Pilgrim and his stupid website! ‘Betty Makes It Better’ was his main informant!” Louisiana said.

“I didn’t see that coming.”

“Why was Nigel’s agony aunt website giving Pilgrim information about the Papers? That seems a little counterintuitive, Lou,”

Holmes made Nancy aware of a sound in the hall outside. She never would have noticed it over the sounds of the storm and the buzzing of the flickering lights, but he heard it. Nancy picked up the shaft of the lamp again.

Luisiana stopped talking and followed Nancy's eyes to the doorway.

"Nigel wasn't giving Pilgrim the information. I was," said a cracked, tired figure from the shadows of the hall.

ALIVE IN ALL MANNETZ

Nancy raised her lamp shaft and Luisiana raised her phone camera with one hand and a large book ready to throw in the other.

The figure stepped in from the shadows just as the lights chose that moment to flicker.

As they came back on, the horror was suddenly visible. The form was feminine and delicate. The skin was leathery and a size too small for the already demure frame. She wore a simple black dress that looked like it once fitted her, but now, it hung loosely from her skin and bones.

As Nancy looked upon the form, she was frozen by a wave of panic. She gazed into the two dim glowing green lights, sitting where she expected to see eyes. The woman had red lipstick across the almost grey lips that matched the rest of her skin.

“Okay, that’s new,” Holmes said with a controlled calm.

“What is that?” Louisiana screamed.

“I think this is Nigel’s dead wife. How are you Mrs Montague?” Nancy asked.

“The blood in the fridge was for her, I assume.”

“I gave that pratt Pilgrim the information that would bring him here. I knew his passenger would show him where the Papers were. And then my husband would be forced to finish his work,” she said. Her voice was raspy and dry, like she was speaking with a throat full of sand. She had been an older woman when she died, but now she looked like she could have been Nigel’s grandmother, not his wife. Whatever he had done to her had taken a toll.

“What happened to you?” Nancy asked. Still far calmer than she knew she ought to be. Regardless of the horror that was this woman, she struck Nancy as a victim, foremost.

Luisiana was edging closer to Nancy but had kept the phone recording and a book high, ready to throw. She looked terrified.

It was hard to tell where the woman was looking because of the dim lights in her eye sockets, but she seemed to be watching Louisiana carefully.

She took another raspy breath before speaking again. “I don’t look as good as I used to, I know. Nigel brought me back after I died. He’s a good man. He’ll be a good *god* soon. I just had to force the matter. He can’t keep me going forever, not as he is.”

“Well, that’s fucking terrifying. Also, where did she come from?”

“Wait, you’re *literally* dead?” Nancy asked, suddenly cheerful.

The woman looked confused for a moment. “Yes, but once Nigel ascends, he will...”

Nancy ignored the rest of what she was saying; she threw her lamp shaft at the woman’s head.

“What! Why did you do that?” Luisiana asked, shocked.

The woman hissed at them like a snake and Luisana threw her book, knocking the woman over. “Oh my god, did I kill an old lady?”

“Doesn’t matter, ignore the old dead biddy. She came from the right when she walked in,” Nancy said.

“What? Why does that matter?”

The woman started to groan and move again. Nancy threw the laptop, she screamed and hissed again.

“Look, the only room we didn’t look in properly was the bedroom, and that’s to the left of the door. We didn’t walk past the old bat, so we missed a door. A hidden door.”

“Okay, but why did we beat up the old lady?”

Nancy was baffled at that her actions needed explaining. She stepped over the half-corpse of a woman casually. “Lou, this dead cow drinks blood, sides with the wizard that’s trying to become a god and, legally, is *already dead*. I got better things to do than play nice with grandma-deady.”

Luisiana yelped as she stepped over the old woman who was flailing on the floor. She reached out and grabbed her leg. Louisiana screamed and kicked, smashing her in the head. The corpse groaned and let go.

“Nice!” Nancy complimented, holding Louisiana’s hand while she righted herself.

“*The old bird would have warned Nigel before she spoke to us, he’s likely on the way,*” Holmes advised, coldly.

Nancy scanned the hall, wondering where the old woman had been hiding.

“Nancy, I feel bad, I think I just beat up an old lady. I should go check on her.”

Nancy raised an eyebrow. “She had glowing lights in her eye sockets and her skin was literally embalmed. What the fuck do you think is happening here?”

"It's not her fault. People struggle to embrace the supernatural."

"For the love of cheese! Dink, wouldn't be this crap! Lou, look at the video you took and tell me if you think it's human!"

Louisiana nervously looked at her phone. "Shit, yeah, you're right."

"There, the wall isn't flush," Holmes noted excitedly.

The wind and rain made the roof shake and the little bungalow began sounding like it was under attack.

"Hurry, he's on the way."

Nancy spared a thought for whatever Mike and Howard were doing, and half wished she could be there with them. The building shook again, this time with something that sounded like an ocean was falling from the sky. Suddenly, she was *happy* that she didn't know what was going on out there.

She kicked at the base of the wall where the old wood panelling wasn't quite flush and a hidden door revealed itself.

"How is that there?" Louisiana asked, looking at the stone corridor behind the door and then around to the back of the wall that it was attached to. The wall was no more than a few inches thick, but the corridor, that was attached to the inside of the door seemed to go on forever.

The house shook again.

"You want to stay here and think about it? Or should we just say 'magic' and get out of here?" Nancy asked.

"Dave, he's still in the van."

Nancy checked with Holmes. He agreed; she replied coldly. "He made his choice. We need to move."

As the door closed behind them, the darkness was replaced by flames across the ceiling. Thankfully, there was little heat coming from them, but they lit the corridor well.

“That’s fucking creepy, isn’t it!” Holmes observed. Nancy was aware of how exciting he was finding all this. She let her gaze linger on the flames for a moment, to allow him to bask in the sight.

“Nancy, how are you so calm about all this?” Luisiana asked, sheepishly using her phone to video the corridor behind her.

“Lou, there’s a sea god out there, not to mention a mad wizard, evil little monsters, a vampire with sunglasses on, and a fake vicar with a baseball bat. I’m not sure I find a sassy corridor worrying anymore.”

Holmes let out a macabre chuckle, which Nancy found oddly supportive.

Louisiana was dumbfounded and opted to stay quiet. She had been so commanding and confident when everything was in the realms of normality. Nancy, on the other hand was thriving in the bizarre new reality she was finding herself in. The thought concerned her for a moment or two, before she was distracted by the stone corridor floor.

The corridor had been sporting a stone floor with a slight incline, however, now the incline was turning into steps.

There was a cutout in the cobblestone wall that served as a handrail. “Considerate,” Nancy noted as she strode down the steps, noticing that the top of the corridor was not dipping down with them.

“I’ve not been in a bungalow before; do they usually have such ostentatious basements?” Holmes asked, actually sounding a little nervous.

Nancy ignored him, for now at least.

“I think we should turn back. This place doesn’t feel right,” Luisiana said from behind her.

The fire above enveloped all of their attention for a moment as it suddenly filled the whole of their view. The room was a cavern, lit by a ball of fire far above, that was feeding the corridor they had just walked down.

“*Wow!*” Holmes exclaimed eloquently.

“With bells on!” Nancy replied, casting her eyes down from it to the vast cavern chamber they were in.

The cavern floor was raised in the middle, with the edges tapering off into darkness, though a watery moat was just about visible around the island-like protrusion. The island housed a large tree, which looked long dead. There was also an oddly out of place table, and some bookshelves. A workbench of mysterious purpose stood proudly in the middle as a crowning jewel.

Whatever lay in the soupy darkness in every direction would remain a mystery. There was no way of telling how large the chamber was, not without coming back with equipment.

“You getting all this, Lou?” Nancy asked. Looking back at her companion, who was frantically pointing at things with her phone camera like she was documenting history. Perhaps she was.

Luisiana nodded, sheepishly.

“*We need to turn back, were in over our heads,*” Holmes advised, nervously.

Nancy began to descend the stairs, confidently.

“Nancy, it’s been great, but we shouldn’t be here,” Lou said from behind her, staying at the top of the staircase.

Nancy strode on. The wall ended, and the stairs widened into a rounded platform at the bottom. She ignored the objections. If she left, it would be back the way she came, and unless something in this room could help her, the way she came contained certain death for her.

“You need to stop being so dramatic. It’s just a magic room in a cave, inside a wall. Honestly, stop being a baby,” Nancy said, glancing back.

It was only a moment between her realising that Louisiana had moved from the top of the staircase and her shoving her with all her might, down the stairs and flat onto her face at the bottom.

“*What just happened?*” Holmes asked, quite reasonably, given what had just happened.

Nancy rolled over as Louisiana’s boot came down where her head had just been.

“What the actual fu...” Nancy failed to finish her profanity on account of Louisiana lunging at her with the knife she had taken from the van.

She batted her arm away, flinging the knife into the darkness. Louisiana, relentless in her sudden desire to kill, lunged at her with her hands. Her grip tightened and Nancy felt like an idiot for ever trusting her. She clawed at her eyes desperately and felt her life slowing.

“Holmes, help me!” she screamed in her mind.

“*I am. Waiting for an opening!*”

After another moment of panic and anger, Holmes saw his chance. Nancy was overtaken with a wave of precision and control. Time slowed for her, and Louisiana looked away, shying from Nancy’s grasping nails. That moment loosened her grip just enough for Nancy to get some well-needed air in her lungs. Clarity came over her, and with Holmes’ help, she hit the arm at the elbow with enough force that the flash of pain made it retract from her neck. Without waiting

for a retaliation, she punched her in the head with all her might and Holmes assisted skills.

Luisiana stepped back, holding her face. “What the fuck, you’re supposed to be a drunk, not a boxer!” she screamed in anger.

“Fight or flight, mooncake?”

Nancy looked at Louisiana, coming towards her again. She glanced at the tables and bookcase, containing information, and maybe even a solution to the damned sea god.

“Fight!” she replied.

“Okay, but this isn’t going to be pleasant!”

FLAMINGO OF FITZE

Nancy allowed Holmes to take far more direct control of her than he had before. He used this new consent to sidestep an oncoming crazy woman. He chased her with Nancy's elbow as she passed, cracking her in the back of the neck. He spun Nancy around and kicked at the falling woman. As she hit the ground with a sharp crack, he let Nancy fall into her with a hand stretched out, breaking her fall and the other a fist into the back of Luisiana's head, forcing her to smack it off the stone floor.

Luisiana screamed in agony; blood blinded her. Holmes pushed Nancy into a crab like move that had her legs around the woman's neck.

"Twist your body for a kill or squeeze to make her pass out. I won't judge either way," Holmes said, releasing his grip on Nancy, who considered his words for longer than she cared to admit. She squeezed her legs for a moment until Luisiana stopped struggling and then released.

"She'll get up in a few minutes. Tie her up."

Nancy lay on the floor for a stolen moment before forcing herself to her feet. She took off her belt and tied it around Louisiana's arms, behind her back. She tied it tighter than it needed to be and then threw her down on the floor again; she was groaning the whole time.

"To think, I almost slept with you!" Nancy howled in anger.

She walked to the work area, limping in pain and rubbing her now bloody forehead.

"*It's just a large graze. No concussion,*" Holmes said supportively. Nancy wasn't convinced that it was particularly accurate information. She knew that Holmes' logical brain would have realised that she had no access to medical expertise and with all that was going on, telling her to get on with things was more useful than saying, *you may have a life-threatening head wound!* She appreciated his callous nature. He was, after all, right.

The work area was in the middle of the natural-looking cave, though, with the island in the middle, and the little watery moat around it, coupled with the cold fire that lit the room from above, she knew the word 'natural' was likely incorrect. Nevertheless, the place felt like nature, somehow.

"You nudded up quick, old man. Thought you were losing your backbone back there," she said, aloud. Despite her ability to commune with Holmes in silence, there was still something more natural in spoken words.

"*I noticed that too. When we came In, there was a wave of panic hitting me like a wall. Was likely part of the defences this place has. How come it didn't affect you?*"

"It did, but between being drunk for a few years, dead parents, and sea gods, I guess it was business as usual for me," she replied, looking through the equipment on the desk, carefully.

"*Well, that's... Well, it's fucking sad to be honest, Nancy.*"

She ignored him and carried on inspecting the table, with the open books on it. She glanced over to Louisiana, who was sleeping off her beating.

“What we got here, Detective?” she asked, deferring to Homes for a more trained eye. There was no response, but she could see him in her mind’s eye, looking through her vision and taking stock of everything. She aided him by slowly casting her eyes across the table, books and shelves and then the wider room, giving him all the data he needed to find something useful.

After her second pass across the room, Holmes saw something.

“*There, the book, the bottom one,*” he said, drawing her attention to half a page of text that had another open book on top of it. The book on top seemed to be some sort of ledger. She moved it, careful not to close the page, in case it was relevant.

The book below contained writing that she didn’t recognise. “What is it?” she asked.

“*Let me see the previous pages, please,*” he asked.

She turned the page back, and after a few seconds back another. She felt him pondering what he was seeing and turned it forward a few more to give him and his camera-like memory enough to work with.

“*He’s been getting his power from the life in the sea. He’s been charging his magic stick from dead fish!*”

Nancy turned a few more pages for him.

“*Oh my, the instruction in this book describes that staff of his. I think I’ve figured out why there haven’t been many tourists. He’s been sucking the life energy out of the town, the very air. He’s literally been feeding on everyone, making them the worst version of themselves!*”

Nancy wasn’t surprised. The town pulled people down; it was part of its identity. She turned a few more pages. Looking for something she could use against him.

“What language is this in anyway?” she asked, wondering how Holmes could read it so easily.

“Demti. It’s a type of daemon script. It’s popular with the types who would summon a sea god to strangle a friend,” he replied, with a half-smile.

“Thought you had amnesia or something,” she asked, smiling a little herself. He had never called her his friend before.

“I do, about my own life, but for some reason, I seem to know a lot about most things that aren’t related to me.”

Luisiana was moving, quietly struggling to free herself. Nancy half hoped she did. Any excuse to smack her around again was alluring. She pretended she didn’t notice. Holmes had her firmly in his attention.

“Well, we can’t stay here all day, not with what’s happening outside, do we have anything or not?”

“I don’t see anything useful, unless we can somehow get out of town, or put his powers in reverse. Neither of which seem likely.”

Nancy sighed. She closed the book and went back to looking around the creepy wizard hole. There had to be something useful here, a weapon, another magic cane, a spell maybe.

“Nancy, stop,” Holmes said.

“I know. We got to go. Give me a minute. There may be...”

“Nancy!” Holmes said, in his stern voice.

She stopped.

“The book. The book cover.”

She looked back at the book she had closed. The cover was leather and hand stitched, brown and natural. There was a design burned into it, a burned black. It was an image of one of the little monsters, mouth open, with the moon behind it.

It wasn't exactly the same, not by a long way, but it was close enough that both she and Holmes recognised it instantly. It was the same image as the pub's sign, The Frog's Moon.

"What the fuck does that even mean?" she asked.

Luisiana made an accidental chuckle sound.

Nancy eyeballed her. "What do you know, and before you try sarcasm, please remember that we are in a cave, inside the wall of a magic lunatic's house. If you wind up dead, no one will ever find you. Not ever."

Louisiana, who was sitting on the steps looking thoroughly beaten, sat upright, hands still tied behind her back. "Nigel was right. You're an idiot. That's why Dave stayed in the van, you moron. He knows exactly where this portal is, and he'll be here any second with a little army of monsters. Oh, look, you have nowhere to run! Nigel planned all of this! We're here now because he planned it! Everything that's happened was because of him!"

A wave of panic and realisation washed over Nancy to accompany the anger. She cast her eyes across the fire lit cave. There was no way at all that she had missed a door, or even a crack that could be an exit.

"Holmes, what are our options here?" she asked. Searching the bookshelves and table for something to get her out of there.

"I'm thinking."

Nancy pulled out a book with a storm cloud on the cover. "This maybe?" she asked, turning so he could see it. "Maybe this is like a ride-the-lightning spell or something, like electric teleportation!"

"No, it's about controlling weather. All of this takes years to learn. Even if there were a spell in here, neither of us are wizards. We can't learn the occult arts in the next few minutes, Nancy!"

There was an echo from the top of the entry staircase. The scream of one of the little monsters echoed through the long corridor.

“No! No! No!” Nancy said.

Louisiana laughed. “I told you I wanted to see what happened if you got strangled to death. I was honest from the start, Nancy.”

“*Nancy, we do have one option, but it’s not going to make much sense to you,*” Holmes said.

“I’ll take it.”

“*Sit on the floor, close your eyes, and bring yourself to my room.*”

Nancy had a good idea what this was about. She didn’t argue. A moment later, she appeared in his room. Cut off from the outside world.

“Thank you... At least this way I won’t feel it,” she said, with dry lips.

“*What? No, I didn’t bring you here to die, woman! We’re getting you out of here,*” Holmes said, cigarette in his mouth, as he frantically put his notes into a cardboard archive box.

“What?” she asked. Looking back at the window in the room, which showed three monsters appearing at the top of the staircase and fixing their eyes on her.

“*Door. Now. Go!*” he barked.

THE BELL TOLD

Nancy did as she was told, in part because she had been curious about the door ever since he had told her to not go out there.

She stepped through the doorway eagerly; she felt her stomach flip over and a wave of heat across her as the warm corridor air hit her. There was a moment of nausea, and then she gleefully basked in it. At least she would die knowing what was out there.

She was finally in the corridor she had glimpsed so many times. There was an eerie red glow through the frosted windows that ran the length of it. The lights were dim and there were large, dark office areas in both directions. The whole place had a vibe of a long-abandoned building.

“Holmes, have you been alone here? This whole time?” she asked.

“Yeah, sometimes, when I’m in the room, I hear people pass, sometimes I see people walking around through the crack in the door if I don’t close it, but as soon as I come out here, it’s like this.”

“I had no idea,” she said. “How long do I have before they kill me?” she asked, speaking of the monsters she closed her eyes to avoid.

Holmes had put his box down and was locking the door. *“Nancy, you just left. I told you not to go out here, because it doesn’t make sense. I meant it. Your body, here is real. Once you left the room, your mind and body merged. Here... Nancy, you are literally here!”*

Being inherently suspicious by nature, Nancy tried to open her eyes in the ‘real world.’ To shift her focus back to her real body, just a little.

Nothing happened.

Realising that she was now safe, for real. She put her arms around Holmes, hugging him with gratitude and feeling it more real than it had been before.

“You could do this the whole time? Why did you wait so long?” she asked.

“Because I’m not convinced that I know how to get you out of here.”

“Oh... Shit!” she replied.

The power in the building was off, and it seemed to be on emergency lighting. A dim low powered glow coming from every third light square in the ceiling. It had always been that way. She hadn’t noticed in Holmes’ room though, because of the light coming in from the window from her perspective of view, from the physical world.

They walked through the large, empty office. It was retro, like a nineties office, which looked fitting for Holmes. It was quiet; literally, too quiet. She could hear the wind outside, though, every window was frosted; she had no idea what was actually outside. The slightly flickering red glow made her wonder if there was fire outside. Was this hell? She wondered.

Holmes followed her, hands in pockets, suit jacket on and looking very interested in all the old desks they passed.

There were old computers in each cubical and a pile of paper in badly organised 'in' and 'out' trays. There were no personal items, no random coats, desk plants, or photos.

Nancy stopped at one of the cubicles and pulled out a wad of paper from the 'in' tray. It was all blank. It was in different paper folders and had paper clips and staples in some of it, but it was blank. She looked at Holmes with confusion and put it on the desk. She took a sampling from the 'out' box and it was the same.

"Holmes, mate, any chance you want to shed some light on this?"

"I haven't been this far out before," he replied nervously.

"Sorry, what? You have been trapped here for God-knows how long and you never took a look in the corridor before?" she asked.

"Basically, yeah."

She glared at him to prompt for more.

He looked sheepish again, but answered. *"It seems that the further I get away from you, the more confused I get. I tried coming out here many times; I really did. But after a few seconds, if I leave the room, if I leave you, I started getting foggy. A couple of times I think I made it here, but I can't really remember. When I got back to the interview room, I felt okay again."*

She felt bad for him. Not knowing what else to do, she hugged him. She hugged him hard.

"I'm fine. Stop being creepy," he argued. Trying to wriggle away. Though she had a feeling he liked it more than he was letting on.

"Why didn't you tell me, you stupid bastard?" she asked. Unexpectedly dealing with tears.

“And how would that have gone? ‘Hey, Nancy, I know an evil sea monster is trying to kill you, but I was wondering if you would come and help me with the empty fucking office that I’m scared of.’”

She laughed. “Yeah, fair point. Do we need to, you know, worry about stuff here?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Honestly, as I said, sometimes I think this office is full, until I go check and find it like this... well, from the doorway, it looks like this.”

Nancy made a thoughtful face and nodded, thinking through their options. “You feel okay now?” she asked.

“It seems to be when I’m away from you. Not in a creepy, over attached way. Literally, I get dumber the further away from you I get. I think it’s a curse. The better I know you, the more I think it’s a curse.”

Just at that moment, they both heard something from the other end of the office, from the corridor they had just come from. It was only a vaguely audible banging noise, but they both turned to it, like it was danger incarnate.

After a second or two with no other sound, they both silently decided it was the wind.

“Yeah, this place is fucking creepy. I say we find the cleaner’s cupboard, convert a broom into a weapon and find the stairs, and some clues!” Nancy said, as if she was suddenly qualified.

“Sorry, what? Why would there be a cleaner’s cupboard? And how exactly does one convert a broom into a weapon? We’re not the fucking ‘A-Team’ and unless one of us is a talking dog, we are also not the Scooby-gang. We have literally no idea what we are doing!” Holmes parried.

“Oh good, finally back to your old self, are you?” she replied with a glint of joy in her eyes.

Holmes was aware of the sound again, though he was pretty sure Nancy didn't hear it. *"Better plan. My interview room leads me to believe that this is a police station. Let's head to the basement where we should find the cells, and the armoury. We get some guns and then go see what the fuck is outside!"*

Nancy grinned. "Sounds like a plan! Maybe we are the Scooby-gang!" she said, pleased that his confidence had returned, however cautiously.

"I should have let you die," he complained, striding off towards the door at the end of the room.

Nancy smiled and followed. She swore she heard that sound again.

They hadn't tried the elevator. It seemed like tempting fate, even if it worked. Instead, they traversed a dimly lit staircase with concrete steps and a metal handrail. The staircase doubled back on itself as it went down. After four floors, the sign on the landing door said, 'Ground floor.' There was a reinforced glass window in the door. They both peered through nervously.

All they could see was another wall through the window, and nothing else. Neither of them wanted to actually open the door until they had checked for guns on the floor below.

"You think we're just being silly? By any chance?" she asked.

"Nancy, think about how you got here," Holmes said, raising an eyebrow at her. *"Do you normally teleport to your imaginary friends creepy abandoned building by closing your eyes and exiting through your own brain?"*

“No, that is a new one,” she said. “So probably not being paranoid?”

“Also,” Holmes began. “*It said ‘Ground floor’ in English, at least we know were not on mars or something!*”

Nancy nodded in agreement. She hadn’t even considered that.

They continued down to the basement level.

“Good job all the doors are open,” she noted, pushing a heavy white door open carefully, trying not to make any noise.

“*I noticed that too. They all seem to be magnetic locks and without any power they are all just open, though I’m not sure I would leave the guns behind a magnetic lock,*” he replied as they walked into the open area.

“Cells?” she asked, looking down an ominous corridor. Holmes nodded and headed for the back wall of the off-white tiled room.

There was an office to one side which had a barred front, likely for booking people in. She pushed the door, it was open.

She went in and instantly saw the keys on the hooks at the back.

“*Yep, we’re out of luck. It’s locked,*” Holmes said from outside.

Nancy emerged a moment later and handed him the keys. One with a tag that said ‘gun-locker’ on it.

“*Smart arse,*” he replied and opened the wall safe. There were five pistols in there, all handles facing them, with magazines on the bottom of the safe.

Holmes took one and slid in a magazine. He checked it and handed it to her. “*I’ll do all the shooting, but just in case, you should have one.*”

She nodded and took it. He took a second to point out the safety and summarised with “*Point and shoot, two hands though, it’ll push back and break your wrist if you’re not holding it firm.*”

She didn’t like it. It was heavier than she expected. She knew he was right, though. He took two more and jammed them into the back of

his belt. He took the extra two magazines and put them in his jacket pockets.

“You any good with guns then, old man?” she asked.

“I may have magical amnesia, but I feel like I am excellent with them!” he replied confidently.

She had seen Sunglasses, Howard, handle a gun and Holmes looked just as comfortable with one. “I believe you,” she said. “Can we please go see what’s outside so I can, maybe, get out of here and back to the evil sea god, please?”

STANDOFF UNDER THE STARS

Mike and Howard had gone from a standoff with the wizard, to chasing him in a black cruiser. The vehicle smelled of corpse, which Mike wasn't enjoying; Howard seemed to have no objection.

Nigel was gliding down the street hovering above the buildings and roughly going in a straight line, there were at least four little monsters following him down the street like faithful dogs. They seemed to have stopped bothering with the invisibility, probably something to do with all the rain and electric in the air.

The red eyes inside the dark shadow of the sea god were still forming in the air above the beach, gaining more definition by the second. This was something they couldn't fight. So, they focussed on the wizard, who they stood at least a chance against.

The other thing that was concerning Mike had been the lack of civilians. Not one curtain had twitched. Not one.

"You think he's found Nancy?" Mike asked, turning so sharply in the torrential rain that the car almost rolled over. The tyres screeching

and the water being flung from the windshield by the wind, while the wipers moved around with pointless purpose.

“I don’t see how! We have so many spells, incantations, and charms on her that even we had to have someone follow her!” Howard yelled over the storm, and over, for some reason *Creedence Clearwater Revival* blaring out of the radio.

“Wait, I know this street! This is where the wizard’s house is!” Howard announced, realising where he was. He had been sure he was being watched, when he was here last.

“Nancy left us to escape the wizard, and then just went to his fucking lair!” Mike cursed, once again almost rolling the car. This time it slid as it turned, briefly mounting the curb as he entered the street.

“Come on Mike, this is exactly the sort of batshit thing we would have done when we were younger!” Howard grinned, as the car came to a skidding halt in the middle of the road.

“We had training, Howard!” he said, opening the car door; the sound of the storm suddenly filling their ears and salty rain wetting the air.

“Ah, those were the days!” Howard said, suddenly reminiscing about a much earlier time in his life. He looked down at his six-shooter like most people would look at an old friend. “She’s got balls, if nothing else!”

Howard climbed out of the car to see the wizard lowering to the ground and the news van that was parked outside the bungalow.

“Maybe she is in there,” Mike said, pointing one of his daggers in the direction of the van. As he did, the sliding door on the side opened and one of Luisiana’s team got out and dropped to his knees. He put his hands up and then to the floor in the way that people do when they worship.

The wizard turned and with a twitch of his staff, he ripped the life out of the man, in the form of a golden line of energy. The man simply died, with his hands outstretched in worship.

Mike ran towards the wizard, both daggers in hand and with a little help from a supernatural source, the wind in the air pushed him just right to propel him directly at his target. He knew it was a futile attempt, but he couldn't watch a man get killed without at least attempting retribution.

The wizard ignored the initial impact. Mike hit his magical shield, like a bug hitting a wall. He turned slowly from the door to his home and raised entertained eyebrows at him.

"I am ascending to godhood. What use are your little trinkets against my power?" he spat, lifting again slightly.

Mike stood up, and with a commanding voice he replied. "I know how this works, Nigel. But while you're looking at me, you're not looking at that!" He pointed at the road as he said the last word. Just in time for the wizard to see the black cruiser drive directly into him at a high speed.

The car hit him with so much force that it went through the front of the bungalow, exploding in glass and brick as it did.

"That's got to hurt!" Mike said to himself, looking at the mess. Though, he was thinking more about Howard, who was in the driver's seat, rather than Nigel.

Howard appeared out of the rubble a moment later. "Run!" he yelled a moment before the car exploded in a black and red plume of heat and debris.

They both stood up while the dust cloud was still being subdued by the rain.

"Lighter in the tank?" Mike asked, coughing.

Howard grinned. “Even had time to close the little flap on the filling hole!”

“You think it was enough?”

Howard shrugged. They knew Nigel’s power wasn’t infinite. It was sourced from the things he killed, and he seemed to have got a boost from the sea god that was well on its way. They knew his reserves would be low, they just didn’t know how much he needed to exert himself before he would start being less wizard, and more old man who would get his arse kicked.

There was a scream from the edges of the street. Howard and Mike caught the flickering as the little monsters appeared and dropped dead. There was at least half a dozen of them.

“Not enough, I guess,” Mike said. Though, he was considering how worrying it was that they didn’t even know there were any left.

The rubble and the car began to shake.

RED QUEEN

Nancy and Holmes stood at the doorway in the stairwell. Nancy had the good sense to put her gun into her jacket pocket. Holmes on the other hand, had one of his against the glass, as they tried to get a better look through the little window.

“Why am I so scared? There isn’t anything out there, is there?” she asked.

Holmes glanced at her and then back to the window, without moving his head. “No, I think we’re alone here. We’re just paranoid, is all.”

“Yeah. Paranoid. That’s all we are.”

Holmes gave her another sideways glance.

“Well, get on with it then,” she said, pretending to be annoyed.

He sighed, and then, after a second’s hesitation, pushed the door open, stepping in, gun at the ready and turning to check the corridor. After a moment, he left Nancy’s view, leaving to the right. She pushed open the door a little and stuck her head out. The corridor led to a large room. She followed, cautiously.

The passageway led to the back of the lobby. There was a large counter where people would be greeted, and chairs were laid out as a waiting area. A large glass front with a rotating glass doorway sat right in the middle of the other wall.

The really scary thing, however, lay on the other side of the glass.

“Holy shit!” Nancy said as it came into view for her.

“Yeah,” Holmes replied, lowering his gun and just looking in awe.

Outside the doorway there was red tinted light shining down through water and onto the ocean floor. They both stepped towards it, totally awestruck. The ground outside held the old, eroded signs of a car park, reclaimed by sand, plants and at least one long decomposed fish. From under the old skeleton, there was a dirty barnacle covered car shape which struck Nancy as especially terrifying. They almost jumped out of their collective skins when something that looked like a shark swam past, ignoring them.

After a few moments of basking in the vista, Nancy sat down on one of the plastic chairs that was bolted to the floor.

“Were under the fucking sea! The fucking sea!”

Holmes sat opposite her. “Yeah,” he replied.

They sat in stunned silence for a few minutes.

“Well, what the fuck do we do now?” Nancy asked.

“We go up.”

“What?” she replied.

“I have no idea why this building isn’t flooding, because those doors should not be able to hold out the bloody ocean, but I know there’s light streaming down, so we can’t be *that* deep. This is a big building. Maybe we can get out if we get to the roof.”

Nancy considered what he had said for a moment. “Or we open the roof door and get flushed. I may drink like one, but I’m not a bloody fish!”

Holmes stood up. “Nancy, I don’t know how things work here. I’m pretty sure I’m a ghost or something, but you are alive and human. There’s no food here. Now neither of us can, I don’t know, *imagine* it into existence. The roof is a chance. It’s that or starve to death while Nigel and his pal take over the world, or something.”

She sighed in acceptance. “I fucking hate stairs.”

Mike rolled out of the way of the news van as it was thrown in his direction with a flick of the wizard’s staff.

“That all you got, Nige?” Mike taunted over the storm and rain.

The truth was, he wasn’t as confident as he looked. He was soaking wet, sliding around and drastically under-tooled for this fight. His passengers were all screaming about the red eyes in the sky, too. Which was a whole other concern.

Howard reloaded his gun. He was down to his last six bullets. He also had a ‘lucky’ one he was keeping in his pocket. He knew that if it came to it, he would need to kill Nancy to stop this. He didn’t want to. He was generally opposed to killing the victims of wizards, but in this case, he knew that Mike wouldn’t be able to do it. Howard didn’t struggle with the actual killing, he struggled with enjoying it. He would be able to do it. Though, he wasn’t sure if it would matter, at this point.

A shadow moved across the rooftops, that caught his eye. He was pretty sure the residents of the town were in some magically induced sleep, and as far as he could tell, all the little monsters were dead now; it had to be someone else.

The lightning flashed. The sky lit up again. Howard stole a glance at the sky, the almost formed blackness was now looming over them. The sea god was beginning to move. It wasn't quite 'real' yet, but it could move it's impossibly large head and its facial features were almost visible.

He used his vampire speed to turn the other way while the light still flashed and looked at the figure on the rooftops, it crouched low and held a whip. Lilly was back.

She had been told time and time again, that if it came to this, her job was keeping Nancy safe. He prayed that she would listen to her orders, for once.

A van came barreling towards him, spinning through the air, just as his burst of speed ran out. He holstered his gun and dropped to the floor as it rolled atop of him.

Mike was starting to think that there was an excellent chance that they were out of their league. The wizard was getting more powerful by the moment. The plan had been to wear him out and then stab him until the desired state of deadness emerged.

"This is getting annoying!" the wizard screamed, being unable to hit either of them. He raised both arms in the air, ripping the bungalow from the ground. And then, with visible effort, he swung his arms, both hands on that damned cane. He gestured and the bricks, glass and the odd piece of furniture rained down on them. Howard had the sense to get as close to Mike as possible.

Mike used all his reserved energy, and the rest he pulled from his passengers. He pushed on the surrounding forces with his will and then, with another, well-trained gesture of the mind, he pulled at them. He generated enough wind around them to create a cyclone, a powerful one. It pulled the falling bricks out of the air and away from them.

He wouldn't be able to do that twice. Truth was, he was a little surprised that he could do it once. He hadn't had to ask his passengers to help him in such an overt way before, and certainly not while in the human world.

Lilly was perched behind a chimney, quite out of sight and thanks to the charms that she was given before leaving the garden, she hid well, and was certain that no one knew she was there. Other than Howard, that was; he seemed to basically see everything at this point.

She watched, terrified, as the wizard ripped his own house into the air and used it as violent rain on her friends. She wanted to help but had been told enough that her job was Nancy. When it all kicked off, she was to guard the chosen woman. She wanted to wait, because any second now, Mike and Howard were going to beat the living shit out of Merlin. Her getting involved would be useless, anyway. She was sorry she would have to miss the show.

As she crouched down hiding from the rogue bricks and debris, she saw a purple glow in the storm, where the wizard's house just was. She knew enough about magical glowing portals to know that this was an entrance. The fact that it was a persistent hole meant that it was two-way. One-way portals would flash in and out of existence as needed. That was how the garden portals worked, anyway. She knew what this was, and the bad guy was looking in the opposite direction.

She knew what she had to do.

AQUATIC ABERRATIONS

“The roof!” Holmes said.

“The roof!” Nancy replied, but far more out of breath.

They were at a plateau, on the staircase, there was one door, different from the rest. This one was grey metal and rather than a handle, there was a metal bar across it, which sported a sign saying ‘authorised persons only.’

Holmes crouched down and checked the bottom of the door for signs of dampness. He took a notebook from his pocket and tore a page out. He slid it under the door and then inspected it.

“Not wet,” he said. “I think that’s a good sign.”

“You didn’t do that on the ground floor. Maybe it wouldn’t have been wet there either,” Nancy reasoned.

“No, but maybe breaking the magical seal down there would have resulted in the entire ocean abruptly coming in.”

“Fair point,” she shrugged. “What do we do? Open it and maybe be instantly killed by a million gallons of water?”

Holmes put a hand on her shoulder. “Nancy, I have no real idea how deep we are, and I certainly don’t know how deep we need to be for the flooding to kill you. Honestly, this could kill you. I have no idea.”

They locked each other’s gaze for a few seconds before Nancy hugged him. She wiped a tear from her eye and noticed him do the same.

“Steve, buddy. You have been the best friend a girl could have. Thank you for everything,” she said.

He laughed. “Nancy, I’ve been stuck in your brain for literally as long as I can remember. It’s been hell.”

They both laughed.

“Hold on to the rail. Hold it tight,” he said.

She did. She sat, legs dangling from the landing, back to the door, and wrapped her arms around the railing.

Holmes drew his gun and pushed the bar down to release the door catch.

Lilly appeared through the other side of the portal with a roll. She snapped herself to a combat crouch and pulled the whip free. There was nothing but darkness.

The blue glow from the portal behind her was the only reason she could tell that she was in a stone corridor.

“What the actual fuck is this?” she said to herself, confused. She slipped her whip back around her waist and pulled the dagger from her boot.

With the dagger outstretched, she slowly made her way down the corridor. Her hunter's armour moving in leathery creeks was the only sound, aside from the electric hum of the magician's portal.

"Sure Lilly, join a band of vampire hunters, see the world, kill a wizard. What could possibly go wrong?" she said to herself in hushed sarcastic tones, trying to push back the feeling of just how truly stupid it was to step through an unmapped portal, alone.

"Sure, Howard, if it all goes wrong, I'll look after the girl. Why would she need looking after, though?" she reminisced, thinking about her confusion at the request, when all Nancy was doing was getting drunk and going home with strangers she met in the pub. In her defence, there was no way she would have seen this coming. Not back then. Howard did though, something else that proved to her that she had a lot to learn.

Now that there was some distance between her and the portal, she could make out a light up ahead. It was changing as she looked at it. She stopped and squinted at it. Why did it look familiar?

Fire!

She recognised it. It was the warm, ever-changing glow of fire, and if she knew one thing, it was that there was no fire without a fuckup!

She ran towards it, knife still in hand, considering how charging towards the unknown flames, was likely stupid. She was doing a lot of stupid things recently.

The wizard finally put his feet on the floor. This should have signified that he was running low on energy. Mike and Howard knew better on this occasion. This wasn't a wizard landing to recharge, or because his

spells were weakening. This was a man lowering himself for bravado and showmanship. This was a man who had been playing with them while he killed time.

“Aww, crap!” Mike said as he saw the wizard’s shield flicker with a fresh veneer of power, rippling in a golden glow across his still clean jacket.

He twirled his cane like a pantomime villain and smiled widely. Howard noted he looked at least a decade younger, too. Not out of breath, or dishevelled, but pristine. He was also glowing with something else, smug self-satisfaction.

Mike and Howard stood in front of him. They had survived magical lightning attacks, evil little monsters, brick rain and cars being thrown. They looked like crap. Mike had at least one broken rib, and he could have sworn he had chipped his dagger, which was scary, given the things it had already been through.

The rain slowed; the thunder stopped. The wizard took a step forward. He was studying his prey, wishing someone else was watching his glorious victory.

“You shall not pass!” Mike said with a lofty tone. He felt something in his side crack, but he managed not to show it.

“Really?” Howard asked, giving him an irritated glance.

“What? I’ve watched a lot of movies! Do you know how boring it is pretending to be a vicar?” Mike replied, ignoring the pain.

Howard shook his head, annoyed. “Might be why you were such a lousy vicar,” he said.

Mike turned to him to defend his vicar persona. Also knowing full well, that the only thing they could actually do now, was stall.

“What is wrong with you two?” the wizard asked, with a magical fury in his voice.

They ignored him, still bickering about Mike's vicar skills. They were projecting a sarcastic, disorganised attitude, but each knew the stakes and when stalling is your only option, well, it's hard to pretend otherwise.

After another few seconds, they were all silenced by the sounds of the sky. Even the wizard looked up, as the god was finally formed. He had arrived. No more transparent aura, no-more vague glowing eyes.

Candiru looked exactly as terrifying as they had expected. It had the face of a squid and the wings of the devil himself. It was as large as Godzilla and twice as ugly. Even though they could see it plainly, it was so big, it was still quite a way off.

The monster shook the earth as it waded towards land.

"How far away did we go?" Howard asked, no longer stalling.

After giving the hive of voices in his head a moment to give him the answer, Mike replied. "We're three miles away from the beach and I'm told, it's just getting ashore." He tilted his head for a moment, letting Howard know he was distracted by his advisors. "Shit, there's a non-zero chance of a tsunami!"

Howard understood the meaning. With this town in supernatural lockdown, there was no chance anyone was evacuating. The death toll would be one hundred percent.

Mike snapped his gaze to the wizard. "Where's Nancy? Won't the marshmallow-fish be pissed when she's still alive?"

"You don't know that she is still alive!" he snarled.

"And you obviously don't know what it looks like when you kill someone with a wraith in their head!" Mike snapped back.

The wizard showed a slight crack in his expression that implied he hadn't thought about something. He corrected it a moment later and, pointing his cane at them, he said, "She's in my lair. With three of my

pets. They know what to do. Unless you think an alcoholic barmaid with low self-esteem is going to defeat three beasts alone!”

“I’ll take that bet!” Howard said, exposing his vampire smile.

WITHOUT THE EMBRACE

Lilly finally made it to the end of the corridor in what felt like the longest run of her life. She had only sprinted for a few seconds, but something about this place was suppressing her confidence, making her doubt everything. It was likely a magical ward, a little something extra to put people off coming in. The wizard was smart.

She almost came crashing to a halt as she saw the stairs appear in front of her, abruptly ending the corridor. She had to take a moment to get her bearings. The chamber was vast. She couldn't even see the walls behind the supernaturally manifested darkness. A ball of flame lit it all, hovering directly above the centrepiece, a single tree on an island in the middle of the chamber. On the strange island was a bookcase, a couple of tables and surrounding it, green tinted water.

The island also sported a Nancy, passed out on the floor and three monsters, one was on top of her, hands around her delicate neck.

Lilly ran down the large stone stairs as fast as she could without falling, a little too fast.

She knew that she wasn't Howard; she had got her arse kicked every time she had fought one of these things. Now there were three, and they were watching her approach. She had no advantage. She needed to do what Howard had been telling her to do. She needed to let herself be absorbed by her training.

She ran towards them, knowing every moment counted, every tick of the clock was one less that Nancy had. She recalled her first day with Howard, the thing he said to her.

“Our enemies have an advantage over every hunter. They don't worry about getting out alive. We can only win when the odds are against us, by existing inside the fight. All that matters is killing what's in front of you, except that it doesn't matter if you get out alive. It just matters that *they* don't, because we're fighting for people who can't.”

She brought herself into the moment. She used the bottom step as a launching platform and sprung into the air. She knew what needed to be done.

There were three monsters, but the only one that mattered was the one with its hands around Nancy's neck. Before she hit the floor, she flicked her whip from her waist and snapped it with an action that made its less-obvious traits activate; it extended beyond what was reasonable.

The monster must have sensed something was wrong because it looked up, which was perfect because the tip of the whip licked its eye. It rolled back in something akin to pain, but she doubted it understood things in the same way that most of her enemies did.

She rolled to a stop next to Nancy, whip in one hand and small knife at the ready in the other. She spent a moment checking on Nancy. There was something wrong. There were no marks on her throat. Lilly knew how strong the creatures were, yet Nancy didn't have so much as a scratch on her.

She noted the oddity and turned her attention to the closest monster. It was coming from her right side and the one on her left was slightly further away but also moving. The third had jumped back into the soupy fog.

Lilly let Howard's words echo in her mind one more time. "Don't try to stay alive, try to win." She knew it was actually shitty advice because he had lived by it and ended up a vampire. That said, he was, to her knowledge, the only vampire who had also held on to their humanity.

She flicked her whip out at the monster's leg. It dodged. She smirked to herself and with another flick, the tip moved contrary to physics and grabbed the critter out of the air. With another supernatural gesture, she flicked the whip back in the other direction, still holding the frog bastard. The frog-fish, while light, were right at the edge of the weight that her whip could throw. She knew it would get tired after only a little of this. The power to move the way it did was its own. She just guided it.

The frog smashed into the other, which was leaping towards her. It screamed, or growled at her. She wasn't sure which it was, but it was mad.

"Okay, Lilly, what do we know about these monsters?" she asked herself as the first one popped out of the fog.

She slid to the ground and smacked it with the metal hammer at the end of the whip handle. "I can't cut them without Howard's magic sword," she considered as she kicked it back into the fog.

She turned as one hit her full force in the chest, pinning her to the ground. She wrapped her whip around its neck and pulled tight. Its eyes bulged and it scrambled for her throat. "They're really fucking dumb," she remembered.

They hadn't been told to strangle Nancy, they had no idea what *a Nancy* was, so they had been told to only strangle things in this place. The stupid frogs were going to try to strangle her, no matter what. Not cut her, not bite her, they were going to only strangle. This, to the untrained person, wouldn't seem like much in the way of an advantage, but to Lilly, it was just the information she needed.

The creature started going limp atop of her; she tightened her whip. After another second, it fell down. She pushed it off her. It didn't really need air, not in the same way that people did. It got up almost immediately.

She got her breath. There were two of them coming from opposite sides. She stepped back as they fell to the floor, all three turning towards her at once.

"Just win the damned fight, Lilly, how hard could this be?"

Nancy watched as the door opened and water pooled in. Not streaming, or gushing, just pooling in, as if it were a leaky window in an old cottage. Nancy and Holmes exchanged confused glances, as was becoming normal procedure for them now.

Once they were brave enough to look, they could see stars outside. Granted, there was still a strange red tint to all the light, but the night was out there. Not the ocean.

After a moment of not being wet, or dead, they stepped through the doorway.

"Well, this could be worse!" Holmes said, with an uncharacteristically optimistic tone.

Nancy pushed him out of the way and joined him on the roof.

It took her a moment to understand what she was seeing. At first, it looked like the roof went on forever in the red moonlight. It was oddly vast, like a flat desert that had no end. Then something moved in the distance, emerging from the floor and then vanishing.

“Oh,” she said, coming to realisation. This wasn’t an endless desert. It was water. The top of the building was perfectly level with the vast, still, water.

“Does this help us?” she asked, hopeful that it meant something.

“I don’t see how,” Homes replied.

“Maybe we can make a raft from the furniture in the building,” she said, as if a sudden wave of genius had struck her.

“And go where?” he replied, looking at her apologetically.

“I don’t understand. Why are you here? What does any of this mean?” she asked, looking around. “Anyway, where’s all that red light coming from?” she turned to look at the sky behind them.

“Fuck!”

Two massive, glowing red eyes looked back at her from the heavens.

“I thought I would be having fun by now,” Howard said loudly and arrogantly, purposefully pissing off the wizard.

“You not having fun?” Mike asked.

There was another shake of the floor as the giant sea god took another laboured step, a few miles away.

Howard began talking about how he expected more explosions before the wizard screamed. “Will you two just shut up!”

They looked at him with raised eyebrows. This was what they wanted.

There was a general theory about fighting something stronger than you. You had to hope for mistakes. There were two ways to get a hopefully usable mistake out of an enemy this powerful. Apathy or anger.

Apathy was accomplished by making the enemy not consider you a threat, to the point of ignoring you.

Anger was accomplished by being really, *really*, annoying. Something that Howard and Mike excelled at.

The *problem* with the anger was that he would double down on trying to kill them, but he may make a usable mistake. It was more likely he would kill them any second, but they had tried everything else and while he was killing them, he wasn't killing Nancy. While Nancy was alive, the sea god wouldn't get to be unleashed fully, or, that was the theory.

The wizard actually growled before muttering something in a daemonic language that even Mike had problems understanding. As he spoke, he waved his hands around each other like he was a cartoon magician making a magical ball of fire. A moment after noting the absurdity of the action, Howard realised that this was exactly what he was doing. This was no small magical attack. This was the sort of fireball that would take out a small building.

GODS DON'T ASK TWICE

Nancy looked up at the two eyes with a sense of dread. There was no point looking away; she knew that all there was in any other direction was a vast ocean and the occasional fish tail. *She fucking hated fish.*

“Oi! Fish wanker!” she yelled at the top of her voice.

“Nancy, are you sure pissing it off is the best plan?” Holmes asked. She shot him a look and then pulled a gun from her pocket.

“Easy!” Holmes said, looking nervous. Nancy ignored him and flipped the safety off like he had shown her. She shot roughly toward the eyes. Even though she had only ever fired a gun once before, she shot well. Holmes was a concise and effective teacher.

“Not bad,” he said, with an annoyed nod and a sigh.

“Strangle her and this can end,” said an angelic, well-spoken male voice.

The two of them looked around, both relieved that the other heard the voice. There simply wasn't anywhere for someone to be hiding.

Holmes pointed at the eyes in the dark sky and shrugged, as if there were no other explanation.

“You can talk?” she asked the sky.

A wind blew, and the water moved. A form began to rise from it. The form was roughly human, but the limbs were too long. It stepped out of the ocean and onto the rooftop island. As it did, it faded into something green and ethereal for a moment before taking the solid form of a man, a man wearing long, wet, blue robes. His skin, however, was far less convincing than his robes. He looked like a fish that had been morphed into a man by some insane artist or mad scientist. It looked a little like a fish’s skin was spread over a human skull, but as he moved, it rippled like water.

“You speak for it?” Holmes asked.

It looked at him with watery eyes that were beginning to cry, though the tears were more likely part of how the man was formed than an indication of his emotions.

“I am but a servant of the mighty Candiru, the master of a thousand oceans,” the fish man said.

Nancy shot him. Without so much as a moment’s consideration, she shot him twice in his chest.

“Nancy, settle down!” Holmes screamed.

The man looked down and water trickled from where the bullets tore his robes. He looked at the holes with great interest. The trickling stopped. He returned to looking at Nancy, who shot him again, this time in the head.

“Will you stop shooting things!” Holmes demanded.

The man didn’t respond much to being shot. “It’s admirable that you tried to kill me. Candiru, the master of a thousand oceans, admires your desire to kill!”

“Thanks!” Nancy replied, wondering if it was worth shooting him again.

“What do you want?” Holmes asked him.

“I want you to kill her, ideally by strangulation,” he said calmly, looking at Holmes.

“No,” Holmes replied without hesitation.

“You can’t leave here; you are in the realm of Candiru the mas...”

Nancy shot him again, hoping he would stop talking. It worked for a moment as he looked down again and clapped.

“Excuse us please,” Holmes said, taking a step away, with Nancy, as if it somehow offered an invisible barrier of politeness.

“What do we do?” he asked her quietly.

“You think we could drown him? That could be fun!” Nancy replied.

“No mooncake, he’s right. We can’t get out and you won’t last long here with no food. Also, a wave of his hand and I recon this building wouldn’t be so dry!”

Nancy knew he was right. She had known since the moment that they had emerged on this roof that she was fucked. Actually, she hadn’t really banked on getting out of this alive at all. She didn’t want the sea god to come and stomp on her town, and possibly the world. But right now, she was playing a game of stalling, in a daemon realm that existed inside Holmes’ head, that was inside her own head, and that made no sense to her at all. She was out of her depth here, but something was still not right.

“Why doesn’t he just kill me then?” she asked, suddenly wondering why she had been allowed to get this far.

“I don’t know, ritual I suppose,” Holmes replied, glancing back at the fish man, who waved politely.

“Wait!” she said, suddenly a little excited.

She walked over to the fish man and squared up to him, nose to, whatever that was.

“He can’t kill me, can he? Candiru, he just has to wait for me to die, doesn’t he?” she asked. “And I bet it’s taking way longer to happen than he wants it to!”

The fish man smirked and, with a calm gesture of his hand, another figure formed out of the water. It slowly gathered colour and shape until it was a massive tentacle holding a watery human figure. The figure morphed slowly into someone she knew quite well.

“Here, your precious woman,” the fish said.

The watery figure had morphed into Dink. Beaten, bloody and soaking wet. The tentacle tip was shoved into her mouth and she looked at Nancy with dread.

“This is a trick! It has to be!” Nancy screamed. As she stepped closer to the tentacle, it moved away across the water.

“Why would I trick you? You have no idea what is happening in your realm. Nigel won. He killed the hunters, retrieved your woman and killed your town. All that remains is your death to free the wraith so he can take its power and finish his ascension!”

There was a clarity suddenly washing over Nancy. There were both truths and lies in what he had said. Mike had promised that no matter what, Dink would be safe and one thing she knew about Mike was that he didn’t have the manners to lie to her. Even if he had, Sunglasses would have told her the truth. He was that sort of guy.

If Nigel had already bested them, then he would be in there strangling her right now.

Then there was the truth. Ritual. She was untouchable. This was why her mom had given her life for her, to protect her from the watery grasp of this monster. He couldn’t lay a finger on her, and he knew it.

Then there was the final shiny nugget of truth that was in the web of idle threats and posturing. It wasn't even about her. She was the chosen one alright. But she was only chosen as a host. She was host to Holmes, the one thing that the sea god wanted all along.

"Holmes," she said with intent, without looking at him. "Someone once told me wraiths can't be killed, but if he can absorb your power, that can't be true, can it?"

Holmes suddenly realised what she was thinking, "I don't think normal rules apply here, to be honest, Nancy,"

"Fish wanker! That's not Dink, Nigel has won shit-all, and you're full of piss!" she said, turning indignantly away from him and pointing her gun at Holmes.

Her own eyes were suddenly wet now. "I don't think I can do it!" she said.

"You must. I want you to!" he said, dropping to his knees and putting his head against her gun.

Behind her, the fish man screamed, and a torrent of water was released. The water began gushing around her feet, but for reasons she was only now beginning to understand, none of it affected her at all. She hadn't been in any real danger since she came to this place. It was only ever about fear, and theatre.

"You're my best friend!" Nancy said softly over the rising water.

"I know. Thank you for everything. Do it, Nancy, you'll be fine without me. I promise!"

She closed her eyes and pulled the trigger with more love than a trigger had ever been pulled before. She felt like a monster in that moment, but also felt the conclusion of something that she had wanted to see to the end. As she felt the click and the recoil of the gun, she thought of Dink, the kisses, the hugs, the romance and the love. She thought of Marina's terrible food, of Phil's stupid over attachments

and of the people outside who were fighting for her. Whatever force there was that held the universe together likely shed a tear at that moment, for the single most righteous and bittersweet bullet that was ever fired.

She knew he was dead. She knew she was home.

Lilly was being strangled again, this time the one remaining frog had actually beaten her. It wasn't lack of skill on her part, it was lack of energy. No matter how you spin it, three opponents would always have more stamina than one. She had managed to kill two, but the third had come out of nowhere. It had been waiting in the shadows this whole time. When it saw her back turned as she finished off the second, it leaped at her and just had too much moxie for her to overcome.

She had tried to flip it off, but its legs were around her waist and, well, it was having such a good time; it didn't really notice her hitting it.

A thunderous crack filled the magical cavern, and the beastie went limp. Lilly fell to her knees and scrambled for breath.

She turned to see Nancy standing, gun in hand, looking at her. "Who the fuck are you?" she asked, pointing the gun with intent.

Lilly, still getting her breath, said, as loudly as she was able, though breathlessly. "I'm Howard's partner. I was sent to protect you!"

Nancy lowered her gun, "Oh, good Job! Consider me protected!"

She walked past the new woman and looked down at a figure in the shadows. She stepped a little closer and realised it was Luisiana, dead.

Strangled by the look of it. “That’ll save me a bullet or two,” she said glibly.

“Wait!” Lilly yelled, not quite managing to stand. “How did you kill the frog? Bullets don’t work on them!”

Nancy looked down at her gun and back at Lilly, “It’s from a daemon realm, obviously!”

“Oh, how did you get it?”

Nancy let out a half grin. “Brought it back from a dead wraith’s imaginary police station... in Atlantis... I guess.”

She stuck a hand out, helping Lilly in successfully righting herself. “I’m Lilly, by the way,” she said.

“I’m Nancy fucking McQueen, slayer of wraiths, host to magical detectives and drinker of spirits. Oh, and hopefully in about ten minutes, killer of wizards.”

Lilly was visibly impressed, and actually, a little intimidated. This was a new and improved Nancy. Gone was the drunken waster. She conducted herself like a hunter and it was a little scary.

“Okay then,” she finally said, because what else could she say?

TOASTED MEAT

Mike and Howard had managed to dodge the first fireball. Howard had been badly burned in the process, but Mike knew he would be fine. His abilities let him ignore most injuries.

The second fireball was even larger than the first. It was growing and the sea god was looming down so close now that either was quite able to kill them.

Mike's passengers buzzed, however, this time, it was no deep insight or superb plan. It was just a notification that they could see no way of winning this fight. Which was concerning, to say the least.

"Hey Howard," Mike yelled over the wind, rain, fireball sizzling and sea God stomping.

"What?" Howard yelled back.

"It's been great. Really, thanks for everything," he said to Howard, who slid to a stop next to him, almost falling in the rain, burns across his body and clothes partially melted.

"We done then?" He asked.

“Seems like it, aye,” Mike said, lowering his red edged blades and steeling himself ready for death.

“Yeah, we did okay, didn’t we?” he asked, clapping him on the back.

They were both in oddly good spirits, given the grimness of the situation.

“Hey!” they heard a voice yell from behind the wizard.

His fireball hovered above one hand, now the size of a truck tyre. He turned to look back at the voice, almost casually, though a moment later his fireball turned to smoke, with the shock of what he saw.

Neither Mike nor Howard could see past him from where they were standing, but they soon recognised the voice.

“How are you still alive?” he asked, so astonished that he sounded a little scared.

“Better question, how long do you think you’ll last now?” she said.

“Nancy?” Mike asked. Loudly, the storm abruptly dying down.

“You should be dead!” the wizard snarled.

From the sound of the gunshot, Mike and Howard knew that she had shot him. A moment later, he stumbled back towards them. He turned, bullet hole in his shoulder and black blood seeping out of the wound, down his formerly impenetrable white glowing jacket.

“How?” he asked, touching the hole with one hand, but still clutching his cane with the other.

“Mike, Howard, I think we can go now. The rest takes care of itself, I think,” Nancy said, walking past the wizard, almost shoving him out of the way as she passed. Lilly was just behind her, but far less cavalier.

“What, how?” Howard asked, with bafflement.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, walking down the street, away from the direction of the monster.

“Well, she seems to know what she’s doing!” Mike shrugged, following her. He was limping and cut. Howard took his arm and hooked it over his shoulder, helping him walk.

“What, what’s happening?” the wizard asked, dropping to his knees.

Nancy came running back past them all, and to the wizard. She grabbed his cane and pushed him away from it, taking it out of his grip. “I think I’ll have this, if you don’t mind.”

She darted back and carried on walking point for them away from the monster, who loomed down on them. They glanced back and an ethereal clawed hand came down from the sky. It was massive, and as it closed around the wizard, it vanished, taking him with it. The storm stopped immediately, and the wind died down. They looked back at the sky just in time to see the two red lights blink out and the shadow of the old god’s head fade away, leaving nothing but clouds and sky.

“What just happened?” Mike asked.

“I came, I saw, and...”

“You kicked its ass!” Lilly finished with a heartfelt sky punch.

“You’re damned right I did!”

The portal closed behind them, and Nancy took her first steps into the garden. Just as she crossed the threshold of the little wall she saw the door to the house open. Dink stepped out and instantly saw her. She came running across the lawn, ignoring the busy breakfast area and the people carrying trays of tea back to their tables.

Nancy sprinted off towards her.

Mike's fractured rib was already feeling better. Howard's skin was unburning so fast that you could literally watch it heal. Lilly looked at him with a disgusted fascination.

"Can I poke it?" she asked. Howard glared at her in response.

"What happened back there, Lilly?" Mike asked. Now walking straighter.

"No idea. She was in some magical coma, then she was recovered and pulled a daemon weapon, a gun. She knew how to use it too," Lily replied.

"She somehow made the Candiru retreat, that's impressive!" Howard noted.

Mike nodded and strolled towards his usual seat in the garden. An enthusiastic young man brought a tray of tea over and welcomed him home.

After ten minutes of enthusiastic and very public making out in the middle of the lawn, Nancy and Dink finally joined them.

"What happened?" Dink asked them all.

Nancy took a cup of tea and didn't so much as blink at its perfection, or indeed ask where she was.

"Well," she began. "I was stuck in this freaky under water police station, then there was a fish man, and then I shot Holmes in the head."

"You did what?" Dink asked in shock.

"Yeah, Candiru, the big sea fella. He wanted me because of Holmes. He needed to kill me to get him out of me so he could eat him. So, I killed him and then there was nothing for Candiru. He just snacked on Nigel and off he fucked."

Someone delivered a plate of toast and it honestly looked like Nancy would bite anyone who tried to take it from her. She was exhausted

and starving. Mike noted that she may have been in the daemon realm for some time.

“That’s horrible!” Dink said, covering her mouth in shock.

“I don’t think it is actually... is it, Mike?” she said with a knowing glance.

Mike smirked in reply. “You can’t kill a wraith, I tried. More than once. Whatever happened to Holmes, it won’t be long before he finds his way back to you. I know that for sure!”

“All came down to faith in the end. I figured you wouldn’t have lied to me about wraiths, and you seemed to know what you were talking about,” she said, shoving toast into her mouth gleefully.

“I still don’t get how or why a wraith would have amnesia, though!” Howard observed as he scratched his now fully healed neck.

Mike shrugged thoughtfully.

“Where’s Marina?” Nancy asked, chewing.

“She’s sleeping. The people here said she’ll sleep until it’s time for her to leave. Apparently, she isn’t suited to this life,” Dink informed her.

“Lazy cow!” Nancy said, suddenly yawning.

IT NEVER STRIKES TWICE

Nancy woke up in her bed and kissed Dink on the forehead. She got up, in her incredibly tidy flat and started making breakfast. She knew Marina would arrive any time now and expect feeding. Nancy had taken over cooking and it turned out she was not terrible at it.

She heard Dink waking up and sat down to a cup of coffee that contained no 'pick me up.' She smiled at her life and how suddenly she had everything she wanted.

The sun was in her eyes, streaming in from her living room, through the now very open curtains. She strolled in there to look out of the now clean windows and noticed a bag that she had forgotten about. It was Pilgrim's laptop. A light was flashing on its edge. She put it on the coffee table and opened it. A video started playing.

"Hello Nancy," said the well dressed and less dead recording of Pilgrim. "I know that by now you know I had my own passenger, and her ability was, is, prescience. Which means I know I'm dead. I leave to you this laptop. It contains all my research and access to post on my

website if you choose to carry on the legacy. Also, there's a file for you on the desktop. Password is 'Sophia.'" The screen blinked off and the login prompt she had seen before appeared. She typed in the password and looked at the file.

She opened it and started to read. Dink appeared next to her and took her coffee, being in greater need than her.

"Oh, you got into the laptop?" she asked through half-closed eyes.

Marina came in and began complaining that breakfast was burning.

Nancy ignored them both for a few more seconds and then stood up with purpose and drive.

"No fucking way!" she yelled.

"What?" Dink asked, dropping her coffee.

"My dad's alive! And he's in a fucking volcano!" she said with wide, stunned eyes.

Dink and Marina just looked at her, stunned.

The wind blew, and the woman fell through the clouds. She held Zeus' sceptre tightly and hoped it would work this time. She had fallen a dozen times now, but she was sure that this time she knew how to use it. She wanted to go home, back to Mike and the garden, but she couldn't until she finished her mission.

Just as the clouds cleared, she said the enchantment and waved the bloody stick around as she was supposed to. This time it lit up and for a moment she felt the power that she had been looking for all these months. She wrapped her mind around it and commanded it into action. It almost worked until she heard a voice in her head that said, "impressive!"

She lost her control and fell to the ground. After a half hour of letting her body heal, she sat up. “Who are you? Charles?” she asked in her mind.

“No, my name’s Holmes and I’m sorry, but I’m a little lost.”

Sophia rolled her eyes. She knew all about wraiths, though, usually her fiancé looked after them.

“Well, Holmes, looks like we’re going home a little early,” she replied.

“What’s your name?” he asked, sounding quite confused.

“Sophia, and it’s good to meet you.”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

HexDSL is a creature of the internet that has existed for many years now. Hex enjoys Hallmark mysteries, trash science-fiction and old detective stories. All of which are reflected his writing with stunning regularity. He currently lives in England, the Midlands, to be overly specific. He tries hard to be a good human. He intends to write much more in the future. As well as talk about things endlessly on his Website:

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He wrote the book that's attached to this page mostly in Microsoft Word. He typed the words out on a Laptop he named Libby (XPS13, for those who care.) If for any reason you want to know more about him, the website is a good place to start. He reads, and he often replies to emails too.

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He will write again, in:

“Denouement 3”

Thank you for taking the time to read this. It was a blast writing it.