

Cthulhushire

The Hunter Through Time

By Stephen J Dutton



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Private investigators Michael Lester and Prudence Brent are hired to find locate a group of people who disappeared from their rented home leaving only strange arcane markings painted on walls and doors. As they conduct their search for the missing people though Michael and Prudence discover that they are not alone in hunting them.

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1.

The private detective Michael Lester returned to his office in the centre of the small town of Wellslaw to find his recently recruited assistant Prudence Brent eating sandwiches at the desk. The office was a small room with only just enough space for the pair but it was adequate when most of their work required them to be away from it carrying out investigations.

"A fruitful morning Michael?" she asked before sucking fruit juice from a carton.

"Very. Our friend seems very active for a man who claims to be incapable of walking more than a few steps unaided." Michael answered, walking around the desk and sitting down behind it, placing his phone on the desk before plugging it into his computer.

"Ooh let me see." Prudence said, leaning so she could see the screen as Michael copied the photographs that he had taken of a group of young men playing football in a park.

"There's video as well." Michael told her, "The ball got kicked into a tree and our boy climbed it without a grumble."

"So suffering from a serious spinal injury because he slipped at work is unlikely then?" Prudence joked and a smile spread across her face.

"There are not enough pain killers in the world to let him do that if he was as badly hurt as he was claiming. These pictures should save the insurance company a six figure sum. Ten percent of which is now ours."

"Not bad for a total of a day and a half's worth of work." Prudence commented.

"No, not at all." Michael

"So we'll have time for another case then?" Prudence added and Michael looked at her.

"There was a call while I was out?" he asked and Prudence picked up a piece of paper.

"A guy called Jack French. He owns some houses in Houndsforth that he rents out and he thinks that one household just bailed on him without paying their rent and leaving it in a real mess." Prudence told him.

"Enough damage to justify hiring us to find them? That must be a lot of damage." Michael said as Prudence handed him the piece of paper and he looked at it, "Did he say anything about a good time to call him?" he added when he saw the mobile telephone number at the bottom and Prudence shook her head.

"No, just that he'd be grateful if you got back to him as quickly as possible. I assume that he's keen to get the money for the repairs before he has to start paying for them out of his own pocket." Prudence said and Michael reached for the telephone handset on the desk.

"Was it the last number?" he asked.

"No Jane called to say that the security company you recommended arrived to fit our new alarm. I'm still not sure that she buys the excuse I gave her but I couldn't exactly say that there's a homicidal lizard man out there somewhere that could hold a grudge against us both. Short of a certain famous ex-sports presenter I'm not sure that anyone would believe that." Prudence told him and he smiled.

"No, he wasn't the Messiah was he? He was just a very naughty boy. At least if you believe some of the things said about him." he said.

"Well I may even need to take up playing rounders to justify having that bat under my bed now." Prudence added.

"Count yourself lucky. If the police happen to pop round then I may need to explain why one of the shotguns I own isn't in the cabinet where it's supposed to be at night and is instead loaded and by my bed." Michael responded.

"Is that to fend off the lizard man or my housemate?" Prudence said, grinning and Michael sighed.

"Is she still trying set up a meeting between us?" he asked.

"Actually no. Ever since she tried to make me the star of an amateur adult movie that she was going to send to you she's been quiet on that front. I think she's met someone else at work. At least now you don't need to worry about your girlfriend walking in on the two of you in a compromising position."

"Yes, I'd hate for Emma to need me to invent an alibi. Anyway, let's see what Mister French has to say about his missing tenants." Michael said as he punched the telephone number left for him into the handset.

"Maybe he's murdered them and buried them under the patio. He could be lying about them running off." Prudence said right before the telephone was answered.

"Hello?" a man's voice said.

"Is that Mister French?" Michael asked.

"Is this a sales call because whatever it is-" the man began.

"I'm Michael Lester from Lester Security Services. My assistant told me that you had called about a number of missing persons." Michael interrupted.

"Oh right. Missing bloody parasites more like, but yes I called you. I need them finding a quick. I want my money back from them for all the damage they've done." Jack replied.

"Well we can call round and see you now if you want. You can give me some more detailed information and I can explain what we can do for you and how much it will cost. Are you at the house right now?"

"Yes I'm there. Do you have the address?"

"Yes my assistant wrote it down. We can be there in about fifteen or twenty minutes." Michael told him.

"Thanks. I'll be waiting." Jack responded before he hung up the phone. Michael then looked across the desk at Prudence.

"Hurry up with that sandwich. We're off." he said to her.

Prudence quickly finished her lunch before she and Michael left the office and headed for the car park behind the building it was located in. Michael's car was easy to spot, an expensive Range Rover parked among a variety of cheaper vehicles.

"Rushing my lunch is worth it to be able to ride in your car again." Prudence said as she climbed into the passenger side. However, just as she was about to fasten her seatbelt she frowned.

"Something wrong?" Michael asked, inserting the key into the ignition and Prudence reached down to pick up a high heeled shoe.

"Well it's not your size so I'm guessing Emma left it here?" she said before she picked up a second matching shoe.

"Yes, just toss them in the back and I'll return them to her."

"Okay but that better be all she left. I don't want know how much she took off in here." Prudence responded, putting the shoes on the Range Rover's back seat.

"Speaking of cars I think you could do with one." Michael said as he began to drive out of the car park, turning to drive around onto the main road.

"No argument there. I think I'm about three quarters of the way to my target." Prudence replied.

"What if I were to help you out? The company I mean." Michael asked and Prudence smiled.

"A company car?" she said.

"Yes. Following people is better if you have a second vehicle to swap to. You'd need lessons of course." Michael said.

"I have a licence. It was on my CV." Prudence pointed out.

"I'm not talking regular civilian driving. I'm talking the sort of driving I learned with the army." Michael told her.

"I was thinking of something like a Mini. Not a Centurion tank. That's right isn't it? Last time I said Chieftain and you told me the army didn't have them any more." Prudence said.

"Actually the Centurion is even older. There were still a few of the variants in service when I first joined up though. I mean driving like when we were following that lizard man pretending to be an innocent dealer in antiques."

"The sort that's so scary it almost made me wet myself? I think I could enjoy that." Prudence said, smiling.

Houndsforth was just to the north of Wellslaw, a five minute drive along the road Michael's office was located on and he and Prudence were soon at the house owned by Jack French. His car was parked outside and as the two investigators got out of the Range Rover they looked at the semi-detached house.

"Doesn't look too bad to me." Prudence said, looking at the front lawn that seemed to be well maintained.

"Door still intact and no broken windows. Certainly no Royal Marine has been here recently." Michael added and he started to walk towards the front door.

He and Prudence reached the door and he was about to ring the bell when it opened to reveal a grey haired man in overalls.

"I heard you pull up. I'm Jack French." Jack said, holding out his hand to Michael but he did not take it,

"Sorry." Jack added when he glanced down and saw that his gloved hand was covered in filth and he removed his gloves, tossing them onto the ground outside the front door and causing Prudence to suddenly step back to avoid what splashed off them, "Come on in. I'll show you what those idiots have left me with."

Michael and Prudence followed Jack inside the house and as soon as they stepped through the front doorway they saw that the neat exterior was in total contrast to the inside. Furniture was upturned and broken while carpets were torn and stained.

"I take it that all of the contents of the house belonged to you as well?" Michael said.

"The house was supplied furnished, yes. The tenants may have added a few items of their own but they had everything they needed. Now all of it needs replacing. I've been trying to clean the carpets of whatever it was they painted into it but all I've done is change random patterns into a giant blur." Jack told him.

"I don't suppose you have any photographs of what it was like beforehand do you?" Michael said.

"Yes I thought of that. I know the insurance company will ask for it." Jack said.

"So you have insurance then?" Prudence commented.

"Of course. I would be stupid not to but I doubt it will cover all of this and my premiums will skyrocket after a claim for all the damage they've done. Ideally I'd drag the lot of them back here and make them clean everything up but I expect they're all lying around drunk or drugged somewhere." Jack said.

"How many of them are we looking for?" Michael asked.

"Four. Two of them were a couple so that left a room spare that someone was going to be looking at this weekend. I've already cancelled that. I've got all their names, mobile numbers, previous addresses and details of who to contact in an emergency but no-one I spoke to knew where they were."

"You've spoken to other people?" Michael commented and Jack nodded.

"Yes, their parents. Don't worry I didn't make any threats. I just told them that the house had been damaged and they needed to contact me to arrange to pay for it. I didn't even mention legal action." he said.

"Their parents? How old are they?" Prudence commented when she heard this.

"They're all in their twenties. Not long out of university I think. They can't afford homes on their own so they're spreading the cost by just renting a share of a house."

"Just like you." Michael commented, looking at Prudence. Then he turned to Jack and added, "We'll need their details of course, including the contact numbers for their parents."

"Sure." Jack responded, nodding.

"Did the neighbours complain a lot?" Prudence said and Jack frowned.

"No. Why?" he asked.

"I've been to a few wild parties in my time and the neighbours always complain when they get too loud. Surely this must have attracted their attention." Prudence said.

"Sounds like a place to start. The neighbours might have spoken to our missing persons as well." Michael said, nodding in agreement. Then he looked at Jack and added, "What about the rest of the house?"

"They lit a fire in the kitchen and burned a bunch of papers as well as tipping food everywhere but come on upstairs. The worst of the damage is up there." Jack said and he then led Michael and Prudence up the stairs to a landing where all the doors were closed, making it easy to see the marks that had been daubed on them all, "I don't have a clue what any of this is supposed to be but there's even more of it in here." he said, walking over to one of the doors and opening it.

The room on the other side had once been a bedroom but now it was totally empty. Every last piece of furniture had been removed, the carpet ripped up and the curtains torn down. The window itself had been painted over in white paint and this was covered on the inside by markings that matched those that now covered the upstairs doors and also all of the walls, floor and ceiling in this room.

"Do you know whose room this was?" Michael asked.

"No-one's. It was the vacant one I was supposed to be showing to a new tenant. I found everything that was supposed to be in here dumped in the hall downstairs. Broken and ruined like pretty much everything else." Jack answered, "So can you help me?"

"I think so. It's difficult for someone to disappear totally without trace so there should be a trail to follow. Did Prudence explain how we charge?" Michael said and Jack nodded.

"Yes. I'll be charging the cost to those idiots anyway." he replied before his phone began to ring and he looked at the screen, "Oh great, this is the new tenant. I need to take this. Can I leave you to get started? You can look around all you want."

"Thanks. We'll start in here." Michael said and Jack left the room, answering the phone as he stepped onto the landing.

"So are these people junkies?" Prudence said, looking at the marks that had been painted on every surface in the room.

"Possibly. Although some of these markings look like they're supposed to have some sort of meaning. Look, this set is repeated and they seem to like their pentagrams." Michael replied.

"So they were Satanists then." Prudence commented.

"Maybe, I'm not really familiar with it. They could just have been really serious about playing Dungeons and Dragons. I want you to take pictures of all of this." Michael told her as he also took out his own mobile phone and turned on the camera. However, instead of taking still images he switched his to video mode and began walking around the room so he could make a single record of the markings, "Now this is interesting though." he added when he was finished recording the video and he made his way to one of the corners of the room.

"What is it?" Prudence asked, walking over to stand beside Michael where she saw a pale blue substance clinging to the corner. This ran from a point about four feet up the wall down to the floor where it had formed a small pool.

"I don't know." Michael answered.

"So are you going to take a sample and get it analysed?"

"There are two problems with that. Firstly we don't have anything that we could carry a sample of that goo in and secondly having chemicals analysed is costly. We're just trying to find these people. If that's some sort of home made drug then it really isn't any of our business. Make sure to get a picture of it though. Then we'll search the other bedrooms."

The bedroom beside the one covered in the strange markings was in a similar condition to the rest of the house with furniture broken and bedclothes ripped apart. In addition to this the belongings of the person who had lived here, obviously a man from the clothing, were scattered around the room.

"This place looks like it was burgled." Prudence said.

"Yes it does rather. Even if someone had been fighting in here I doubt that they'd take the time to pull out drawers and tip their contents onto the floor." Michael replied before he bent down to pick something up from among the mess on the floor, "On the other hand I would have expected a burglar to have taken this." he added and he held up a wallet. Then he opened it and looked inside. There he saw several banknotes as well as some small change in addition to a bank card, "This is Emma's bank." he said, "I suppose I should let her know that the owner has disappeared and dropped his card."

"Think she'll be able to tell us if he calls asking for another?" Prudence said.

"Not if she wants to keep her job. But having the account of this Mister D L Briggs put under observation or maybe even frozen will limit his options for staying on the run." Michael said and then Prudence smiled.

"Oh hey, there's a phone here as well. Who leaves their phone lying around if they're going on the run?" she said as she crouched down to pick up the phone.

"Anyone that doesn't want to be tracked by the government or one of the big tech companies. If your phone is turned on then they all know where it is and there are all sorts of applications that can turn on the microphone or even the camera to spy on you."

Prudence suddenly paused and looked at Michael.

"You don't happen to have any of those applications on your computer do you?" she asked him nervously.

"No. Why?" he responded and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad to hear that. It's just that I've taken to taking my phone into the bathroom when I shower so Jane can't try and film me naked when I get out to send to you."

"Your housemate, no. But if there are any perverts working for your mobile provider then you could end up an internet star any day now. I suggest you buy a protective cover for your phone that blocks the camera lens."

"If we find Mister Briggs I bet he'll wish he bought a protective cover for his phone." Prudence said as she then looked at the phone she had just picked up and she held it out so that Michael could see that the screen had been smashed.

"It looks like it's been trodden on." he commented.

"So no good then?" Prudence asked.

"Oh it could still come in useful. The memory might still be intact and we can find out who he's been speaking to."

"Such as someone he wanted to go and stay with?" Prudence suggest and Michael smiled.

"Exactly. Maybe if you ever manage to get a proper journalist's job you can actually ask the right questions instead of the dumb ones most of them seem to." he said, "Now I think it's time we checked another room."

The next bedroom was in a similar state to the previous one, with the contents having been scattered around the room so wildly it was impossible to tell where most of the items had started off. However, it was easy to tell that the occupant of this room had been a woman and there were several photographs of various groups of people that had just one young woman in them all.

"I'm guessing this was her then." Prudence said, looking at one of the photographs, "Looks like she had plenty of friends."

"Good. Maybe we can identify a few of them. Photograph all those pictures and we'll see what we can-" Michael began.

"What?" Prudence said when he stopped talking unexpectedly and Michael crouched down to reach behind an upturned desk.

"Jackpot." he said as he picked up a laptop computer and set it down on the bed before opening it and turning it on.

"Michael no-one would just leave a computer lying around. I can see that someone might forget a wallet or phone, but a laptop?"

"Maybe she was planning to come back for it. Maybe they all are still planning to come back. Hopefully there's no password on this computer though." Michael replied, watching the computer start up and he smiled when he saw the desktop appear, "Excellent. Now let's see if the Wi-Fi is still working." he said as he started the internet browser from the icon on the desktop.

"Internet?" Prudence said, "Are you going to read her e-mails or something?"

"Maybe later. For now I just want to see whether, ah yes here we go. She bookmarked her social media page and if we're lucky she'll have left it logged in." Michael said, "Yep, logged in permanently. Now you can go through everything and find out what she was doing before she vanished."

"Me?" Prudence commented.

"Yes. I'm hoping that you'll be able to pick out anything odd better than I can. After all you're-

"A woman?"

"Exactly. So is there anything else in this room that looks to you like it shouldn't be here?"

"You're kidding, right?" Prudence said, staring at Michael, "I wouldn't have a clue what was supposed to be here in this mess." then she looked down at the floor and added, "Although I do like her taste in shoes. I hope she posted where she got those from on her social media."

The final bedroom was the room occupied by the couple and there was a marked difference between the condition of the possessions of the pair. Those that looked as if they belonged to the woman had been scattered across the floor like those in the other rooms but what remained of the man's looked as if they were still where they were normally kept.

"Interesting." Michael said, "Someone needed to go through her things but not his."

"Maybe they just didn't get that far." Prudence commented.

"I don't think so. Look at this set of drawers. All of them that have been tipped up contained her things while the ones with his in have been left alone."

"Why only search her things though?" Prudence asked.

"I'm thinking that we've found our culprit for making the mess." Michael told her, "I think that this guy was looking for something that he thought one of the others had hidden somewhere. Of course he wouldn't need to ransack his own belongings to look for it, whatever it was." then he smiled and walked over to one of the wardrobes that had a man's clothing inside, "In fact take a look at this. Some of these hangars at the front are empty. I think he grabbed a few things and then left. In a hurry probably."

"What about the other three?"

"Maybe he went to join them. Perhaps they left first and he followed them."

"After checking to see if they'd hidden something. Perhaps whatever it was belonged to him and he wanted to get it back." Prudence said,

"That's a good suggestion although it still doesn't answer the question of what it was or whether he found it. Now I think we should check the kitchen." Michael said.

"Don't tell me you're hungry." Prudence said.

"No but if you recall Jack said that a fire was started there." Michael reminded her.

"To burn some papers." Prudence added and Michael smiled.

"Exactly, Now what would be so important that someone would need to burn it?" he said.

2.

The kitchen showed the same signs of having been ransacked as the other rooms in the house and food had been tipped out onto the floor before the packets had been dropped on top of it. Only sealed packets, bottles and cans still had their contents but even these had been pulled from where they had been kept.

Prudence slipped as she stood in something slippery and she squealed as she began to fall before Michael caught her.

"Are you okay?" he asked and she nodded.

"Fine. Just glad that you don't need to rush me to hospital because I cracked my head open after literally slipping on a banana peel." she said as she looked down at what it was she had stepped on.

"Good." Michael said as he let go of her, "Now how long would you say all of this had been here?" he added, looking at the spilled food.

"I don't know. Not long though, nothing seems rotten." Prudence answered and Michael nodded in agreement.

"That's what I'd say as well." he said, "My guess is that all this happened some time yesterday. Now let's see what they were setting fire to. The thing about fire is that it doesn't necessarily destroy everything on a sheet of paper. You have to make sure to break up the ashes afterwards. Or ripping up the paper beforehand can work just as well to stop them from being put back together."

The fire had been set in a metal cooking pot left on the table and the ceiling immediately above this was discoloured by smoke. As Jack had said the fire had been set using paper stuffed into the pot and among the ashes were several large pieces of paper that, although charred were still intact and what had been written on them could still be made out. Carefully Michael removed one of the partially burned sheets of paper from the pot.

"This looks like the stuff that's scrawled all over the walls." he said as he laid the paper out on the table.

"It looks like there was regular writing underneath it though." Prudence added, noticing what looked like part of a line of text that was just about visible at the bottom of what remained of the sheet of paper.

"Yes it does. Maybe there'll be a clue there about what they were up to. What about the other sheets?"

Michael said and they both looked back at the pot where there were more sheets of partially burned paper to be read.

"How do I do this?" Prudence asked as she extended her arm to try and pick up the next sheet.

"Gently. Just use your finger and thumb." Michael told her and she slowly pulled the sheet from the pot.

"Damn it!" she exclaimed as she watched more of the paper crumble, leaving only about a third of the sheet intact.

"That's okay. Just set it down and we'll take a look." Michael said.

When Prudence set the remains of the paper down on the table beside what was left of the first sheet Michael saw that the only thing left was part of a diagram of some kind made up of straight lines at various angles with numbers labelling where they intersected one another. Unfortunately if there was any sort of key to what these numbers represented then that information had been consumed by the flames. However, on this sheet he was able to make out something that he had missed on the other, a distinct line that followed the edge of the paper about a quarter of an inch in which the colour changed.

"You've seen something. What is it?" Prudence commented when she saw him suddenly start looking back and forth between the two sheets of paper.

"Prudence I think these are photographs that someone's printed out." he told her.

"Photographs? I mean I get that they were printed out from the paper but what makes you think they are photographs instead pages of an e-book or document?" Prudence asked.

"This line here. Look closely and you'll see that there was originally a white border around the edge of the paper before it got darker, just like you get if you print out a photograph." Michael answered and he moved his finger along the line he had seen, "I think that someone photographed the original document and then printed it out."

"So what was the original document these came from?" Prudence said.

"That's the big question." Michael responded, "Hopefully the image files themselves will be on that laptop or the phone's memory card and we can see what was in them before someone decided to try and destroy them."

"What about these?" Prudence asked, waving her hand at the burned papers.

"We'll keep what's left just in case we can't find the image files. Half a clue is better than none after all."

Michael replied and Prudence nodded.

"Okay. What's next?" she said.

"Next we get the details of these missing people and their parents from our client and I'll drop you at home. I think we can call it a day now." Michael said.

"Do you want me to take the laptop home with me? I can maybe take a look through it after dinner if I get time." Prudence suggested.

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that." Michael said and Prudence smiled.

"Hey if you're thinking about buying me a car then it's the least I can do."

When Michael stopped his Range Rover opposite the house that Prudence shared with her friend Jane he looked towards the house and spotted Jane looking back out of the window.

"Looks like she's been waiting for you to get home." he said, turning to Prudence as she was undoing her seatbelt.

"More likely she's decided to try and get her claws into you again and is hoping I'll invite you in." Prudence replied, reaching into the back of the car to retrieve the laptop, "Okay so I'll see you tomorrow." she added, looking at Michael and he looked back at her. As he did so he noticed Prudence moving her head to the side while looking past him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Just trying to get my head behind yours so Jane won't know if we're kissing or not." Prudence replied and Michael let out a sigh.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning. Bright and early." he told her before she smiled and got out of the car.

Prudence waited for Michael to drive away before she crossed the road and walked up the path to her front door and unlocked it.

"Hi Jane." she said as she entered the lounge, "So how did the alarm fitting go?"

"Hi Prudence. It went fine. Though why we need alarm contacts on every door and window is beyond me. We've got motion sensors in all the important rooms." the other woman replied.

"Yes but Michael says that they aren't infallible." Prudence said as she headed towards the kitchen, setting the laptop computer down on the couch as she passed by it.

"Is this about your lizard man again?" Jane said, putting her hands on her hips. Prudence had told Jane about the first case she and Michael had investigated together that led them to uncover the existence of a reptilian humanoid masquerading as an antiques dealer but her housemate had dismissed the idea as a bad joke so Prudence did not think it a good idea to bring the subject up again so she could explain how the cold blooded creature did not trigger thermal sensors.

"No I think it's got something to do with what he did in the army." Prudence said, thinking up a lie quickly as she entered the kitchen to get something to eat.

"Well I've got something I want you to try." Jane said, following her from the lounge.

"What is it?" Prudence asked, taking a meal from the freezer and opening the packet ready to put it in the oven.

"Oh just a new type of tea I had recommended to me." Jane told her and she began to pour hot water from the kettle into a mug she had already prepared. Then after stirring it with a spoon she passed it to Prudence, "Here, try it."

"I'm not sure Jane." Prudence said.

"Go on, it's nice. One of the secretaries at work suggested it. It's not snake venom or anything." Jane said.

"Okay but enough of the snake jokes, okay? I can show you the video Michael shot if you want." Prudence replied and she took the mug and gave it a sniff, "This smells sweet." she commented before she sipped the warm drink, "Is that raspberry?" she said and Jane smiled.

"I knew you'd get it." she said as the pair walked back into the lounge.

"Aren't you having one?" Prudence commented when she saw that Jane did not have a drink of her own.

"I had one ten minutes ago." Jane said, sitting down and watching as Prudence continued to drink her tea. Then she smiled and added, "Okay so tell me all about what you did today. Have you found the serpent person yet?"

Rather than return to his own apartment building after he had dropped Prudence off at her home Michael drove to the building where his girlfriend Emma lived.

"I'm here." he said into the intercom on the building's front door.

"Come on up. I've made dinner for us both." Emma's voice responded and there was a buzzing sound as she released the door for him. Pushing this open Michael hurried up the stairs rather than wait for the lift and knocked on the door of Emma's apartment.

"Hello gorgeous." Michael said when Emma opened the door and he kissed her on his way inside.

"Thanks Mike." she replied.

"Oh you thought I was calling you gorgeous. I was looking into that mirror over there." Michael joked, pointing to the mirror that hung in the hallway and Emma frowned as she closed the apartment door behind him.

"Dinner's on the table Michael. Come and eat it. I dare you." she said.

"Thanks." Michael said and right before he sat down at the table he reached into his pocket to take out the bank card he had found at the damaged house and he slid it towards Emma.

"Where did you get this?" she asked as she picked it up, reading the name from the card and seeing immediately that it was neither hers nor Michael's.

"It was in a wallet that a missing person left behind in their bedroom. Since it technically belongs to your bank I thought you ought to have it." Michael explained.

"Mike you don't expect me to start giving you any information about the man this was issued to do you?" Emma replied.

"Don't worry Emma, I'm not trying to get you fired but if this guy has disappeared then you might want to keep an eye on his account. Of course if there is anything you can tell me then-" Michael began.

"I'll make sure the card is put into the system as lost Michael but that's all I can do." Emma interrupted him.

"Fair enough. Like I said I don't want you to get fired." Michael responded.

"So are you going to tell me why you're looking for Dominic Briggs?" Emma asked, reading the signature off the back of the card.

"Oh he and his three housemates trashed their house before running off and leaving the landlord with one hell of a mess to clean up." Michael told her.

"And do you think they were eaten by lizard people?" Emma added. Like Prudence and done with Jane, Michael had tried to warn his girlfriend about the serpent person that could be hunting for them but with no more success than she had met with.

"No. More likely they all got high and smashed everything up. Then when they came down from their trip they saw what they'd done and decided to get out before their landlord saw the mess and handed them a bill for the damage." Michael said before he took another bite of the meal Emma had made for him. Then he paused and added, "Mind you they had painted a whole load of weird stuff on the walls." and Emma groaned.

3.

Prudence was breathing heavily when she burst into the office the next morning with the laptop under her arm.

"Just made it." she said, looking at the clock.

"Running late?" Michael asked.

"You could say that." Prudence answered, "It started last night. I fell sound asleep half right after dinner and woke up at about eleven. That means I didn't get chance to look at this laptop though, sorry."

"That's alright. I can't expect you to give up every minute of your time." Michael said.

"Thanks. So anyway I went to bed and fell right asleep again and slept right through my alarm. If Jane hadn't knocked on my door I bet I'd still be asleep now." Prudence continued as she turned on the computer.

"Well you're here now so you may as well get started looking at that laptop. I'm running background checks on our four missing persons now. Let's see, we have Dominic Briggs whose bank card is now back with his bank, Elise Mayall, Andrew Watson and Laura Croft."

"Laura Croft? Seriously?" Prudence commented, and Michael smiled.

"Seriously. I think she's the owner of that laptop you've got there." Michael told her as she quickly navigated to the bookmarked social media page on the laptop computer.

"And of course here are pictures of her dressed as a certain computer game character at a party." Prudence said, turning the laptop around so that Michael could see the photograph of the young woman wearing a revealing outfit and carrying a pair of toy pistols with bright orange tips that she had posted on her social media account.

"So is there anything on there about what they were doing before they ran off?" Michael asked.

"Let's see." Prudence said, looking back at the information Laura had posted, "Most of this seems to be about holiday plans." she said.

"Does it say where and when? Maybe she's gone abroad. We didn't find a passport after all." Michael said.

"Sorry Michael. It looks like she booked a surfing holiday in Cornwall. She wouldn't need a passport."

Prudence replied as she searched the posts for the information. Then she found another post and paused,

"Wait this is interesting." she said.

"What have you found?"

"Over the past few weeks she's put up several posts about going shopping. Some of them were about the holiday she was planning again, it looks like she was buying a new wetsuit online but there's also stuff about 'supplies for the big night'." Prudence said.

"Supplies for the big night? Sounds like something I discussed with a girl when we were both fifteen and her parents were away for a weekend." Michael commented.

"How romantic. Condoms and cola." Prudence said.

"And cigarettes. Mustn't forget the cigarettes for afterwards to feel really grown up. So what was Miss Croft buying?"

"Let's see. Candles. Basil. Black lotus. What the hell is black lotus?"

"Sounds like a flower but I've never heard of a black flower and I certainly don't remember seeing any at the house. Although I suppose Jack could already have thrown them out. Does it say where this black lotus came from?"

"Actually there's a picture from about a month ago. Look, she's standing outside that florists in the high street with them. Oh there's also a book." Prudence said and then she sighed.

"What's wrong?" Michael asked.

"The book is called 'Witchcraft in Modern England' by Harriet DeLuna. Wait, it says she was on her way to pick up a copy from the author. This is after the stuff about the big night though."

"It might still be worth following up on. The author must live must live relatively close by if Laura was going to collect the book in person. Does it say where?" Michael said but Prudence shook her head.

"No, not here. Maybe somewhere else though." she said.

"Hold on I'll see what I can find." Michael replied, quickly typing the author's name into his internet browser's search engine, "A-ha, here we are. Harriet DeLuna has her own web page." he said, clicking on the link.

"So does she have a pointy hat and a broomstick?" Prudence asked.

"No but she has a well put together webpage if you ask me. Complete with an online store for the books she's written. Six of them it looks like. All available for twenty pounds each or forty if you want them signed."

Michael said, "Ah now this is more interesting."

"What is?"

"She has a bio page. It looks like she's a member of a pagan coven." Michael said.

"Does it tell us where she lives?" Prudence said.

"No, she's smart enough not to publish that online but there is a contact page with an e-mail address and a post office box. A box that happens to be right here in Wellslaw so she can't be far away. I'm going to send her an e-mail and see if I can set up a meeting." Michael said as he began to type, "Put a photo of Laura on your phone. Once I've done this we'll wander into the high street and see what the florist has to say about the black lotus. With any luck it's odd enough that he'll remember it."

The street on which the florist was located was a pedestrian area that this early in the morning was still relatively empty. This allowed a small number of delivery vehicles to easily make their way along the street that was off limits to most traffic and as Michael and Prudence approached the florists they saw an unmarked white van parked outside from which trays of various plants were being unloaded and taken inside.

"I'll be with you in just a moment." the florist told the two investigators as he took the last tray into his shop and Michael and Prudence followed him inside. The florist then went outside again to see the driver of the van off before he returned, "Now what can I do for you?" he asked with a smile.

"Actually we're looking for some information about a young woman you may have sold some flowers to about a month ago. My name is Michael Lester and I run a private detective agency. The woman in question has disappeared and we've been asked to find her." Michael said, holding out a business card towards the other man and the florist let out a nervous laugh.

"Hey look all I do every day is sell flowers and a month is a long time ago to remember a customer." he pointed out.

"Ah but we think that these were very special flowers." Prudence said as she brought up the picture of Laura Croft she had downloaded to her phone and showed it to the florist. To try and jog his memory more easily she had chosen the image of Laura standing outside his shop with the black lotus flowers in her hands, "Her name is Laura Croft and she lives in Houndsfirth. She picked these up from you."

"Oh yes I remember her. Those are some very expensive flowers she bought. Three hundred pounds for what she's holding there, that makes it easy to remember even after a month. Take a look around and you'll see you could get an entire garden full of more common plants for that much."

"So you don't normally carry black lotus in stock then?" Michael said and the florist shook his head.

"No. It had to be ordered in. Black lotus is difficult to grow and the only suppliers are in the far east. China and Indonesia mainly." he said.

"We didn't know that there even were any black flowers." Prudence commented.

"There aren't not really. A true black flower would absorb too much heat and die. Flowers like the black lotus are actually blue or purple." the florist explained.

"So what is a flower like that used for?" Michael asked but the florist shrugged.

"Beats me." he said, "That woman was the only person who's ever bought black lotus from me."

"So you wouldn't know if they were used in witchcraft?" Prudence said.

"Are you kidding?" the florist asked.

"It doesn't matter." Michael said, "I think you've told us all you can. Although if you do remember anything else then I'd be grateful if you could give me a call. My mobile number is on the card. Now if my girlfriend finds out I was here and didn't buy her a dozen roses she'll probably be my ex-girlfriend by this time tomorrow."

"Of course. What colour? If you're after black they'll take a few days to order in."

Michael and Prudence were just leaving the florist's shop with a bunch of white roses when his phone began to ring. Taking it from his belt he looked at the display to see who was calling him but although the number was shown and the area code indicated that it was fairly local he did not recognise it.

"Lester Security Services." he said after raising the phone to his head.

"Michael Lester?" a woman's voice asked.

"Yes." Michael answered, confident from the fact that the number had not been hidden that this was not a sales call.

"I'm Harriet DeLuna." the woman said.

"Ah Miss DeLuna. That was quick, I only e-mailed you a few minutes ago. Thanks for getting back to me." Michael said.

"No trouble at all. Your e-mail said that you were looking for a missing person. How does that relate to me?" Harriet said.

"According to her social media she may have met with you recently. Would it be possible to come and see you in person to discuss that?"

"I suppose so. Do you know Chorleaf?" Harriet said.

"I do. My assistant and I are in Wellslaw."

"Good, then you aren't far away. When would you like to visit?"

"If you send me your postcode now we'll be right round." Michael told her.

The parish of Chorleaf was more of an area of land than a town or village. There was a single cluster of houses to the north but apart from that tiny hamlet only individual houses could be found there and it was to one of these that the postcode provided by Harriet led the sat nav of Michael's Range Rover.

"This is nice." Prudence said when she saw the old house that looked as if it could have been untouched for well over a hundred years. There were no signs of modern technology anywhere on the outside at all and no car was visible either.

"Beats gingerbread I suppose." Michael commented as he parked on a spot of open ground beside the hedge that formed a barrier around the house. Then he and Prudence got out and walked to the front gate. There was a small arbour above the gate at the threshold of the property and hanging from this was a piece of wood with various symbols burned into it.

"Basil." Prudence commented and Michael looked at her.

"What is?" he asked.

"This plant." she said, pointing to the plant growing over the arbour.

"I wouldn't know. Herbs and spices aren't really my thing." Michael said, opening the gate and walking through.

"Just combat rations?" Prudence said as she followed him and they walked up the path together. Unsurprisingly there was no doorbell on the front door but there was an ornate metal knocker that featured some of the same symbols as the wood at the gate while a horseshoe had been hung above the door itself. Michael knocked three times and then they both waited a few seconds before the door was opened by a dark haired woman that Michael recognised from Harriet DeLuna's website.

"Harriet DeLuna? I'm Michael Lester and this is my assistant Prudence Brent." Michael said.

"Hi." Prudence added.

"Do come in, Let's see if we can find this poor missing woman shall we?" Harriet told them, stepping back to let them into her house.

"Thank you." Prudence replied.

"Can I get either of you a drink of tea?" Harriet asked as she led the investigators into the kitchen where a large cat sat licking its paw on the table, "Don't mind Grimalkin. He's harmless." she said, "Now what about that tea?"

"Just water for me thanks." Michael replied.

"I'd like some tea please." Prudence added as they both sat down and the cat moved towards her, prompting her to reach out and begin to stroke it, "This is a very nice house you have here." Prudence said to Harriet as she was making the tea.

"Thank you. The area is good for keeping away from some of the distractions caused by modern society. Of course on the other hand it does mean that I don't get to see many other people. Even my closest neighbours are half a mile away. Sometimes it seems that the person I see most is the TV licence man." Harriet replied.

"I didn't notice an aerial." Michael commented and Harriet smiled.

"Which is exactly what I tell him while he's trying to trick me into letting him inside. I can tell you a dozen ways to stop malign spirits from crossing your threshold but I still can't find one to keep those little trolls away." she said as she made her way to the table with a tray of drinks, handing one each to Michael and Prudence before setting the third cup down in front of the chair she then sat down on, "It is handy for meetings of my coven though. We aren't likely to be disturbed by drunks staggering home from the pub."

"Yes you're a Wiccan aren't you?" Prudence said.

"Pagan if you don't mind." Harriet responded.

"I'm sorry I don't know what the difference is." Prudence said.

"Pagans follow a belief system that goes back thousands of years whereas the Wiccan faith was created in the twentieth century by people who wanted an excuse to dance around naked." Harriet told her.

"I'm glad you asked that and not me." Michael commented, looking towards Prudence as well before sipping at his water, "Now Miss DeLuna-"

"Oh please call me Harriet." Harriet interrupted.

"Very well, Harriet we've been asked to locate four young people who have disappeared from their home. One of them posted on her social media account that she visited you recently for a book." Michael said.

"Witchcraft in Modern England." Prudence added.

"Ah yes, I think I remember her. Her name is Laura isn't it?" Harriet said.

"That's right. Laura Croft. She also bought a number of other items such as basil and a flower called black lotus." Michael said.

"Well basil is known for having a variety of uses. Personally I use it for its protective properties but others also prefer to use it for its ability to attract abundance or love." Harriet explained.

"Abundance?" Prudence said.

"Money generally." Harriet replied.

"And what about black lotus?" Michael asked.

"Beats me Michael. I don't pretend to know everything there is about spell casting but I'm familiar with most of the known ingredients and black lotus is something I've never even heard of. But what does any of this have to do with missing people?" Harriet said.

"One of Laura's last posts mentioned that they were gathering supplies for a big event and that included your book." Prudence told her.

"Could you tell us what people generally buy your book for?" Michael said.

"Oh I think most of them have some strange notion about mixing potions. Some will be looking for alternative medicines, others occult ways to get rich or get married. Then of course there are those who are interested in trying to contact supernatural beings. Laura asked me about the latter of those." Harriet said.

"What sort of supernatural being exactly?" Michael said and Harriet frowned.

"That's an unusual question. Most people tend to ask whether I believe in supernatural beings." she said and Michael smiled.

"Maybe prudence and I aren't most people." he said, "Prudence show her the photographs of the markings on the walls."

"Markings? What markings?" Harriet asked.

"The four missing people decided to redecorate their house with these symbols. Can you tell us what any of them mean?" Prudence said as she took out her phone and accessed the library of photographs she had taken at the house that showed the strange markings that had been painted on the surfaces of the spare bedroom.

"These aren't pagan symbols." Harriet said as she scrolled through the images stored on the phone, "Of course some people will just scrawl random lines on a surface to try and make it look like it's part of a ritual. Usually they're students who want a theme for a party where they all dress up and get drunk." then she paused and frowned, "That's odd." she said.

"What is? Do you recognise something Harriet?" Michael asked.

"No but look at these two pictures you took." Harriet answered and she turned the phone so that Michael and Prudence could see the screen. Then she slid her finger back and forth to swap between two of the images. The area covered by each image overlapped with the one before and after so it was easy to locate them in relation to one another and as Harriet swapped them back and forth it became obvious what she had seen.

"That symbol changes between photographs." Prudence said when she saw what looked like an arrowhead in one picture become a rhombus shape in the next.

"How can that be?" Michael said as he took out his own phone, "Let's see what the video shows of that part of the wall."

Moving to the part of the video where it captured the arrowhead symbol Michael let it play and he, Prudence and Harriet watched the video pan along the wall they also saw the symbol morph into a rhombus.

"It's like one of those ridged cards with two images printed on them. Depending on what angle you look at it from the ridges only let you see one image at a time." Harriet said and Michael nodded.

"Yes, I remember those. I got them from cereal packets when I was a kid. But I don't think these markings came out of a cereal packet." he said.

"No but I think I remember reading about things like this somewhere." Harriet said as she got to her feet, "Come with me. Leave your drinks though. I don't want to risk anything getting spilled on what I'm about to show you."

When Michael and Prudence got to their feet Harriet led them up the stairs of her house to a room that was filled with shelves containing books and bundles of paper, many of which were clearly very old.

"This little library is the result of more than fifty years of effort. I've searched bookshops, antique shops, markets, auction houses and adverts placed in hundreds of newspapers to find these." she said, "As you can see what I put in my books is just a fraction of the knowledge that I've gathered. A lot more is the sort of thing that could easily be misused or misunderstood so I keep it to myself. I've got a manuscript here that describes what we've just seen. An incantation that uses markings that take on power from other dimensions and these dimensions can be seen through them." she continued as she took one of the bundles of papers from a shelf and placed it on the table in the middle of the room. Then she began to search through the papers for the one she wanted and Michael and Prudence watched as she did so.

"Wait a moment." Michael said suddenly as Prudence gasped when they both saw a drawing on one of the sheets of paper that they recognised.

"What?" Harriet asked.

"Go back a moment." Michael said.

"What was that picture?" Prudence added as Harriet returned to the previous sheet of paper and removed it from the bundle so that they could all see it clearly. A picture had been carefully drawn on this that showed a hunched figure armed with a spear but that was obviously not human. Not only was the head too flat and protruded forwards but it was also covered in scales.

"That is a member of a race of lizard people who legend has it used to live in these parts. Local druids communed with them before the Romans drove away the druids and wiped out the lizard people." Harriet said.

"No they didn't." Prudence responded and Harriet frowned.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean that I had one of those things staring me right in the face at night in the middle of the woods around Elder Edge. By that stone circle." Prudence told her.

"That stone circle is a fake. It was put there-" Harriet began.

"In the eighteen hundreds, yes we know." Michael interrupted as he looked at his phone again and then he held it out towards Harriet so that she could see a still image of a reptilian humanoid holding an ordinary looking revolver, "If the police in Wellslaw didn't always take so long to do anything then that thing would have been stuffed and in the British Museum by now." he said as Harriet's eyes widened.

"But how?" she said.

"That particular creature claimed to be millions of years old. It hibernated in some sort of box that the police now have. When it was woken up by an antiques dealer from Elder Edge it killed him and then impersonated him." Michael explained.

"So if these missing people are involved with anything to do with these creatures they're in a lot of danger." Prudence added.

"I wish I could help you more but I'm afraid I can't. This paper is the only reference to them that I'd seen until you showed me that picture." Harriet responded.

"What else is in those papers Harriet?" Michael asked.

"They're the notes of a pagan priest from the sixteen hundreds. He collected stories that had been handed down verbally from generation to generation, never written down before to try and avoid the attention of the Christian Church. There are some of them that would still like to burn me and everything you can see here at the stake but four hundred years ago he was taking a big risk." Harriet answered.

"Is there any chance we could borrow these? We have-" Michael began but Harriet shook her head.

"I'm sorry but no. Everything in here is too valuable for me to let it be taken away." she said.

"What about copying it then? Michael said and he held up his mobile phone to indicate that he meant to photograph the papers.

"Well I suppose so. But I should warn you that the language it is written in is hard to read. English has changed somewhat over the centuries." Harriet warned him.

"Don't worry we have someone who is an expert with languages." Michael replied.

4.

It took more than an hour to go through the stack of papers and photograph each sheet one by one, making sure that nothing was left out. Then Michael and Prudence left Harriet's house and got back in his Range Rover.

"Call John Midland." Michael said clearly so that the car's internal microphones would pick up his voice as he began to drive off. This triggered the hands free connection to his phone and it immediately began to dial.

"Hello?" a man's voice said a few seconds later.

"John it's Michael. I'm calling about that book we left with you." Michael told him.

"You don't want it back do you? I was hoping to be able to study it for longer. The information inside really is fascinating." John said.

"Don't worry professor, we still want you to keep studying that book but we've just found something more that might interest you." Michael said.

"Another book? I knew there had to be more like this. The knowledge I've already-" John said before Michael interrupted him.

"This time it's a set of papers." he said, "There's a woman who lives out in Chorleaf that has a collection of hundreds of books about pagan belief and she has a set of notes that relate to the Necronomicon. She wouldn't let us take the originals but we were able to make copies. Is it alright if we come round to you now and give them to you."

"Of course." John said excitedly, "I can't wait to see what you have for me now."

"Good. We're on our way now and should be with you in about a quarter of an hour." Michael said before he hung up the phone call.

John Midland was a retired professor of Classics that Michael and Prudence had gone to when they discovered a book written in ancient Greek called the Necronomicon, apparently a translation of an older work that described the existence of powerful supernatural beings such as the reptilian humanoids living around Elder Edge. Intrigued by the contents and as the only person that the investigators knew who could understand the contents, John had kept the book to read and now they hoped that the notes they had just come across would prove useful towards understanding its contents. He lived in a house in Wellslaw that was surrounded by a tall fence and security gate. Expecting the arrival of Michael and Prudence, John had already opened this when they arrived though and Michael drove right through to park in front of the house. Behind them the gate began to slide shut, indicating that John had heard their arrival and sure enough as they both got out of the Range Rover the front door of the house opened and the grey haired man emerged with a smile on his face.

"Good morning. So good to see you again." John said. Then he saw the slim folder that Michael was holding he added, "Are those the papers you spoke about?"

"Actually these are all that is left of something that we found at the house where all this started. Someone wanted to destroy them but only managed to damage them. Four people who lived in the house have disappeared and we've been hired to find them." Michael said as he handed John the file containing the burned remains of the papers found in the kitchen of the damaged house.

"Yes they are badly damaged aren't they?" John said as he looked at them, "But what about the papers you told me about? Where are they?"

"Right here. I'm afraid we haven't had the chance to print them out yet." Prudence replied, holding up her phone.

"We also have some photographs and video of some strange markings we found in the house." Michael added and John nodded.

"Very good, I'll take a look at them all. Do come in quickly." he said, letting them past him into his house and then glancing skywards before going back inside himself and closing the front door, "Come on through to my study." he added, leading the two investigators to the room where he had the Necronomicon lying open on his desk beside a computer.

"Making notes?" Prudence said and John nodded.

"Yes. I've also been uploading photographs of the illustrations so I can keep everything together. When I'm done you should have a file of everything that's in this book that even you can understand." he responded.

"Even us Prudence." Michael muttered and they smiled at one another.

"Now may I see these new photographs?" John asked as he sat behind his desk and Prudence brought up her camera's photograph library.

"Here you go." she said, handing him the phone.

The images on the screen were much smaller than the original documents of course but as John scrolled from one to the next he was able to pick out some of the hand drawn diagrams and illustrations included among the writing and he smiled.

"Yes I can see that some of this matches the contents of the Necronomicon that I've translated so far. This could be a very useful tool. Where did you say it came from again?" he said.

"From a woman called Harriet DeLuna. She writes books about Paganism and has spent her life building up a library of the occult." Michael said.

"I'd love to speak with her." John said, "If this is anything to go by then her library could be a goldmine of further information."

"I'll send you a link to her website." Michael said.

"I must copy these to my computer if that's okay. Then I'll print them out after you've gone." John said and Prudence nodded.

"Go ahead." she replied. Then as John was connecting her phone to his computer she noticed a small package on the desk. This had been opened and inside there was a metal whistle, "Refereeing some football games professor?" Prudence commented and she picked up the whistle.

"Oh be careful with that please." John said, reaching out to take the whistle back from her, "That's very special."

"Why?" Prudence added.

"It's made of silver and meteoric iron. It was very expensive." John said.

"Meteoric iron?" Prudence said.

"Does this have to do with anything from that book professor?" Michael added.

"Yes, there is a procedure that I'd like to try. According to the text a whistle like this makes it easier." John told him.

"Makes what easier exactly?" Michael asked.

"I'll tell you if it works." John answered.

"Just be careful John. That lizard man that was impersonating Harold Farrow had one when he was calling the other lizard people to him. That gate of yours might not keep them out." Michael warned him.

"Don't worry, I'm taking every precaution." John said, "Ah, now I see there is an extra set of photographs that was taken yesterday. Are they the ones you were telling me about?"

"Yes, I took those at the house where the people we are looking for lived." Prudence said.

"Why are you looking for them?" John asked.

"Because they're missing and they owe money to the owner of the house. What you see there was painted on every surface in one of the bedrooms. The windows had been painted over to give them more room to write as well. If you look closely you'll see that there is one symbol that appears to change shape depending on the angle you are looking at it from."

"This is interesting." John said when he noticed one of the symbols that had been painted on the wall of the bedroom, "I've seen this before."

"Seen what?" Michael asked and John leant over to where the Necronomicon was lying. Flicking through the pages of the ancient book he came to a page that had a particular diagram on it and he turned the book around so that Michael and Prudence could see it the right way up. The symbol on the page had the appearance of a five pointed star, similar to the pentagrams common to occult or satanic folklore. However, in addition to the five slightly curved lines that made up the star there was an additional symbol contained within the pentagon at the centre of the star, a symbol that looked something like an eye.

"Here we go. As far as I can tell it's called the Elder Sign and it is somehow related to a group of entities that may be some kind of rivals to the creatures that most of this book concerns itself with." John explained.

"So something that we're supposed to be able to call on for help and protection?" Prudence asked.

"I'm not sure I'd go that far. There's nothing to indicate that they are particularly friendly towards humanity." John said.

"So we're still on our own. Shame. I was hoping that it might give us a way of protecting ourselves from that lizard man who's still out there somewhere." Michael replied.

"What about the symbol itself? Can we use it like some sort of crucifix against a vampire?" Prudence said.

"I don't know. If that information is in this book I haven't come across it yet." John answered. Then he frowned for a moment before he added, "Ah, here's that symbol you told me about. The one that changes shape. Arrowhead to diamond, yes?"

"That sounds like the one. I'll give you the video from my phone as well. You can actually see the shape of the symbol change depending on the angle of the camera. Harriet DeLuna said that the author of the notes we've just given you spoke about signs relating to other dimensions. Do you know anything about that?" Michael said.

"I've not read anything about it in the Necronomicon yet, no. But I'll see if there's anything I can find and get back to you." John said and Michael nodded.

"Thanks, that's all we can ask of you I suppose." he said, "Now I guess all I need to do is give you this video and we can leave you to your studies."

Returning to Michael's Range Rover the two investigators got in while the front gate quietly slid open again.

"So are we agreed that this case is another weird one?" Prudence asked and Michael sighed.

"I think we can." he replied as he drove out onto the road.

"So what do we do now then?" Prudence said.

"What we're being paid for. Find our four missing people. Supernatural cause or not we still have bills to pay."

"Okay but how do you propose to find them?"

"By looking. So far we've searched their home and followed up on Laura's social media posts and all that's done is suggest that we've landed ourselves with another case of voodoo or magic or whatever you want to label it. We also have a number of leads to where they might run though. The details Jack gave us about them had names, phones numbers and addresses for their families. Now one of those is up in Scotland but the other three are right here in the Wellslaw area. Two in Wellslaw and one in Elder Edge. That includes Dominic Briggs whose parents live in Wellslaw. Now it seems to me that if he was running from something he might just head back to them. Either to hide or get help. Either way I was thinking that perhaps we ought to find out whether he's been seen there. Or if anyone can give us a further lead."

"So a stakeout?" Prudence said.

"Well first we'll just ask but if that doesn't get us results then yes, a stakeout." Michael replied.

After stopping at their office to collect the details of Dominic Briggs' parents Michael drove himself and Prudence to the street where they lived and he drove past their house slowly. The houses in the street were all mid sized and semi-detached with gardens surrounded by walls low enough that an adult could leap over them with little effort.

"I don't see anyone around." Prudence said.

"I think we should try calling them." Michael said, picking up speed before he pulled over about a hundred yards beyond the house and parked at the side of the road, "Pass me the file." he said as he took out his mobile phone and when Prudence gave him the file that held all of the details provided by Jack French he looked up the telephone number for the parents of Dominic Briggs, "Now keep watch on the house. If Andrew is in there then he could decide to make a sharp exit when I make this call and we'll go after him. He might be able to lead us to the others." he told Prudence as he keyed the telephone number into his phone and listened to it ring before a woman answered it.

"Hello?" she said, not giving a name.

"Hello is that Missus Briggs?" Michael asked.

"Yes. Who is this?" the woman responded.

"My name is Michael Lester of Lester Security Services. I believe that you have recently been contacted by Jack French, your son Dominic's landlord. He has hired us to find your son and I was hoping to have a word with you about him."

"We already told Mister French that we don't know where our son is." the woman told him.

"Yes I understand that but I was hoping you could give us some information about how to find him. Right now nobody knows where he or any of his friends are and we're concerned that he's in danger. Would it be convenient to come and speak with you in person?" Michael said and then there was a pause during which he looked over his shoulder towards the Watson house, both he and Prudence waiting to see if anyone suddenly came rushing out. However, there was no sign of any activity before the woman finally responded to Michael's question.

"Yes of course, if it will help Dominic. When do you want come around?" she said.

"Now if we can." Michael told her.

"Very well." the woman said, "I'll be expecting you." and then she hung up.

Looking at Prudence, Michael smiled.

"There we go. We just got our invitation." he said.

"So do we go now?" Prudence asked.

"No, we'll give it a few minutes yet. Having her know that we were right outside to begin with might turn her against us and there's still a chance that Dominic could come running out of there at any moment. We'll give it ten minutes yet." Michael answered before his mobile phone sounded, alerting him to receiving a text message and he looked at it.

"From Emma?" Prudence asked but Michael shook his head.

"No, it's Jack." Michael replied and then he sighed.

"Have we just been fired?" Prudence said.

"I don't think so, not yet at least but according to this text message our client has heard back from his insurance company." Michael told her.

"Let me guess, they're not paying out." Prudence said.

“Not quite. They insisted that the damage to the house be considered criminal damage and they’ve insisted that he contact the police and get a crime number. So I wouldn’t be surprised if we were hearing from them at some point as well.” Michael told her.

“How soon do you think?” Prudence said and Michael paused.

“Well this is Wellslaw police we’re talking about so assuming that Jack is even allowed to report the crime it could be anywhere from three weeks to never.” he said.

5.

When Michael and Prudence walked up to the house where Dominic Briggs' parents lived they stopped outside the front door and Michael passed a business card to Prudence.

"Your turn I think grasshopper." he said and she frowned.

"Grasshopper?" she said.

"Old TV reference. Just ring the bell and introduce us, okay?" Michael replied.

"Okay master." Prudence said as she reached out to press the doorbell and shortly after the door was answered by a middle aged woman, "Missus Briggs? My name is Prudence Brent from Lester Security Services. You spoke with my colleague Michael a few minutes ago." Prudence said and then she remembered to hold out the card.

"Yes please come in. I've been trying to call my Dominic since the weekend but he hasn't been answering. Do you think you'll be able to find him?" she said as Michael and Prudence entered the house.

"Your help will make things a lot easier." Michael told her before she pointed to a nearby room.

"We can talk in there." she said.

The room they then entered was a lounge and Michael and Prudence sat beside one another on the couch while Dominic's mother sat on a chair facing them.

"Your name is Patricia, correct?" Michael asked, recalling the information he had been given and the woman nodded.

"Yes. I'm Dominic's mother." she answered.

"And is his father Craig around?" Michael added.

"No, he's at work until six."

"Very well. Hopefully you'll be able to give us all the information we need then." Michael said, "Now to begin with can you tell me anything about Dominic's relationship with his housemates? Was he happy living with them or was he planning on leaving?"

"Oh he seemed happy to be living with them. He never said anything to me about wanting to leave. I suppose he would have eventually once he'd saved enough money for a place of his own." Patricia answered.

"And he wasn't planning on taking any holidays?" Michael added and Patricia shook her head.

"No. He and some other friends went to Germany a few months ago though. Is that important?"

"I don't think so. Unless you noticed any change in his behaviour afterwards." Michael said.

"No, he didn't seem at all strange or upset by anything. I don't know what could have caused him to disappear. I just can't believe that he would have damaged the house he was living in either."

"Do you know what he and his friends had planned last weekend?" Prudence said.

"Last weekend? Nothing as far as I know. Why?"

"Because we found evidence that at least one of his housemates was planning something significant and there's a chance that Dominic was involved in it." Michael said.

"Did you know Laura Croft?" Prudence added.

"Yes I met her. She seemed like a nice young lady. All his housemates seemed nice. I can't picture any of them getting into trouble." Patricia responded.

"Patricia do you know if Dominic or any of his housemates had any interest in the occult?" Michael said and Patricia's eyes widened for a moment.

"Is this about those strange games he plays?" she asked in response.

"Games?" Prudence said.

"Yes he started at school. He collected all sorts of books and the little metal figures that he painted and he and his friends played some sort of game with them. I never really understood it myself but I saw some of the pictures in the books of the monsters."

"We didn't see anything like that at the house." Michael commented.

"Oh no, he left all of those things here. He didn't have the room for them at his house and he would come by to pick them up when he needed them. He didn't take any at the weekend though." Patricia explained.

"Could we see them by any chance? The books I mean." Michael said.

"Of course if you think it would help." Patricia told him and they all stood up together before she led Michael and Prudence up the stairs to a bedroom that looked as if it was not currently in use. No personal items of any kind were visible when they entered the room but when Patricia walked over to one of the wardrobes she opened it up to reveal a man's clothes still hanging inside and the shelf at the top filled with books. At first glance all of these appeared to have an identical format, having pages about the size of ordinary A4 printer paper and being no more than half an inch thick whether they were hard or softback bound but Michael still moved in for a closer look.

"May we take a look at these?" he asked and Patricia nodded.

"Of course." she said and Michael reached up to remove the book to the extreme left of the shelf. This was a hardback book that was clearly of modern origin. Its cover featured an illustration of several figures in medieval clothing battling against a horde of human skeletons armed with swords and axes and the title identified it as the core rule book for the game system. Michael quickly flipped through the book and saw that although it contained numerous images and diagrams these appeared to be tables for the game rules and more illustrations in the same style as the cover. Then he tipped the book over and flipped through the pages again to see if anything would drop out. When nothing did he put the book down on the bed and reached up to take another one from the shelf.

"Prudence give me a hand." he said and she stepped towards the wardrobe to help.

When they were about a quarter of the way through searching the books on the shelf without finding anything hidden inside them when the sound of the doorbell was heard from downstairs and Patricia excused herself to go and see who it was. Michael waited for her to be heading down the stairs before he crept towards the open door to listen.

"Keep searching. I want to know who it is." he told Prudence quietly as he heard the sound of the door opening. Then he heard a male voice speak and he winced.

"Missus Patricia Briggs?" the man said.

"Yes, who are you?" she responded.

"Police Missus Briggs. I'm Detective Sergeant Jackson and this is Detective Constable Brown. May we come in? We'd like to ask you some questions about your son Dominic." the man told her.

"Police? Of course. There are already two people here asking about Dominic. They're upstairs." Patricia told the detective and Michael frowned when he heard this.

"Okay it looks like we're done here." he told Prudence, "Let's put those books back."

Most of the books were back on the shelf when Patricia reappeared in the doorway of the bedroom with the two police officers, Detective Sergeant Mark Jackson who Michael and Prudence had already met and a female detective constable they did not recognise.

"Ah Michael Lester. I hope you got an invitation before you began rummaging through this lady's home." Mark said.

"Of course." Michael responded.

"And what exactly are you doing here?" Mark asked.

"The same as you I expect. Jack French, the landlord of Dominic Briggs asked us to find him. He texted me a while ago to say that his insurance company had insisted that he call the police to report criminal damage." Michael said.

"Criminal? Dominic hasn't broken the law." Patricia said in surprise when she heard this.

"That is what our investigation is here to find evidence of Missus Briggs." Mark told her.

"Look we're done here for now." Michael said, "But feel free to drop by our office this afternoon and I'll fill you in on what we've found so far. Okay Mark?"

"I think that would be a good idea. I'd hate to think that you were hiding anything from the police." Mark replied and then Michael and Prudence walked towards the door.

"Don't worry Patricia," Michael said to Patricia, pausing as they walked past her, "our only interest in this case is finding your son."

6.

After leaving the Briggs house Michael drove himself and Prudence back to their office building.

"So what's our next move?" Prudence asked as they entered the office.

"We've still got Laura's laptop and Dominic's phone but I expect DS Jackson will want to take both of them so we'll start by making sure we have copies of everything." Michael said, opening a cupboard and taking out a plug in computer hard drive, "Here take this and plug it into the laptop's USB port."

"You want me to copy files from it? I haven't had the time to figure out everything that's on it yet. How do I know what's important?" Prudence replied.

"You won't need to. There's a utility on that drive that will clone what's on the laptop's hard drive entirely. That includes all the small files that websites use to identify computers accessing them. Using that we can plug that drive into another computer and use it to spoof them into thinking we're logging on from the laptop."

Michael explained.

"You mean like her social media accounts?" Prudence said and Michael nodded.

"Exactly. She left her account logged in from her laptop so we'll still have access using the clone. A little trick from my army days." he said.

"And what about the memory card in the phone?" Prudence said as she took the hard drive and plugged it into the laptop that was still on the desk.

"I have a card reader about and there can only be so much on a card so I'll just straight up copy all the data from that." Michael told her before he began to rummage around in a drawer until he found a plug in card reader he could use to duplicate the contents of the mobile phone's memory card. However, when he tried inserting the card into this he found that the contents were corrupted, "Damn it. Useless." he muttered.

"Well this seems to be working at least." Prudence said, "If you believe the progress bar it will be done in just under half an hour."

The progress bar on the laptop turned out to be quite accurate and just under half an hour later Prudence was disconnecting the external hard drive when the intercom for the office building's front door sounded and Prudence picked up the handset.

"Lester Security." she said.

"It's DS Jackson. Your boss invited me here so are you going to open the door or have I just wasted my time?" Mark's voice said.

"Let him in Prudence." Michael said, overhearing this.

"Please do come in." Prudence said and she pressed the button to unlock the front door before hanging up the intercom.

"Hide that hard drive and turn off the laptop." Michael told her as he got up and walked to the office door, opening just as Mark reached the top of the flight of stairs leading up from the ground floor, "Detective Sergeant Jackson, do come in and make yourself at home. You remember my assistant Prudence Brent?" "Detective Jackson." Prudence added.

"Miss Brent. Not found a real job yet then? I think the supermarket around the corner is always hiring.

Although it is a very posh supermarket so I don't think they'll hire you Michael." Mark said as he sat down in the spare chair, "Now how about you tell me what you know about this case? Where are those people and this had better not have anything to do with supposed lizard people."

"You saw the video. How can you deny what you saw?" Prudence asked.

"May I call you Prudence?" Mark asked her and she nodded.

"Sure. If you want." she replied.

"Well Prudence a couple of years ago I was one of the police officers assigned to the big science fiction convention that is held in Manchester every year. Now what I pictured was ten thousand anti-social nerds paying a lot of money to listen to pompous film and TV stars. What I actually saw though was a lot of people who were incredibly dedicated to their hobbies and a lot of them had spent a great deal of time and money making costumes like the ones from the shows they watched. Cosplay they called it and as far as I'm concerned what I saw on that phone was someone using an elaborate costume as a disguise to hide their identity. They did commit murder and were in possession of an illegal firearm after all." Mark said.

"I take it you've spoken to Jack French. I have to say I'm impressed at your response time. Coming out on the same day? That must be a record for an offence like this." Michael said.

"Of course I've spoken to him. He told us he'd hired you and that you'd already searched the house. So how about you tell me what you saw there and hand over everything you took?" Mark responded, ignoring the barb about police response times.

"We saw occult writing all over the walls of one room and the furniture in others torn apart. Our client was in the process of trying to clean it up." Michael told him.

"Yes I wasn't exactly happy about that. We'll never know what he disturbed doing it. Now what did you take from there?" Mark asked.

"That laptop and a mobile phone that had this memory card in." Michael answered, looking at Laura's laptop and then handing the damaged mobile phone and memory card to the detective, "We also found a wallet." he added, opening the drawer in which he had put Dominic's wallet and passing it across the desk as well.

"I take it all the contents are in here?" Mark said.

"Not quite. There was a bank card as well so I returned that to the bank. I figured that if accessing money became more difficult for the missing man then he'd be more likely to do something to show himself."

Michael told him.

"I'm actually impressed." Mark replied as he put the wallet, phone and memory card into plastic bags he had with him and then stuffed them into his pockets, "So what else can you tell me. I doubt that visiting Missus Briggs was the first action you took."

"You're right. We went to see a witch." Michael replied and Mark just glared at him, "Seriously. If you check that laptop you'll see that Laura Croft-"

"Damned stupid name." Mark muttered and both Michael and Prudence smiled.

"You should see the photos on her laptop." Prudence commented.

"According to her social media posts Laura bought some very expensive flowers as well as a book about witchcraft. The author lives in Chorleaf so we went out to see her and asked her if she knew what any of the missing people were up to. Basically she didn't. Although she did give us some helpful notes about the occult symbols painted on the walls if you want them."

"No thank you. I'm a detective, not the witch-finder general." Mark said.

"Then that's all we have for you detective." Michael said and Mark nodded.

"In that case I'll be taking that computer and be off. If you do happen to find out anything else that isn't to do with lizard people or witches then I'm sure I don't need to remind you to contact me." he said, getting back to his feet and reaching for the laptop.

"Will you share your information with us?" Prudence asked and Mark frowned at her.

"Lester, tell your minion that that's not how the police work." he said.

"Prudence the police aren't supposed to tell anyone anything because then everyone would know just how little they knew." Michael said, grinning as he looked at Mark.

"Goodbye Mister Lester. I'll remind you not to get in the way of my investigation." Mark said before he left the office and Prudence waited for the door to close behind him before she turned to Michael again.

"You didn't tell him about the partially burned papers." she pointed out and Michael smiled.

"No. Well you did hear him say that he wasn't interested in witchcraft and I think that we can agree that those papers definitely relate the occult in some way. In fact I'm curious to see what else there could be in that house that Mark and his flat footed goons have ignored because they don't understand it." he replied.

"Err Michael, we don't we don't exactly understand witchcraft either." Prudence pointed out.

"No but we know someone who does." Michael replied as he picked up the telephone before dialling Harriet's number.

"Hello?" Harriet's voice said when the phone was picked up.

"Harriet it's Michael. I just wanted to let you know that the person we took the pictures of those notes to was very happy to receive them but I was wondering whether you might be willing to help us out some more with our investigation." Michel told her.

"Well that depends on what you want. You know I won't let anyone take anything from my library although you're welcome to come here and read from it under my guidance." Harriet replied.

"Actually I was hoping that you might come and have a look at the house where all this started. Prudence and I searched it briefly but we weren't hunting specifically for signs of someone using witchcraft or at least thinking they were. I thought maybe-"

"Maybe I could tell you where someone had been trying to cast spells?" Harriet interrupted and Michael smiled.

"Exactly." he said, "So will you help. I can pay-"

"No." Harriet interrupted again, "I mean yes I will help you but I won't accept payment for it."

"Thank you. When are you available?" Michael asked.

"Let's see. It's coming up three now and according to my calender sunset is at five twenty. Could you collect me at six?" Harriet said.

"Of course. But why wait until then?" Michael said.

"Well firstly I'd like to prepare a few things but also because some things are easier to do after dark." Harriet responded.

7.

There was no street lighting around where she lived so Harriet's house was hard to locate in the dark and Michael almost drove right past it before Prudence suddenly called out.

"There. There it is." she said and Michael braked before pulling over.

"Do you want to go and get her? I'll wait in the car." Michael said and Prudence got out, leaving him alone in the car with the engine still running. He sat and watched as Prudence hurried to the front door and knocked. Moments later Harriet emerged and the two women walked back to the Range Rover. As they approached Michael could not help but notice that Harriet was carrying a bag over her shoulder.

"All set?" he asked as Prudence climbed back in through the passenger side door and Harriet got into the back of the vehicle.

"Yes, I have everything I need to look for the signs of spell casting or the influence of spirits." Harriet told him. Michael then began to drive, heading back towards Wellslaw and then continuing to Houndsforth and the house that Jack French had rented out.

When Michael and Prudence then got out of the Range Rover they both walked to the rear of the vehicle.

"What are you doing?" Harriet asked as Michael opened up the door at the back.

"We have supplies as well." Prudence told her as Michael handed her a torch.

"Don't the lights in the house work?" Harriet said when she saw Michael then produce a second torch for himself. Both of these were long metal torches that were obviously very sturdy in their construction.

"Actually I don't know." Michael answered.

"So these are just in case then?" Harriet said and Prudence smiled.

"You could say that but it's not just in case the lights don't work." she said.

"Then why are you carrying them?" Harriet responded.

"Because carrying an actual weapon would be illegal." Michael said before slamming the back of the car shut. Then he locked the car and put the key in his pocket, swapping it for a key to the house he had obtained from Jack French. He then used this key to open the front door and immediately reached for the light switch just inside it. As soon as he flipped the switch the hall light came on and Michael stepped inside, "Looks like we have lights." he said.

"But you're still planning on needing to bash someone over the head with a torch?" Harriet commented as she and Prudence followed Michael into the house, "I feel I should warn you that negative thoughts such as those of jealousy and violence can have an adverse effect on the magical arts."

"Trust me we only bash things in self defence." Prudence told her and she frowned.

"You mean you've actually done it?" she asked and Prudence nodded.

"We met some of those lizard people you have drawings of up by the Edge and they weren't very friendly." she said.

"Come on upstairs. I think we should start with the room where the walls were painted. Hopefully Jack hasn't painted over them yet." Michael said before he led Prudence and Harriet up the stairs.

"You didn't photograph these markings." Harriet said as soon as they reached the top of the stairs and she saw the markings on the doors on the landing.

"Do you know what they mean?" Prudence asked.

"Yes, they are barrier marks. Intended to ward off evil spirits. Completely useless here though. They should be placed at the threshold of an area of land. Just painting them on a door to protect a room is no use." Harriet said.

"Even if the doors are dividing private rooms from a public part of a building?" Michael asked.

"Magic doesn't actually care about private property but a threshold is more than that." Harriet answered,

"Now where is this room you want me to see?"

"This way." Michael replied and he walked over to the door leading to what had been the spare bedroom and opened the door.

Entering the room and turning the light on Michael saw that the walls, floor and ceiling were still covered in the markings that had been there the previous afternoon and he stood aside to allow Harriet to follow him through the doorway.

Although she had already seen the images of the markings that covered every surface this was the first time that Harriet had been able to see them in person and her attention was immediately drawn to the floor.

"I thought so. This circle looks like it was supposed to be the focal point of a ritual of some sort." she said and she crouched down, setting her bag down as she inspected the large circular pattern that had numerous other symbols marked within its boundary, "Now if I could just tell what it was supposed to do." she added.

"Don't the symbols tell you?" Prudence asked.

"They might if I could understand them but I've been through every resource I can think of, in my library and online to try and decode them and I've come up with nothing" Harriet answered and she opened up her bag and began to root through it until she found what she was looking for, "A-ha. This should do." she said. "What is that?" Michael said while Harriet opened the bottle and tipped a little of the white powder it contained into her hand.

"If there was any magic here then this powder will change colour depending on what the purpose of it was. Red will tell me that the circle was a protective one. Blue is for summoning or conjuring and green is for projection." she said and then she blew the powder from her hand. This immediately spread out to form a white cloud in the air before the grains began to fall and settled on the floor in and around the circle. Where they remained white.

"Well that was an anti-climax." Prudence said.

"What does that mean?" Michael added.

"It means that this circle has never had any spiritual power at all. It is just what it looks like, paint on a floor." Harriet said, "This could just be a very elaborate hoax."

"But what about the mark that changes shape?" Prudence said and she looked towards the wall where she could see an arrowhead shape.

"Of course. They're amateurs." Harriet said, smiling as she reached into her bag again and this time took out a candle.

"What do you do with that Harriet?" Michael said.

"Well I'm not about to hit a ghost over the head with it like you would with those torches of yours." Harriet responded as she set took out a box of matches and lit the candle. Then she held it out in front of her and stared at the flame, "Now watch the smoke." she added.

As it burned the candle began to produce a fine wisp of smoke that started to drift through the air.

"What's so special about that?" Prudence said and Harriet smiled before blowing through the smoke. However, despite the current of air she created in doing this the smoke continued to drift in the same direction, "How is that possible?" Prudence added.

"The smoke is drawn towards magical power." Harriet told her, "The marking that changes shape is obviously magical even if this circle isn't. My guess is that the people who did all this didn't really know what they were doing and they made mistakes. Whatever they meant this circle to be for they failed."

"That smoke isn't heading towards the arrowhead-diamond thing though." Michael said when he saw how the smoke was drifting.

"It's going for the strongest source of power. There must be something else in here with magical power." Harriet said and she began to walk across the room, letting the smoke guide her.

"It's heading for the corner. Where that blue stuff is." Prudence said.

"Blue stuff?" Harriet commented.

"There was some sort of blue slime in the corner yesterday." Michael told her.

"I think I see it. No wait, it's just a stain on the wall and floor." Harriet said as she continued to get closer to the corner.

"It must have dried up." Michael said.

"Well whatever it was there was magic here." Harriet said before she took a deep breath and blew out the candle.

"What's that stuff called? The stuff that ghosts are supposed to leave behind." Prudence said.

"Ectoplasm." Michael reminded her and she smiled.

"Yes, that's it. Ectoplasm. Could it have been that?" she said and Harriet paused to think.

"I don't know. I've never encountered anything like that before. If these people were able to summon a spirit of some kind then they achieved something I've never managed." she said as she returned to where she had left her bag. She then put the candle back inside and took out the bottle of white powder again. This time after pouring a small quantity into her hand she returned to the corner and blew it against the wall where it was stained.

This time when it hit the wall and floor the white powder turned a bright blue and Harriet smiled.

"So they did summon something." Prudence said.

"Yes, something from beyond our world manifested right here." Harriet said.

"How long ago?" Michael asked.

"Oh no more than a week I'd say. We're lucky that the window was painted over. Direct sunlight has a purifying effect that would have destroyed all trace of the magical power used here." Harriet answered.

"That lizard person who was pretending to be Harold Farrow summoned more lizard people to him. Could these people have summoned them as well?" Prudence suggested.

"No, whatever was summoned here wasn't a physical being as we would know it." Harriet told her, "It may have taken on a physical form when it was summoned but it wasn't a creature composed of ordinary matter."

"Do you have any idea what it was?" Michael said.

"No. None of the markings here fit with Pagan rites. The only mention of anything like them that I've seen is in documents like the one you copied. They come from something different. Some scholars say that they're older even than mankind itself."

"Which if there is a race of lizard people that co-existed with the dinosaurs could be true." Michael pointed out.

"So what did it do when it got here? Did it kill the people who live here or take them away somewhere?" Prudence said.

"Ah now that I might be able to help with." Harriet said and she returned to her bag once more and took out another bottle of powder.

"What does that do?" Prudence asked.

"It senses death." Harriet told her, "In theory all we do is sprinkle some around and if it settles somewhere where someone died recently it will show up."

"In theory?" Michael added.

"Well I haven't actually done this before. There isn't a lot of call in witchcraft circles to investigate murder scenes. It's still less than a hundred years since the last time a witch was put on trial in England. Now watch and see. Assuming someone did die here of course." Harriet responded and she tipped the contents of the bottle into her hand and began to throw it round the room while Michael and Prudence looked at one another. Most of the fine powder seemed to vanish as it landed but when some landed within the circle marked on the floor in the middle of the room all of a sudden the shapes of two figures lying sprawled out appeared. Then as Harriet threw more of the powder a third shape appeared near the door to the landing.

"Does this mean what I think it does?" Michael commented.

"Three. Three people died in here recently. Also it worked." Harriet responded and she smiled for moment before realising that she was in effect taking pleasure at the demise of three people and her smile quickly vanished.

The outlines of these powder shapes were sufficiently vague that it was not possible to tell from them who they represented but Michael and Prudence could not help but consider how the number matched the number of people whose belongings had been ransacked.

"So someone survived." Michael said.

"And then he ripped apart his friends' rooms to try and find something." Prudence added.

"Bear in mind that this powder only reveals where a physical body dies, not the spirit within it," Harriet told them and the both looked back at her.

"What do you mean by that?" Prudence said.

"I mean that whatever entity was summoned may have taken on physical form by possessing the body of one of the people that summoned it. That could be why there are only three bodies shown here. If the fourth person you are looking for was possessed then their body may have been used to kill the others."

"No matter what killed them there is still the matter of the bodies themselves. Somebody must have disposed of them. We'd know from the smell if they were just hidden around the house so they must have been taken away somewhere and that could give us a clue. Moving bodies is a difficult task, I'm sure the neighbours would have noticed even if they didn't realise what was going on." Michael said

"Do you want to go and ask them now?" Prudence asked but Michael shook his head.

"No, most people don't like strangers knocking on their door after dark. That can wait until tomorrow." he said. Then he looked at Harriet and added, "How long will these patterns last? I'd rather not have the landlord or worse still, the police seeing them."

"No more than an hour, don't worry." Harriet told him before his mobile phone began to ring.

"It's John Midland." Michael said, looking at the screen.

"Who's John Midland?" Harriet asked.

"The man who we took the photographs of your notes to." Prudence told her.

"Hello John." Michael said when he accepted the call.

"Michael thank God I reached you. I've managed to identify some of the marks you photographed and I think you need to know about them. First though have you had any sort of visions or hallucinations, particularly to do with dogs?" John said.

"Visions of dogs? No, why?" Michael said.

"I'll explain when you get here. I think you should bring Prudence as well. She needs to know about the danger you could be in." John told him.

"Danger?" Michael repeated, looking at Prudence with a concerned expression.

"Yes danger. How quickly can you get to me?"

"I don't know. We're at the house in Houndsforth now but Harriet is with us. She's the woman who has been collecting the occult information we-"

"Wonderful. Bring her as well. I'd love to speak to her about what she knows." John interrupted, "I'll see you soon." he added before hanging up.

"John wants to see us all. You too Harriet if you're happy to meet him." Michael said, looking at Prudence and Harriet.

"I don't mind. If he's been able to get something out of the photographs of my papers or any of these symbols then I'd be interested to hear it." Harriet replied.

"Did he say we're in danger?" Prudence then asked and Michael nodded.

"Yes, I'm afraid that he did." he told her.

"Then could we get going quickly? I know they say that what you don't know can't hurt you but I get the feeling that we could easily be killed by something we know nothing about." Prudence replied.

8.

This time the gate in front of John's house was closed when Michael drove up to it and he had to lean out of the window to press the intercom.

"John it's us. Let us in." he said when he heard it picked up but before John could say anything himself.

"Of course." he responded and moments later the gate began to open.

Once again John opened his front door before Michael or Prudence had to approach it and he waved them towards him.

"Hurry, get inside." he told them.

"John Midland, meet Harriet DeLuna." Michael said as he walked up to John and the retired professor smiled at her.

"Ah yes, the lady with the library. Pleased to meet you." he said to her, holding out his hand to shake hers.

"Likewise." she replied.

"Please come with me. I'll show you what I've found." John added when everyone was inside and he led them to his study where the Necronomicon was still lying on his desk along with printouts of a number of the photographs Michael and Prudence had supplied to him.

"Have you found out what these symbols mean?" Harriet asked when she saw a copy of a page from the notes in her library.

"I think so, yes." John answered, nodding and he sat down at his desk, "Please sit." he added and as the others pulled up chairs he looked down at the handwritten notes he had made himself, "As I've said before the author of the original version of this book had knowledge of creatures far older than mankind." he said and Prudence smiled nervously.

"You mean like that lizard man who tried to kill us?" she said.

"Exactly. But compared to the creatures I believe we are dealing with now they are recent inhabitants of this planet." John replied.

"So what do you think we are dealing with?" Michael asked.

"The Hounds of Tindalos." John answered.

"So that's why you asked about visions of dogs." Michael said.

"Yes. There isn't actually a description of them in this book. It suggests that no-one who saw one would live long enough to describe it but the names suggests some similarity to a wolf or dog." John said.

"So there's one of these things on the loose then?" Prudence added.

"No, not exactly. They don't exist any more. The Hounds of Tindalos lived billions of years ago when other life on earth consisted of nothing but single celled organisms. They inhabited something called the 'angles of time' whereas all other life such as us inhabits the curves." John told her.

"What does that mean?" Harriet asked.

"To be honest I'm not sure. I think perhaps that there could be an alternative time line of the universe that just intersected with ours some billions of years ago and that was when these creatures were able to exist on Earth. Now the only way to encounter them is travel back to that period in time." John said.

"So the people in that house travelled in time?" Prudence said, frowning.

"Could it be a form of astral projection? I've read a few accounts of it and the authors of some said that they could send their minds through time as well as space." Harriet said and John smiled.

"I think that's exactly what it is." he said, "The Necronomicon says that there is a drug called 'Liao' that can send a person's mind back in time potentially as far as the start of the universe. I haven't been able to find a recipe but I don't think that that's a priority right now."

"So what happens if you go back in time and meet these Hounds of Tindalos? Do they attack you?" Michael said.

"I suppose they would if you were able to go there physically, yes. However, just sending your mind back in time won't give them anything to attack. On the other hand it will attract their attention and they can follow you back here. It takes some time for them to travel but once they know of your existence they will come after you. The only trace they leave is the occasional patch of blue ichor." John continued.

"That blue slime in the corner." Prudence said, looking at Michael.

"My powder picked up a summoning portal. That must have been where the creature arrived in this time." Harriet added.

"The corner is significant. The Hounds of Tindalos need them, something to do with the angles of time again. They can only appear from a relatively sharp corner."

"Yes and then it killed three people." Michael said, "Which leaves the question of what happened to the fourth."

"Could it have taken them back in time with it?" Prudence suggested.

"Unfortunately there's nothing in the book to tell what a Hound of Tindalos does with its victims. They just vanish." John said.

"I'm not so sure that everyone in that house died." Michael said.

"Why not?" Prudence asked.

"Think about it. The house was trashed. Someone ripped apart everything except what belonged to Andrew Watson. I think he's still alive somewhere. I think that he was desperate to find something that he thought one of the others had, most likely a way to protect himself from these Hounds of Tindalos. Unless these things are prone to a bit of looting after their killing sprees." Michael said.

"The Necronomicon says that their sole purpose in coming to our time is to kill." John said.

"And if we were having visions of dogs then you think they'd be coming after us as well?" Michael commented.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that." Prudence added, "Lizard people are bad enough but I don't want to be looking over my shoulder for a time travelling Hound of the Baskervilles."

"Me either. I'm not sure that a protective circle would work against something that can manifest itself physically." Harriet added.

"From what you've said I think you're fine. The book says that the Hounds of Tindalos have to see you to be able to track you through time and the only way that can happen is if you either go back to their time or if you happen to be where they appear here." John said.

"So let's assume that Andrew Watson did survive when his girlfriend and other two housemates were killed by this thing. Where would you go to try and get away from one of these time travelling hound things?" Prudence asked.

"Distance means nothing to them as far as I can tell. Maybe they can't leave Earth but then again neither can most people." John said.

"But they can only come out of sharp corners. So what if you could find somewhere without any?" Michael said.

"Like a circular room?" Prudence said.

"Possibly. Although I was also thinking about staying outdoors. Probably in a rural area without any buildings close by." Michael replied.

"Well that just about describes most of the area outside of Wellslaw. Elder Edge, Quarrieside and Chorleaf are all surrounded by woods." Harriet pointed out.

"Woods that have their own nasty inhabitants." Prudence added, remembering her and Michael's encounter with a tribe of primitive serpent people in the woods of Elder Edge.

"I think he'd be more likely to be further north than the Edge." Michael said, "He lives in Houndsforth after all. It's on the far side of Wellslaw."

"Maybe Prudence is onto something with her theory about a room that lacks any corners." John said and the others looked at him.

"There's a building without corners in its rooms? Where?" Prudence commented.

"Actually I was thinking more generally about structures. People who sleep rough still need shelter and bridges can offer that. Bridges of course often have arches and arches don't have corners." John pointed out.

"So how many bridges with arches are there around Houndsforth and Wellslaw?" Prudence said.

"Dozens at least." Michael replied, "We could be talking road bridges, foot bridges or railway bridges. I think we ought to start close to the house and work our way further out."

"Now?" Prudence said but Michael shook his head.

"No, not while it's dark. We'll start in the morning." he said.

"What about the fact that we know three people died in that house?" Harriet asked, "Will you tell their landlord or the police?"

"I doubt they'd believe us. That detective still thinks we were attacked by a guy in a fancy dress costume." Prudence told her, "He also specifically told us not to tell him anything to do with witchcraft."

"We'll have to find some way of telling our client that his tenants are dead." Michael added, "With any luck finding Andrew Watson will give us a way to make it sound believable."

"Jane I'm back." Prudence called out when Michael dropped her off at her home before taking Harriet to hers.

"Prudence it's almost ten. What took you so long?" Jane asked as she turned off the television she had been watching.

"Oh you know, detective stuff." Prudence responded, shrugging her shoulders and not wanting to bring up the subject of supernatural time travelling hounds.

"Well I know what you need." Jane said, getting to her feet and heading towards the kitchen, "A cup of that tea you like. You sit down while I get you a cup of it."

"Oh I like the sound of that." Prudence said as she sat down and she groaned as she took off her boots, letting them drop to the floor.

"Here you go then. Nice and fresh." Jane said when she returned from the kitchen shortly after with a mug of tea in her hand and she handed this to Prudence before she sat back down.

"Mmmm. That smells good." Prudence said, sniffing the tea before she took a sip, "I love that raspberry flavour." she added and she continued to drink.

"So what did you do today Prudence?" Jane asked, "I want to know everything."

Prudence smiled and looked at her housemate.

"I know what you're up to." she said.

"I don't know what you mean. I'm just curious, that's all." Jane replied.

"No you're not Jane. You're obsessed. Obsessed with Michael Lester just like you get with men all the time and you want me to tell you all about him so you can try and get your claws into him." Prudence said. The she took another drink from her mug and added, "It won't work though. He's perfectly happy with the girlfriend he has right now. No amount of personal information or e-mailed naked photos is going to change that."

Jane then smiled at Prudence.

"Then there can't be any harm in telling me can there?" she said and Prudence smiled back at her.

"I suppose not." she responded and then she took a deep breath before she began, "So today Michael and I went to see a witch. An actual witch and that was just for starters."

9.

Michael collected Prudence from her house the next morning but rather than drive towards their office he turned north towards Houndsforth.

"I checked online to find the closest bridge with an arch to the house was and it's the railway viaduct between Wellslaw and Houndsforth." he told her.

"Oh right. I don't think I've ever been down near them." Prudence replied.

"There's no real reason to. They're where the railway crosses the river of course and they're not even visible from the main road." Michael said as the Range Rover approached the river that divided Wellslaw from Houndsforth. Before reaching this Michael braked and indicated to turn down the road to the right of the main one. Then after turning down this road he turned the Range Rover again to drive along a narrow road that led down towards the railway viaduct that crossed the river. Made of red brick, the viaduct towered over the few nearby buildings and as Prudence looked up a train sped past on its way towards the city of Manchester, not much more than ten miles to the north. There was a tall fence with a locked gate at the end of the road that prevented Michael from driving the Range Rover right under the viaduct but beside this there was also a dirt path that led around it, allowing a person to walk under the viaduct to reach the wooded ground on the other side.

"We'll leave the car here and search on foot." Michael said as he parked beside the gate.

"This place is pretty isolated. Do you think it's safe leaving the car here?" Prudence asked.

"Oh I don't see why not." Michael replied and he glanced towards the nearby houses, "I doubt the people around here are about to come and try to steal it. Now do you have that pocket torch I gave you?"

"Right here." Prudence said, nodding her head as she reached into her handbag and took out the compact alloy torch that Michael had given her when she first started working for him.

"Good because we can't justify carrying the full sized ones around in broad daylight. If anything does go wrong just use the end of that to jab your attacker. Eyes and throat work best but into the ribs will hurt like hell as well." Michael advised her as he turned and started to walk towards the dirt path.

"So what exactly are we looking for?" Prudence said as she dashed to catch up with him.

"Anything that would point towards someone sleeping rough around here." Michael told her, "Wellslaw doesn't exactly have a large homeless problem so any evidence we find would mean there's a good chance that it's Andrew."

The dirt path took Michael and Prudence right under the viaduct but apart from a few pieces of litter that looked as if they could have been there a very long time and some footprints in the dirt there were no signs of a human presence beneath it.

"Well he's not under here." Prudence commented.

"We need to check the other arches." Michael added.

"I'm thinking that my choice of footwear wasn't the best. Should I go back to the car for my wellingtons?" Prudence said, looking at the rough ground and the vegetation that covered it as it led down to the river. Then she looked at her boots with heels that made

"That's okay. Wait here while I take a look." Michael told her before he stepped off the path and began to cautiously make his way along the viaduct to the next arch.

This took Michael to the riverbank itself and as soon as he looked under the arch he saw what he had been hoping to find. Although there was no sign of Andrew Watson there was the remains of a small fire that someone had lit in a hole using mainly scrap paper for fuel. Added to this there was a rucksack and a sleeping bag rolled up against the brick viaduct as well as a black plastic bag that Michael crouched down to inspect. Opening the bag he saw that it contained a number of tins of food as well as several small bottles of water. None of these items linked this improvised camp to Andrew Watson though and so Michael moved on to the rucksack instead. Inside this he found several items of clothing bundled up and as he rummaged through these he came across a small tablet computer as well as a pair of plug in chargers for the tablet and also a mobile phone. These were the clues that Michael had been looking for and he smiled when he saw them. A homeless person was unlikely to keep such devices. The money that could be made by selling the tablet would be enough to get a roof over their head for several nights or buy food to last for weeks. There was always the possibility that the rucksack and its contents were stolen and the homeless person living here under the viaduct had just not yet had the opportunity to sell the devices but Michael suspected otherwise. He returned the chargers to the rucksack but kept hold of the tablet computer as he turned his attention to the various side pockets of the rucksack. These contained a variety of smaller items useful to someone sleeping rough, matches, a torch and spare batteries, a cutlery set and a can opener.

This only left the sleeping bag and when Michael lifted this up he found further proof that this was not an ordinary homeless person's camp. Beneath the sleeping bag there was a bladed weapon that Michael

immediately recognised as the bayonet from the current British military rifle, the L85 or SA80 as it was more commonly known. This was inside its rigid scabbard that included a sharpening block and saw blade, both of which would be useful to someone sleeping rough but to find a homeless person with such a weapon was unusual. As well as the bayonet there was also a wooden baseball bat which Michael could see no point in having to hand in such a situation except for use as a weapon.

He left both the bayonet and bat where they were, covering them once more with the sleeping bag and then with the tablet computer in his hands he started to head back towards the path where he had left Prudence.

Prudence had waited patiently while she waited for Michael to return and to pass the time she took out her mobile phone and starting one of the games she had installed on it, focusing on this until she heard the sound of movement through the nearby undergrowth. However, when she looked up in the direction Michael had gone she saw no sign of him and then she realised that she could hear the sound of heavy breathing from behind her and slowly she turned her head towards the source of the sound.

Right in front of her Prudence saw a large black and brown dog with a muscular build looking straight at her as it stood motionless and blocking the path back towards the Range Rover. Remembering that no-one was supposed to have lived long enough after seeing a Hound of Tindalos to provide a description Prudence suddenly considered the possibility that she could be looking at one right now and her hand slowly moved towards her handbag where she had the compact torch. The dog began to growl as she did this and she froze, staring back at the creature until all of a sudden she heard a shout.

"Buster!" a female voice shouted and as the dog turned around a middle aged woman appeared with a dog lead in her hand. The dog immediately wagged its tail and ran towards her, sitting down while she took a treat from her pocket and then gave it to the dog.

"That's your dog?" Prudence asked and the woman nodded.

"Yes Buster is mine. I'm sorry if he scared you, you look as white as a sheet. Don't worry though, he's a big softy really. People misunderstand Rottweilers. They're actually very well behaved." the woman replied.

"Sure." Prudence said, remembering the way the dog had growled at her.

It was then that Michael reappeared and stood beside Prudence.

"Did I miss anything?" he asked.

"Just me coming face to face with a large dog." Prudence answered and Michael looked at the woman dog walker.

"Do you often walk your dog along here?" he said.

"Yes, there's nothing wrong with that." the woman responded angrily.

"I'm sorry I wasn't trying to suggest you were doing anything wrong but I am interested in whether you've seen any changes around here. In particular I'd like to know if you know anything about a homeless person sleeping over there by the river." Michael said and he pointed towards the campsite he had just discovered.

"Oh the tramp, yes. He arrived a few days ago. This weekend I think." the woman told him.

"Then you've seen him?" Michael said.

"No but I know that someone's been living down by the river. I've seen the light from their fire." the woman replied, "I just kept Buster close to me and carried on walking. Most of the homeless are drug addicts and I don't fancy coming face to face with one on my own. Are you here to get rid of him?"

"Not really. We've been asked to find a missing person and we think that he could be sleeping rough." Michael explained.

"Well I hope you can get rid of him. There are children living in the houses here and I don't like the idea of a drug addict hanging around them." the woman said before she began to walk again and Prudence stepped back to leave as much room as possible for her and the dog get past.

"That damned dog freaked me out when I saw it." Prudence said softly, "I thought I'd just come face to face with one of those Hounds of Tindalos John told us about."

Michael smiled.

"Well you're okay now aren't you?" he said.

"Yes but only because I went to the toilet right before you picked me up. Otherwise I'd probably be standing here in a puddle of my own pee."

"Yeah, don't do that Prudence. For starters I'm not letting you back in the car if you ever do." Michael said and Prudence frowned.

"So I take it you found something over there then." she said and she looked at the tablet in Michael's hand. "Yes, someone has definitely been sleeping rough over there. They've set up a small camp and I found this there." he told her and he held up the tablet.

"Well I knew Wellslaw had a reputation for being posh but I didn't think that even our tramps had Wi-Fi." Prudence said.

"There were also a couple of chargers. Whoever is living over there they haven't been sleeping rough for long."

"But no Andrew Watson though?" Prudence asked and Michael shook his head.

"No. I don't know where he is right now." he answered.

"So is taking that tablet legal?" Prudence added.

"That depends on what I do with it. If I keep it then it's theft by finding. On the other hand since it was abandoned I have every right to pick it up and take it to the police as lost property." Michael said.

"After making a copy of everything that's on it I take it." Prudence said and Michael nodded.

"Exactly. Andrew Watson thought this was worth hanging onto so there must be something important to him on it." he said.

"And what do you think he'll do when he finds out that it's missing?" Prudence said.

"I doubt he'll be very happy with the person who took it. Which is why if you're willing to come back here after dark we'll need to take a trip."

"A trip where?"

"To a military surplus store I know. Andrew Watson has a knife and a baseball bat hidden back there and I don't know whether or not he'd be willing to use either on someone. I think it's about time we got you a stab vest of your own."

"Can I pick the colour?"

"Prudence it'll be an ex-police vest. They're all black." Michael told her and she smiled.

"My favourite colour. It goes with everything." she said.

10.

"I wish you'd told me that there was a massive dog at that shop." Prudence commented as they drove along the motorway on the way back from the military surplus store where Michael had bought her an ex-police issue stab vest designed specifically to fit a woman, "That's twice today I've thought I was about to get eaten by a supernatural hound."

"You soon found out how friendly he was though didn't you?" Michael pointed out and Prudence smiled.

"I'd have taken him home if I could. Even if you might not even have room for a dog that big in this car. Come to think of it I'm not sure I'd have room at home." she said.

"You were bringing plenty of other stuff back anyway. What did you buy it for?" Michael commented, glancing at the plastic bag of other items Prudence had bought for herself from the variety of goods on offer.

"Maybe I think having a few of these glow sticks around the house could be useful." she responded.

"It's not the glow sticks I was thinking about. What about that baton? It's not as if you can carry it around." Michael said.

"That's in case that lizard man comes calling." Prudence said, "If any of those guns he had could still fire I'd have bought one of them as well."

"And to think that when we first met you thought no-one should own a gun." Michael said, smiling, "Now what about the handcuffs?" Michael asked.

"I thought those might come in handy if we ever come across someone who tries to get away from us." Prudence answered.

"We can't handcuff people Prudence." Michael reminded her.

"I was thinking about the lizard man again. I'd like to see that detective still claim he's just someone in a costume. What's he going to do? Walk up and rip off a mask to reveal Old Man Jones the caretaker who would have got away with it if not for us meddling kids." Prudence replied.

"Actually that reminds me." Michael said, "Could you call Wellslaw police now and see if you can speak to DS Jackson? BY the time we get back to the office that tablet will have been cloned so we can let him have it."

"Sure." Prudence said, taking out her mobile phone and dialling the direct number for Wellslaw police station that she had stored in its contact list, "DS Jackson please." she added when the phone was answered.

"I'm sorry DS Jackson isn't here right now. Can someone else help?" the person on the other end told her.

"He's not in." Prudence said to Michael, "Should I ask for that police woman he was with yesterday?"

"No, get him to call you back. I want rub his face in the fact that we've made progress while I bet he hasn't got anywhere." he told her.

"No, could he call me back on this number? It concerns the case we discussed with him yesterday."

Prudence said into her phone.

"Of course. I'll pass the message on." the person at the other end of the call said before hanging up.

"Well that was abrupt." Prudence said as she returned her phone to her handbag, "So what do we do if we aren't going to be handing that tablet over to the high and mighty Detective Sergeant Jackson?"

"We'll see if John has come up with anything new. Maybe there was something in those notes we got from Harriet. Right now I'll take any advantage we can get." Michael replied.

"The good news is that I've managed to find evidence that your missing people used the drug Liao I told you about." John said as he led Michael and Prudence into his study where the Necronomicon and copies of Harriet's notes were laid out across his desk.

"Great. Is it something we can use to protect ourselves?" Michael asked.

"Oh no. All I've done is found what I think is a reference to the drug in these extra notes you brought me. It's not conclusive but it mentions what the author called 'a potion brewed from the petals and seeds of flowers brought to these shores from the Indies.'" John told him, quoting from the notes he had made himself while studying the writings brought to him.

"The florist said the black lotus had to be imported from the far east." Prudence pointed out.

"Which fits with what's written here." John said, "Of course all this does is confirm the sort of creature we're dealing with."

"Which doesn't do us much good if we come face to face with one. We know they're killers." Michael said.

"Yes these notes suggest that their victims just vanish and are never seen again. My guess would be that after making a kill a Hound of Tindalos takes the body of its victim back in time with it."

"Somebody must have tried to fight back. Don't those notes mention any way of killing them? What about a shotgun?" Michael asked.

"What happened to not breaking the law? Wouldn't firing off a shotgun be kind of illegal?" Prudence pointed out.

"Not if we can get it on private land. There are plenty of farmers around here that I'm sure would let me practice with mine for a small fee." Michael said and then he looked at John and added, "What do you think John? You're the closest thing we have to an expert."

"I don't know Michael. I'm a professor of Classics, not zoology or physics. The issue is that I can't tell you what these Hounds of Tindalos are made of. Creatures like the serpent person you took this book from can be harmed just as easily as any ordinary reptile but the Necronomicon describes a number of species that are so utterly alien that weapons such as swords or guns would have no effect on them. Others can survive fire, can breathe underwater or don't even need to breathe at all and can survive even in space. I'm not sure that a creature like a Hound of Tindalos can be killed by any means we have at our disposal." John replied.

"Then what about trapping it?" Prudence suggested.

"If they can travel through time I doubt we could build a cage that would hold one. It could just go back in time again." Michael said.

"I hadn't thought of that." Prudence replied, "So what does that leave us with?"

"Trying to keep this young man away from sharp corners for the rest of his life. Or at least until we can find out if there is a way to kill one." John said. Then he smiled nervously and added, "And hope that we are dealing with only one. Canines tend to hunt in packs after all."

"And for that we need to find him." Michael said before he looked at Prudence and asked, "Are you up for another late night?"

Not wanting to alert Andrew Watson to their approach, Michael parked the Range Rover further back from the viaduct though still far enough down the side road that he and Prudence would not be observed as they got out of the car and quietly opened the back.

"Do you think this will work against one of the Hounds of Tindalos?" Prudence asked as Michael helped her put on the newly purchased stab vest. The heavy protective garment covered her body from the base of her neck to her waist, covering most of her vital organs but it left her head, limbs and lower abdomen exposed.

"I doubt it. From what John says about them I suspect that they'd be strong enough to rip right through these. On the other hand if Andrew does try to stick a bayonet through either one of us I'll be happier knowing that we have these vests." Michael replied while he began to don his own stab vest. Then he passed Prudence a large torch while taking another for himself, "Okay let's go. Keep your torch turned off until I say so though," and Prudence nodded.

The two investigators then made their way down towards the viaduct, walking along the dirt path to get around the fence that blocked only the road before they noticed a glow coming from near the river.

"I think there's someone down there." Prudence whispered and Michael nodded.

"We need to get closer." he replied.

"Then let's go. I wore flat heels especially." Prudence said and then the pair of them left the path and began to creep towards the river.

Michael led the way as they went and Prudence tried to copy the way he crouched as he moved to minimise his silhouette. She also noticed that despite his torch being switched off he held it over his shoulder facing ahead of him and gripped it close to the lens. He had explained to Prudence that this allowed him to use the heavy torch as an improvised baton if he came under attack and so she copied this as well as they got closer to the river bank and it became more obvious that the glow they had seen from the path was a small camp fire although from the angle they were at it was still not possible to see who or how many people were sat beside it.

A rustling sound from the undergrowth made Michael freeze on the spot and behind him Prudence did likewise, but as they both looked towards the source of the sound they saw only a fox appear and look towards them briefly before it carried on its way and disappeared again. Michael then looked at Prudence and smiled at her, holding up three fingers.

"Third hound today." he whispered and in return she frowned at him and punched him in the back, the blow absorbed by his stab vest, "I still felt that." he added softly.

"You were supposed to!" Prudence hissed back at him and she took another step towards him. However, as she put her foot down she stood on a piece of dry wood that produced a sudden 'snap' and she winced, realising that she could have just given away their presence to anyone sat by the fire. Sure enough moments later a figure appeared from beneath the viaduct.

"Who's there? I know someone's out there. I can protect myself." a man's voice said as he peered into the darkness. However, having been sat in front of the fire and with the light it cast shining directly into his face his eyes had not adjusted to the dark and he did not notice Michael or Prudence until Michael stood up straight and turned on his torch, shining the bright light directly into his face so that he was forced to shield his eyes.

"Andrew Watson?" Michael called out and the man standing in front of him froze.

This gave Michael the opportunity to study the man's appearance in the torch light and he noticed that although his clothes did appear somewhat dirty they were in generally good condition and of expensive brands, certainly not the sort of things an impoverished homeless person would be wearing. As Michael had expected he also noticed that the man was holding a knife in his hand that he recognised as the bayonet he had seen earlier.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"Are you Andrew Watson?" Michael responded, moving closer to him and Prudence followed close behind.

"Yes. Now tell me who you are." Andrew said and then he noticed that both Michael and Prudence were wearing black armoured vests, "Are you the police?" he added.

"No, we're not the police. We're here to help you." Prudence told him. Then she remembered that technically they had been hired to find Andrew so that he could be made to pay for the damage to the house where he and his three housemates had lived and she added, "Sort of."

"What can you tell us about the hound Andrew?" Michael asked.

"That hound? You mean that damned Hound of Tindalos that's coming after me? That's what it's called you know, a Hound of Tindalos and now thanks to Dominic and his stupid games I'm going to be killed by something that shouldn't even exist. I can't go to anyone for help because no-one would believe me." Andrew responded in a panicked tone of voice.

"We believe you. We know they exist." Prudence told him, "You contacted it using the drug didn't you? Liao it's called."

"Oh not me. I had nothing to do with any of that." Andrew replied, glaring at Prudence.

"Why don't you explain to us what happened. Be as detailed as possible." Michael said.

"Fine, like I said it started with Dominic, do you know who he was?" Andrew said and Michael nodded.

"One of your house mates. We know all their names." he said.

"Okay well Dominic went to Germany with a bunch of his geek friends and while they were out there one of them found some weird book about magic and decided it would make a good prop for use in one of those games they play with the little painted figures. Anyway Dominic must have read part of it because he took photos of some of the pages with his phone, a recipe for a drug that could send your mind back in time he said and he and Laura decided that we should all try it to see what happened. I didn't want any part of it but Elise thought it would be good for fun so she agreed to join in. Anyway they spent hundreds of pounds getting some stupid rare flower just to make this drug that they all took and then one night they all took it together."

"And what happened?" Prudence asked but Andrew shrugged.

"I don't know exactly. I went to the pub. I thought it was all stupid and I was mad at Elise for the money she was wasting. We were supposed to be saving up for a wedding." Andrew said, "All I know is that when I got home all three of them were terrified of something. They said they'd gone back further than they planned, right back to the start of the world if you can believe that. Then they started ranting about dogs. They said that they saw something and that it was coming after them. They'd already begun to start painting on the walls and floors and even when I told them to stop they carried on. I knew the landlord would be furious but I couldn't stop them. Dominic tried looking for a way to stop the thing in the pages he'd taken pictures of but he couldn't find anything and he said his friends just laughed when he told them what had happened and he couldn't get at the book itself to see if there was anything else in there. That's when Laura went looking for other books on witchcraft to see what she could find but all that got them was more of those useless symbols that they painted everywhere. Then they all started doing this chanting that was supposed to ward off evil spirits. They sat in that spare room for hours on end just repeating the same gibberish over and over again. They were certain that it would protect them but it didn't do them any good. The hound came and it took them. It killed them and it took them back with it."

"Where were you when this happened?" Prudence asked.

"In the room Elise and I shared. It was the only place in the house not covered with all their painted symbols." Andrew told her, "They were all sat in the spare room and chanting when all of a sudden I heard Laura scream, then Elise as well and I ran to see what was happening. It was all over in a matter of seconds though. When I opened the door all I saw was a cloud of smoke coming from the corner and Elise, Laura and Dominic being dragged into it. I could tell they were dead. Then I looked into the cloud itself and I realised that there was something in there and it was looking back at me. It dragged the bodies into the smoke and then it all just vanished. All I know now is that the thing that killed them knows about me now and it's coming back to kill me just like it did with the others."

"So you came here?" Michael commented, looking past Andrew to his camp and he nodded.

"I tore the house apart looking for everything the others had on that creature. I thought maybe I could find something they'd missed but Dominic had tried burning the photos he took and although there was still parts of them left they didn't have any of the useful information on. I thought maybe I could get in touch with his friends but when I was searching his room I ended up smashing his phone by mistake. All I could remember was what the others said about angles of time or something like that. They said that a Hound of Tindalos

could only appear from a corner close to its victim and all I could think of was to get outside. This was the closest sheltered and out of the way place I could think of." Andrew said.

"So you sleep here. Where are you going during the day? We were by this morning and you weren't here." Michael said and Andrew frowned.

"You stole my tablet." he said and Michael nodded.

"Yes. I thought there could be useful information on it. We managed to pull a fair amount from Laura's laptop. So where are you going in the day?"

"I found the book Laura bought and there are all these notes about plants that can be used to protect against evil spirits. I thought maybe if I could find some of them I might be able to do something to protect myself. I've been searching everywhere but I can't find anything." Andrew told him.

"If we could get that book to John he might be able to find something in it that would stop the hound." Prudence suggested and Michael nodded.

"Do you know who has it?" he then asked Andrew but the other man shook his head.

"I've only met Dominic's gaming friends once or twice. I'm not even sure of their names." he said.

"I suppose this means we'll have to contact his mother again doesn't it?" Prudence said.

"Yes, she's our only lead to these people now." Michael responded, "We'll have to wait until tomorrow though. I don't think she'll appreciate us ringing her now." then he looked at Andrew and added, "Is there anything you need in the meantime?"

"I want my tablet back." Andrew replied and Michael smiled.

"We'll bring it by tomorrow. Until then you'll just have to keep doing what you've been doing. Stay put though, don't bother trying to find protective herbs." he said.

"From what we've heard they won't be effective anyway." Prudence added.

11.

"No Missus Briggs I-" Michael began while he was talking to Patricia Briggs the next morning back at his office, trying to discover the names and addresses of Dominic's role-playing group but throughout the conversation she was giving him little chance to speak.

"The police told me about how he's being accused of vandalising the house he lived in and I'm not going to help them find him. It's obviously a mistake." she said.

"I understand that Missus Briggs and I can assure you that-" Michael began before he was interrupted again and then he sighed and put the phone down.

"So she hung up on you then?" Prudence asked from across the desk and Michael sighed.

"Yes, though not before using language I certainly can't picture my mother ever using. Or even most of the sergeants I knew in the army and that's saying something."

"Do you think if we keep watch on her then she'll try to contact any of them herself?" Prudence said.

"I doubt it and that leaves us with a big problem. As you pointed out last night that woman is our only lead right now."

"And she won't speak to us." Prudence commented before music began to play from her bag. The song was called 'Dear Prudence' by The Beatles and had been set as the ring tone for her mobile phone by Michael and she quickly removed the phone from her bag to answer it, "Hello?" she said.

"Miss Brent it's Detective Sergeant Jackson. I got a message to call you." Mark's voice said.

"Hold on I'm going to put you on speaker." Prudence replied. Then before switching on he phone's speaker mode she looked at Michael and added, "It's Detective Jackson."

"Mark." Michael said.

"That's DS Jackson to you." Mark responded, "Now what do you want?"

"We've been working on the Briggs' case. We've come up with another lead. How soon can you be here?" Michael said.

"Oh I might be able to pop round sometime this afternoon." Mark said.

"This afternoon?" Prudence exclaimed.

"It may surprise you to know this Miss Brent but I have more pressing matters than a simple case of criminal damage. Any issues with Jack French's insurance company are a civil matter and that's where amateurs like you two come in." Mark said.

"For God's sake Mark three of the four people we're looking for are dead and we've found the fourth. But we're going to need your help to save him as well." Michael said.

"Dead? You have proof of this? I mean real proof, not just some fairy story." Mark asked.

"How about an eye witness? Andrew Watson is still alive and he can testify that all three of his housemates are dead. Now he's in hiding to protect his life." Michael told him.

"I'm on my way over now. This had better be worth it or I may just think about charging the pair of you with wasting police time." Mark said and then he hung up the phone.

"Well that got his attention." Prudence said as she returned her mobile phone to her handbag.

"Yes nothing like the possibility of a triple murder to drag Wellslaw police out of their station with it's coffee machine and endless supply of digestive biscuits." Michael commented.

"So will you give him this tablet?" Prudence asked and she picked up Andrew's tablet from the desk for a moment before setting it back down again but Michel shook his head.

"No. It belongs to Andrew Watson. I told him that I'd return it and I will." he replied, "We'll wait for Detective Jackson to get here and try to persuade him to accept what's happened."

"Do you think he'll believe us? He still thinks that lizard man was a guy in a costume." Prudence pointed out.

"Maybe he won't but maybe he can put pressure on Patricia Briggs to provide the names of her son's gaming group. Of course for us to get those names out of him might be a challenge."

"And if he still won't believe us?" Prudence asked.

"Ah but this time it's not just us is it? We have Andrew Watson as well." Michael pointed out.

Although it was only a five minute drive from Wellslaw police station to Michael and Prudence's office it was still more than an hour before Mark finally arrived and pressed the intercom.

"Open up. It's me." he said impatiently.

"Sounds in a good mood doesn't he?" Prudence commented as Michael let Mark into the building and she got up to open the office door just as the detective came up the stairs, "Thanks for getting here so quickly detective." she said to him and he frowned at her.

"As I told you on the phone I have a lot to do." he responded.

"Yes those biscuits won't dunk themselves in your tea will they?" Michael said sarcastically.

"Just tell me what you've found. Where is Andrew Watson and how do you know that the others are dead?" Mark asked as he sat down.

"Andrew Watson told us. He was in the house when they were killed." Michael said.

"I see. Did he happen to see the culprit?"

"He heard the others scream and went to investigate. He said that he saw the hound just as it was leaving." Prudence said and Mark glared at her for a few moments before he responded.

"Hound? Your telling me that they were killed by a dog?" he said, "Where exactly did this take place?"

"Because Jack French didn't say anything about pools of blood anywhere."

"It wasn't actually a dog." Prudence said, "It's called a Hound of Tindalos. Dominic, Elise and Laura summoned it after they tried a drug that-"

"Summoned? As in spirits and demons?" Mark interrupted, "I meant what I said about wasting police time."

"Look Mark it's real." Michael said, leaning forward over his desk, "If you want to run this as an ordinary criminal damage case then fine. But we need to get in touch with some friends of Dominic's. Just like I told you on the phone, Andrew Watson's life is in danger."

"From this ghost dog thing?" Mark said.

"The Hound of Tindalos, yes. He thinks it saw him and is coming for him next."

"Oh I see it's a ghost dog that killed three people and now is looking to cover its tracks by killing the only witness." Mark said.

"Look why not come with us and talk to Andrew himself?" Michael suggested.

"Ah now that's a better suggestion. Where exactly is he?" Mark asked.

"He's been living rough near the river between Wellslaw and Houndsforth. Come on, we'll give you a ride to see him." Michael said and he picked up Andrew's tablet as he began to get to his feet.

"Actually I think I'll follow you in my own car. I want to be able to leave if he turns out to have already been eaten by a magic puppy or something." Mark responded.

This time Michael parked his Range Rover at the end of the road leading to the viaduct, just as he had done the first time he and Prudence had gone there to look for Andrew and Mark pulled his car up along side it.

"Okay so where is the elusive Mister Watson?" Mark asked as he got out of his car.

"By the river under the viaduct." Prudence told him.

"We can get around the fence using that path over there." Michael added.

"Just watch out for dog walkers." Prudence commented.

"Everything with you is about dogs today isn't it?" Mark replied as they began to walk towards the dirt path.

They followed this around the fence and under the viaduct before Michael and Prudence again left the path to head for the nearby river. Mark hesitated for a moment before he began to follow them.

"So why is he hiding out here?" he said.

"No corners." Prudence answered and he frowned, not understanding the response. Before he could ask for more information though Michael called out.

"Andrew we're back." he shouted and then Andrew emerged from beneath the viaduct, again holding the bayonet in his hand and as soon as he saw this Mark reached under his jacket and produced a baton, expanding it to three times its initial size with a flick of his wrist.

"I'm a police officer. Put the knife down!" he yelled, raising the baton to his shoulder.

"Just do it Andrew. He's here to help." Michael said and then a moment later he added, "Sort of anyway."

"Have you found a way to kill that thing?" Andrew asked as he put the bayonet down on the ground.

"No, not yet. We need to find that book and for that we're going to need the names of Dominic's friends."

Michael told him as he, Prudence and Mark walked up to him and Mark picked up the bayonet before banging the end of his baton on a rock to collapse it again.

"I already told you I don't know them." Andrew replied.

"We know but Dominic's mother won't tell us but maybe if you tell DS Jackson everything that happened that night then he may be able to talk her into giving us their names." Prudence said.

"And here's your tablet back. Maybe this will show you can trust us." Michael said and he handed the device over to Andrew.

"Thanks." he said, turning around and walking back beneath the viaduct..

"Can we get a move on with this?" Mark said as the others followed Andrew while he put the tablet back into his rucksack.

"Tell him what happened Andrew." Prudence told him and he sighed.

"Okay fine. Thanks to Dominic finding what he said was a recipe for some weird drug he, Elise and Laura all became convinced that there was something called a Hound of Tindalos after them. I thought they were crazy for ripping the house apart to try and protect themselves with magic symbols and chanting every night but the damned thing came for them just like they said it would. It just came out of a corner and killed them all. I arrived just in time to see it taking them and that's when it saw me just like it saw them when they took the drug. I've been hiding out here ever since. There aren't any corners it can use to get at me from." he

explained, summarising the story he had previously told Michael and Prudence but it was clear that Mark was not impressed by any of it.

"So tell me Mister Watson, do you and your friends take a lot of drugs together?" he said.

"What? No. Maybe we all smoked the odd joint at a weekend but nothing serious." Andrew replied.

"I see and had you smoked any of this pot on the day you claim the attack took place? How strong is what you smoke?" Mark said.

"You think all this is a bad trip?" Andrew exclaimed and then he looked at Michael and added, "I thought you said he was here to help."

"Look Mark he's not making this up. We've been checking and there's information about these Hounds of Tindalos going back hundreds of years. Dominic's friends have a book that may have more in it. Hopefully including a way to kill one of them." Michael said.

"When it comes to how long people have been writing about things I could say the same about the tooth fairy, Easter bunny or Santa Claus. That doesn't make any of them real though does it?" Mark pointed out.

"Okay so you don't believe in the Hounds of Tindalos. Can't you agree that finding Dominic's friends could be useful?" Prudence said.

"So they can lead you to this book of fairy tales you mean?" Mark replied, "If you're unsure about keeping matters confidential then just ask your boss about what would happen if his girlfriend was leaking information from her bank."

"We just need you to give them our card. You can do that." Michael said.

"Yes but why would I? My job is to investigate crimes and magic time travelling dogs aren't covered by any law that I know of." Mark responded.

"What's your explanation for what happened then? Where are his friends?" Michael asked.

"I think it's far more likely that Andrew Watson and his friends all took some sort of hallucinogenic compound. What happened after that is anyone's guess. Maybe he attacked the others while under its influence and killed them. With the mess that house was in I'm sure it would be easy to miss the evidence of where they died. On the other hand they could all have run off somewhere while high and be living under another bridge ranting at the world about phantom dogs coming to kill them. Having this checked for signs of blood will be a good start." he continued and he held up the bayonet.

"I'm telling the truth. I know it sounds crazy but-" Andrew began.

"You're right. It does sound crazy and I've heard all sorts of crazy stories from people trying to avoid being convicted of a crime." Mark interrupted.

"Then how do you explain the lack of any bodies?" Prudence asked.

"He's had plenty of time to hide them. Don't worry, if there are bodies to be found we'll find them eventually though." Mark said.

"This is ridiculous Mark." Michael said.

"No, what's ridiculous is wasting any more time on these fairy stories." Mark snapped back at him and he turned towards Andrew, "Andrew Watson I am arresting you on suspicion of criminal damage. You do not have to say anything but if you-" then before he could finish Andrew suddenly hurling his rucksack at the detective.

The thrown rucksack struck both Mark and Michael and as they fell they took Prudence down with them. Then before any of them could get back to their feet Andrew began to run, heading for the path under viaduct.

"Come on, we need to keep up with him." Michael told Prudence as he helped her back to her feet but Mark was already back up and chasing after Andrew.

Andrew followed the path under the viaduct and continued up the narrow road, turning towards the main road at the end of it. At this time of day the traffic here was relatively light but several drivers were still forced to slam on their brakes as Andrew rushed out into the road ahead of them without looking and behind him the others heard the sound of horns being sounded. The traffic was just starting to move again when Mark reached the main road and he stopped, watching as Andrew disappeared through a hole in the hedge on the opposite side and by the time an opening appeared in the traffic he was gone.

When Michael reached the main road he was just in time to follow Mark across and then through the gap in the hedge before more cars appeared while Prudence narrowly missed the gap in the traffic.

"Go on, I'll catch up." she called out then muttered to herself as Michael also went through the hedge, "I hope."

The other side of the edge was wooded for a short distance before the ground opened out into a field of sheep and as Mark emerged into this he saw Andrew running away from him as fast as he could. Rather than going after him right away Mark reached for his radio instead.

"Whisky Lima this is DS Jackson. I am in pursuit of an IC one suspect heading west from the junction of Manchester Road and River Driveway. Back up is requested." he said.

"Copy that Jackson. Units are on the way." the voice of one of the police controllers responded before Mark began to run again, now only a few paces ahead of Michael.

Andrew kept on running westwards, passing from one field into the next with both Michael and Mark chasing after him and when Prudence finally arrived she could see only Michael in the distance.

Meanwhile Andrew kept on running across the next field until he came to a river that blocked his path and rather than attempt to cross it he turned to run alongside it, following it as it then curved around again as the fields gave way to more trees. Seeing an opportunity here Andrew ran into the trees to try and hide among them.

Mark halted at the edge of the wooded area and used his radio again to update the police station on his location, hoping that there might be more police officers in position to help him locate and trap Andrew. While he was talking Michael caught up to him and also looked into the trees, then over his shoulder at Prudence as she ran across the field towards him.

"He's in there somewhere, come on." Michael told her and they both advanced into the woods to search for Andrew.

Mark also entered the woods in search of his suspect although he took a slightly different path, occasionally checking looking back towards Michael and Prudence to see whether they had found Andrew before him.

They had not though and all three of them continued to move through the woods in search of him.

Andrew himself had expected his pursuers to follow him into the woods and he quickly found somewhere to hide, hoping that they would go right past him and he could double back to collect his belongings and find a new place to shelter. However, it seemed to him that they were getting closer so he waited for them all to be looking away from his current location before getting up and cautiously moving further away from them. This brought him to the edge of the wooded ground and he found himself instead standing at the edge of an area of flat ground beside a number of houses that was used by the residents to park their cars in. For a moment he considered making his way around the front of the houses and circling back to pick up his belongings but he wanted to avoid being seen by the local residents who might become suspicious of his presence so instead he took cover behind a nearby car so that it hid him from being seen from in the woods while the fence alongside the small car park hid him from being seen from the neighbouring houses.

However, what he failed to notice was the corner where the fence turned at a right angle.

Andrew's attention was focused solely on the woods and his pursuers inside them and he did not notice as a cloud of smoke began to pour silently from the corner where the two perpendicular fence panels met and he did not see the creature that emerged from this smoke, advancing towards him until he heard the sound of its breath. Slowly he turned around to face the Hound of Tindalos.

12.

The sound of a sudden scream made Michael, Prudence and Mark all turned their heads.

"That sounded like Andrew." Prudence said.

"It was. Come one." Michael responded and the pair of them broke into a run through the woods towards the source of the scream. Mark also began to run towards the sound and in under a minute they all burst from the woods into the car park.

"Okay Watson give it up." Mark announced, looking at the cars and guessing that Andrew was hiding behind one of them and he began to walk around the car park.

"Andrew are you here?" Prudence called out but there was no response and she and Michael also began to walk across the car park in search of any sign of him. As they walked Michael suddenly put a hand on Prudence's shoulder.

"Prudence look. The corner." he said to her and he pointed his finger towards the corner of the fence where the Hound of Tindalos had emerged from before taking Andrew. Although both the hound and Andrew's body were gone from the car park there was still a glistening blue ichor clinging to the corner and Prudence winced.

"Blue. Just like in the house where the others died." she said and Michael nodded.

"I think that the hound finally caught up to him." he replied.

Just then there was the sound of a car door slamming not far away and moments later a pair of uniformed police officers came running along the track leading from the road to the car park.

"DS Jackson we got here as fast as we could." one of them said.

"Well what are you waiting for? Get searching. You're looking for a man called Andrew Watson and he has to be here somewhere." Mark told them.

"What about them?" the police officer asked, looking at Michael and Prudence.

"Ignore them, unless they get in your way in which case arrest the pair of them." Mark responded.

"You're wasting your time sergeant." Michael said, "We're too late. Andrew Watson is gone just like his friends."

"More fairy stories? I don't think so." Mark replied before he looked over at the two uniformed officers again and added, "Come on get looking."

"So what do we do now?" Prudence asked Michael and he sighed.

"We go. Andrew Watson and his friends are all dead and there's no point wasting any more time on them. I'll tell Jack French that we've exhausted every lead and his tenants have disappeared." he replied.

"And what about the Hound of Tindalos?"

"Thankfully the Hound of Tindalos seems to be gone. I think we should just be glad that it never laid eyes on us." Michael said.

"There's still the matter of Dominic's friends having that book." Prudence said as they both began to walk towards the road.

"I know. Maybe Patricia Briggs will have a change of heart when her son fails to turn up but until then we'll just have to hope they don't decide to try anything they find in it and John will have to make do with just the Necronomicon." Michael said and Prudence smiled.

"Well it is a big book. I'm sure there's a lot in there to keep him busy for a long time." she responded.

John Midland stepped into his back garden with the Necronomicon open in his hands and looked up at the sky. Then he took the whistle from around his neck and blew it before he began to read from the book.

"la! la! Hastur! Hastur cf'ayak vulgtmm, vulgtmm, vulgtmm! la! la! Hastur!" he said clearly.

He then looked upwards again and began to search the sky until he saw a shape that initially looked like a large bird or bat descending towards him. As it came closer it became easier to see that the creature had a more humanoid form though, with massive membranous wings attached to the shoulders of a torso that also possessed two arms and two legs that ended in webbed feet. The creature was significantly larger than John and when it landed in his garden it looked down at him with its beaked face and he smiled.

"Byakhee." he said.