

Martin McCallion
56 Powerscroft Road
London
E5 0PP
+44 (0)7989 407073
martin@devilgate.org

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CASINO SOUL

by Martin McCallion

1: Trying to Evoke

People were sweltering in the August streets, trying to cool off in parks and pools. It might not have been the best time to move to London, Stewart thought. The Tube was ridiculously crowded, and the heat on the Northern Line was overwhelming, though he had heard that some of the other lines had the welcome chill of air conditioning. On the other hand, he had left Edinburgh just as it was filling up with out-of-townies. He would have to miss the Festival this year, with his new job here.

Hence Oxford Street. Saturday afternoon. Wishing he had made time to buy work clothes before getting the train south.

‘Business casual,’ the joining instructions said. Not so much a dress code as a contradiction in terms. At the interview one person — sales — had been wearing a suit and tie. The other men had been wearing open-necked shirts and chinos, far from Stewart’s normal preference of sportswear or jeans.

As he crossed the road between the stationary buses and taxis, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He squeezed himself past a gaggle of noisy Americans who were sitting on the pavement arguing about where Oxford University was, and pulled his phone out. Someone

crashed into him and almost sent it flying. ‘Hey, what the f—!’ Stewart looked up to see a large man, dressed entirely in orange, lumbering away. The man looked back. Their eyes met, and the man glared at Stewart. It must have been a trick of the light, the sun’s heat, and the man’s unusual dress sense, but for a moment Stewart thought his glaring eyes were orange too. Then his back was retreating among the shopping hordes. Stewart shook his head, and looked back at his phone. A message from his housemate Freddy.

— *Hey, you’re up west, yeah? We’re meeting up in the Spice later if you want to join us*

There was a link to a location: a pub called the Spice of Life. Halfway down Charing Cross Road, where he knew he could go to bookshops.

— *Sounds good, see you there*

#

The shops were as horrible as he feared, but at least they were cool. Now, clothes acquired, he was ready to try zigzagging his way down through what he thought was probably Soho, to get to Charing Cross Road, and the bookshops.

Wardour Street: wasn’t that the one his dad used to play a song about? Something about a bomb.

It would be easy to get lost in London’s ancient ways, he thought. On the ground, you might think the streets were a grid, but they weren’t really. It had been the same in Edinburgh: he would follow a street that he thought was parallel to one he knew, and find himself far from where he intended.

A left turn onto Old Compton Street, enjoying the late afternoon sunlight and the sight and sounds of people sitting outside bars. The road forked, and just to the right, the Spice of

Life: all red brick and white stonework, hanging baskets of flowers, and a sign saying, ‘Good beer.’ He was too early to meet his housemates, but he thought he’d go in and check it out.

There were two old guys in leather jackets standing by the doors, smoking. They looked like punks. Like his dad had been. They were about as old as his dad, too. They stared at him as he approached the doors. They weren’t trying to intimidate him, but it didn’t feel exactly welcoming.

As he crossed the threshold he thought he was stepping into an ancient dive bar: black walls, smoky interior, and sticky floor. Were his friends really meeting here? He paused, blinked and realised he was mistaken. The decor within was as modern as you would expect in the heart of London, while still trying to evoke an old-world atmosphere: shiny dark wood and glass partitions; comfortable looking alcoves and friendly table groupings.

What had happened as he had first looked in? A trick of the light, maybe. The influence of the punky dads.

Beer. A seat in an alcove. A few sips and he was wishing he had gone to the bookshops first. He had come out with nothing to read. His phone was nearly dead from reading on the long Northern Line journey and using the maps app. He didn’t want to run out and lose contact tonight. He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes for a moment.

He is travelling on what feels like a Tube train, but it’s high above the ground. Out, out towards water, towards concrete, towards sky. Towards the light. The light in the sky is a sickly yellow, a colour out of madness, out of horror, out of something he cannot name. There is danger in the light; terror waits ahead; death is before him.

And now the light has gone. He stands in darkness. Yet he knows he is on a vast field, huge, limitless, under a starless sky the size of space itself.

Under his feet a gritty, sandy surface. His ankle turns on it; someone grabs his shoulder,

*stops him falling. A shadowy figure to his right. Another to his left; a third. Is there a fourth?
Do they make up the number?*

He is reassured by their presence, yet the fear is still strong.

*He is ripped from the darkness, to another place where death is near, then back into the
sickly light.*

Stewart jerked awake, sitting upright on the pub seat. He was drenched in sweat. How long had he been asleep? A glance at his wrist suggested only a few minutes. His beer was still sitting, cool, in front of him. Odd to fall into such a vivid dream so quickly. He hadn't slept too well last night, though. And he'd had strange dreams then, too. Maybe it was the excitement of moving to London.

He finished his beer and stepped out into the early-evening sunlight, feeling woozy. The ancient punk-rock smokers had gone. He had a couple of hours until he met the others. He wondered who else was going to be there. Freddy had mentioned meeting some other people. Mainly he hoped Malorie would be there. He hadn't spoken to her much last night, but he had really liked her.

He shouldn't think about her that way, though: she and Freddy were a couple.

#

It was important to get some food inside him: line his stomach before the important business of drinking.

The trouble with being in the West End already, he thought, was that he might have a long wait back at the pub before his housemates arrived. Hanging around on your own in a pub that's filling up quickly is never fun. And they were meeting some others, people he didn't know. Any group might be the one they ended up joining. It could be embarrassing.

So he lingered over a burger and chips. At least being alone in a fast-food place didn't

look as sad as being on your own in a pub on Saturday night.

His phone buzzed. Malorie, on the house chat.

— Hey, Stewart, we're just leaving. Be at the spice in half an hour. See ya

Half an hour sounded optimistic, but he was glad that he wouldn't have too much longer to wait. And that Malorie was coming.

He sent a thumbs-up in response, and wondered who else was coming. Freddy and Malorie for sure. Nat and Leon had both been out with them last night, but he hadn't seen them before he left this afternoon. Somehow he thought that all five housemates going out at once might be rare. Still, Leon was in the band with Freddy and Malorie, so he would surely be along. Nat was more of an enigma.

Half an hour later he was back at the Spice of Life. This time he noticed the theatre next to it. Its front was dominated by a display of a small child in what looked like a bird's nest. The Harry Potter play. He wouldn't mind seeing that, but he'd heard you could only get tickets for months in advance.

There were people smoking outside the pub, but no sign of the intimidating punks. He hesitated on the threshold, remembering the strangeness this afternoon, and wondering if he should wait outside for the others. But then he heard a shout. 'Oi. Stew! Get them in!' He turned and saw Freddy and Malorie crossing the open space in front of the theatre, Leon just behind them.

#

The rest of the night passed in a blur, parts of which he reconstructed later in a mosaic-like montage.

There were drinks in the Spice. Standing up now, all the seats long gone by the time they arrived. When they were at the bar waiting for the second round, Freddy said, 'Here,

take this. It'll brighten things up.'

'What is it?' said Stewart, looking down as Freddy's hand pressed something into his. He looked up, but Freddy had already turned away to greet an arriving friend. 'Oh well, what the hell,' Stewart said, and washed the pill down with a mouthful of beer.

A bit later, 'Come on, let's go upstairs. This lot are supposed to be good.' A band was playing in the upstairs room. They gave it two songs, but after an exchange of glances, shakes of the head, and nods, they all trooped back down to the bar.

'Sorry about that,' Freddy shouted, 'they were shit.'

'You don't need to shout down here,' said Stewart, raising his voice only slightly. 'Mainly the sound was shite.'

'No, the songs were bad too,' said Malorie. 'But look,' she went on, turning toward the door and smiling. 'Here's a much better band.' Two women and a man were crossing the room to join them. Hugs were exchanged and Stewart was introduced. He only remembered the name of the taller of the woman. Sarah was striking, in a bleached-blond hair and miniskirt kind of way. Her leather jacket reminded him of the punks he'd seen outside earlier, and soon everything was disjointed and confused.

They moved on to a club later, where he recalled the drinks being cataclysmically expensive, and dancing even though he hadn't much liked the music.

Around three in the morning they made their way to Trafalgar Square and caught a night bus home. Staggering through still-unfamiliar streets he slurred, 'This is what I came to London for!' to general laughter.

2: A Lot Going On

Sunday morning and Sarah Albuquerque hadn't got to bed yet. After leaving the club with the Rapture Raiders and their new flatmate, she and Ted and Rosie had kept the party going when they got back to Hackney. They sat out the back of the house where Ted lived, until the sun came up. Then they went to a cafe for breakfast. Now she was back at her own flat, trying to decide whether to go to bed, in which case she would lose most of the day, or stay up and get on with some songwriting. Not easy, as her flatmate was asleep. What even was this eight-in-the-morning-on-a-Sunday thing?

Stay awake. Do things. Keyboard and headphones and she could write songs. The half-drunk, half-hungover, half-wired from espresso state might be conducive to something good. Or might make for complete nonsense, but there was only one way to find out.

Two hours later she was just taking a break to make more coffee when her phone pinged with a message.

It was from her cousin Constance. She hadn't heard from her in a while.

— *Can I call you?*

Then a second later: — *Sorry it's so early. Haven't been to bed yet.*

Me neither, Sarah thought, before texting back to say yes.

Constance called almost immediately. 'Hey cuz, how's things?'

'It's been a while, Connie. I was beginning to think you weren't talking to me.'

'You know how it is. There's a lot going on. Especially now...'

Why did she trail off like that? 'Especially now?'

Constance was silent for so long that Sarah almost thought the connection had dropped. 'Tell me,' Constance finally said, 'have you been having problems with sleep?'

It was an odd question, but Connie had always been the oddest of her cousins. Possibly the oddest person she knew, Sarah thought. 'I didn't get to bed last night, same as you. But partying, not insomnia.' She poured coffee into her mug and sat back down at the kitchen table.

'Or...' Constance hesitated. It seemed to Sarah like she didn't want to say the next word. 'Dreaming. Have you been having bad dreams? Or strange ones...'

'Now you're just being weird, darling cuz. I mean, I'm used to you being weird, but you call me out of the blue on a Sunday morning and ask me if I've been having *dreams*? What next, you going to psychoanalyse me?'

'I need to know, Sarah. I've got work out how far it's spread.'

'How far what's spread?'

'The... sickness. The contamination. No, that's not right. Or is it?'

'Connie, hon, you're not making any sense.'

'I know. None of this makes sense. But it means *something*. I know it does.'

Constance let out a long breath on the other end of the phone.

Her cousin sounded like she might have been partying on something more mind-bending than Sarah. 'Look, Connie, I don't know what your problem is, but I can answer

your question. I haven't been sleeping that well. And... I guess I have been having some odd dreams. But it's just the heat. These nights are hot. Sultry, even. I wish we had aircon. It's honestly a relief to get in to work some days.'

'The heat. Yes, that's part of it. Everyone sweating, lying with their windows open, like an invitation. And then all the changes to the city with Brexit. People leaving, new... movements. It doesn't like the disruption. It was the same in 2012.'

'What doesn't?'

'The city. London. It's upset. Thanks, Sarah, you've been a great help. Talk soon.'

And she was gone.

Sarah sat looking at her phone for several minutes, wondering about her cousin's mental state. She hadn't sounded herself — well, she *had*: even when they were kids, Connie would say weird things. But she seemed to be taking it to a new level today. *London* was upset? Like the city was conscious?

I should call Aunt Clarissa, she thought. But what could she do? Constance was a grown woman. I can't call her mother up and say, hey, your daughter's acting weird again. Weirder than usual. And anyway, Aunt Clarissa wasn't always the most down to Earth of people. There was that whole thing where the kids in her town were calling her a witch. To be fair it *had* been near to Halloween, and Clarissa had been going around in a witch's hat, but there was something about the way she played up to it. Maybe Constance was an apple not falling far from Clarissa's tree, as the saying suggests.

'Good morning, good morning.' Sarah's thoughts were interrupted by her flatmate Ronnie coming into the kitchen.

'God, you're unusually cheerful this morning.'

'Well, I was woken from a delightful dream by the sound of my delightful flatmate

talking on the phone.’ Before Sarah could protest that she hadn’t been talking that loudly, he went on. ‘But that means I remembered my dream. Which was, as aforesaid, delightful.’

Why was everyone talking about dreams this morning? “Aforesaid”? You rehearsing for Shakespeare?’

‘Actually, yes. I got the part!’

‘Hey, congratulations. Wait, was this in the dream?’

‘No, this is real. Though you could say it’s “in the dream.” The midsummer night’s one!’

‘Ha. We’re long past midsummer, but well done. And now,’ she said, pushing back her chair and standing up, ‘I’ve got to go. Shopping calls.’ She was beginning to wish she hadn’t gone out last night. Still, it was always a good time with Malorie and the other Raiders. Their new flatmate had seemed a bit standoffish. Probably just shy and overwhelmed. First time in London and all that.

3: Higher in the Pecking Order

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ Malorie said. ‘Scary dreams again.’

‘What about?’ said Nat, who was getting ready for their shift at the hospital.

‘No idea.’ Malorie rested her head on the table. ‘Just scary. Night terrors, or whatever.’

‘That’s funny.’

‘No it’s not.’

‘No, I mean,’ Nat said, ‘I feel like I’ve heard a lot of people saying that lately. Friends, and at work. Patients. Come to think of it, I’ve been dreaming a lot too.’

‘It’s the heat,’ Malorie said from the tabletop. ‘It’s making the whole city dream.’

‘How did it go last night? You look like you had a heavy session.’

‘Mainly just late. It was after four when I got to bed.’

‘Shit, girl, what are you doing up?’

Malorie sighed. ‘I wish I wasn’t. It was a decent night, though. The Spice followed by Overtone.’

‘Ah, my least favourite club. I’m glad I couldn’t make it.’

‘There is that. Stewart seemed to have a good time, at least.’

‘Oh, yeah, how was the new boy?’

‘Fine, but... he might be developing a thing for Sarah. Which would be bad.’

‘Sarah from Tasty? She was out too?’

‘All of them were.’

‘And why would it be bad?’

Malorie whistled. ‘Most importantly, she’s into women. Maybe guys too, I’m not entirely sure. But even if so, she’s a bit out of his league, don’t you think? Plus, they’re our rivals. It would create a conflict of interest in the house.’

‘Wait, “maybe guys too”? You don’t know?’

‘She’s never said, but I’ve sometimes got the idea that she might.’

‘You’ve never talked about it? I thought she was one of your best friends.’ Nat felt in their pockets, jingled keys.

‘She is, but... I dunno, I guess we mainly talk about music? No, I mean, we do talk about personal stuff, relationships, whatever. But that’s never come up. She was in a relationship with a woman when I met her at uni, and I’ve only ever seen her with women since. You don’t suddenly ask, “Hey are you bi at all?”, do you?’

‘I guess not. Anyway,’ Nat went on, ‘you’re not *that* rivalrous. Is that a word? And you’re assuming that Stewart will be a fan of the Raiders. Poor boy moved in without even hearing what you sound like.’

‘He said he’d listened to our SoundCloud. And anyway, he seems to have good taste in music.’

‘He’ll probably like Tasty, then.’

‘Shut it. We’re much better than they are. They’re just more established.’

Nat laughed as they gathered up their things. ‘In the shitty places you play, that don’t mean much.’ They looked at their watch. ‘Gotta go. I’m gonna be late.’ They were out the door and gone with a cheery wave.

Malorie put her head on the table again. She knew Nat was only teasing her, but there was a core of truth in what they said.

Tasty were just slightly higher in the pecking order than the Rapture Raiders, and it felt like it made a lot of difference in the back rooms of pubs and tiny venues where they were able to get gigs. Supporting Tasty felt a lot different from headlining their own show. Sarah being her friend didn’t change that.

As the front door clicked shut on Nat’s cheery, ‘See ya!’ she felt her head swim. She sat up, hoping she wasn’t going to be sick. She had drunk a fair amount last night, but it was spread over a long time. She had been trying to take it easy. And hadn’t she danced most of it off? She’d hardly been off the dancefloor at Overtone, and then only for water. Well, and one vastly overpriced gin that Stewart had insisted on buying her.

He was a nice lad. She hoped he wasn’t going to get hurt by falling for someone inappropriate, like Sarah.

She got up from the table, feeling a little unsteady, and flopped down on the horrible old brown couch. I should go back to bed, she thought, but she didn’t want to wake Freddy. I’ll just close my eyes for a minute.

She is running, fleeing in terror through a jagged landscape, and she doesn’t know what is after her. The sky is purple and huge birds wheel in it. Or are they even birds? Are they something much more sinister?

The scene fractures, melts, dissolves. She isn’t anywhere now, or doesn’t know where she

is, doesn't understand it. Not that she had understood the last place.

Hands are reaching for her. Somehow she knows this, though she can't see anything. But are they reaching out to grab her; drag her down, tear her apart; or to help her?

It is both. She knows this, too. But how can she tell which is which, in this no-place where she is lost?

'Hey, babe, do you want some breakfast?' Malorie woke from her terrible dream, yet didn't feel like she had been asleep. Freddy was clattering about in the kitchen.

4: Never Dreamed

‘Ah, you’re up,’ said Freddy. ‘Good. We’re taking you exploring today.’

‘You are? Where?’ Stewart was contemplating breakfast, and right now he didn’t feel like going anywhere.

‘Oh god, it’s not the punk tour is it?’ Malorie said. ‘He’s obsessed with that.’

Stewart thought of the smoking punks who had been hanging around the pub. ‘Punk? What do you—’

‘No, not that,’ Freddy said, shaking his head vigorously. To Stewart’s puzzled look he said, ‘I once took Malorie around a few places where the old punk bands used to hang out. My uncle showed me them. Now she thinks I’m obsessed. The Spice is one of them.’

‘The pub from last night?’

‘Yeah. It’s in a film or something. Anyway, I thought we’d head out to the Olympic park. You said you wanted to see it.’

‘Yeah, at some point. It doesn’t have to be today.’

‘We’ll drive to Stratford. Park at Westfield.’

‘Isn’t that a shopping mall?’ Stewart didn’t feel like more shopping, after yesterday.

‘It’s right next to the park,’ said Malorie.

‘And we can take you on the magic trains.’ Freddy’s eyes glowed with enthusiasm.

‘Oh, god, don’t call them that. They’re just robotic. Automatic.’

‘I’ve heard about that. Goes out to Docklands, right?’

‘Yeah. So what did you think of last night?’

‘It’s a bit of a blur. I know there was dancing...’

‘There was some very bad dancing,’ said Malorie, with a smile.

‘And... did I fall asleep on the bus?’

‘I think we all did.’ Freddy said. ‘Amazing we made it back. You seemed kind of interested in Sarah.’

Stewart had a hazy memory of talking to some people who weren’t his new housemates, one of them an attractive woman. ‘Yeah, she seemed all right. She’s in a band, right?’

‘You’ll be seeing her live on Tuesday,’ Freddy went on. ‘We’re supporting Tasty at the Wheatsheaf.’

‘Give him a chance, Freddy. He might not want to come along to see us.’

‘No, I’ll come and check you out. I mean, gigs are the main reason I wanted to come to London.’

‘Yeah, you said something like that last night,’ said Malorie. ‘Not the job, though?’

‘Well, that, obviously. But gigs and theatre and art and everything too. London’s where it all happens, right?’

‘Says the guy who’s just come from where all the comedians have gone,’ said Freddy.

‘Aye, well the Festival’s only for one month a year. The rest of the time everyone’s here.’ Saying it, Stewart felt he was being disloyal to his homeland and his former adopted

city, but he knew there was truth to it.

‘Well, if you’re up for it, we’ll head out in about half an hour.’

#

The idea of driving in London terrified Stewart, but Freddy seemed completely confident at the wheel. Still, an hour in a hot car on a sunny day had not had the best effect on his hangover.

‘How can you be OK to drive?’ he asked Freddy as they got out in the multi-storey car park. ‘And why didn’t I think of that sooner?’

‘It’s fine,’ Freddy breezed. ‘I had plenty of coffee. You get used to it. And we weren’t going fast.’

Stewart thought Freddy’s eyes were sparkling strangely, and wondered if he had taken something stronger than coffee. But he was just glad to be out of the car and into the open air. Or the conditioned air of the shopping mall, which they had to walk through to get to the park.

‘Hey, Sarah’s here,’ Malorie said, looking at her phone. ‘We should meet up with her. Get lunch after we’ve seen the park.’

The Olympic Park was interesting enough, Stewart thought, but in the end it was just a nicely-landscaped area around some riverbanks, and several sporting venues that he’d probably never visit. ‘My parents tried to get tickets,’ he said. ‘They were going to bring us all down here. Holiday in London, see the sights, all that.’

‘No luck, though?’ Malorie swatted at a fly that was bothering her.

‘I think they got some, but just for a couple of things. They decided it wasn’t enough to make it worth the trip.’

‘Were you disappointed?’

‘Not really. I mean, I’d’ve liked to come to London, but I wasn’t bothered about the sport. Not really my thing. I quite fancy going up that, though.’ He nodded toward the mysterious, sinuous, red tower next to the stadium.

‘You can, but you’ve got to book in advance.’

‘Another time, then.’

‘But now: lunch!’

The smell of the mall’s food court made Stewart’s stomach turn at first, but he decided it would be best to try to eat something. And when they met up with Sarah, his stomach started turning over for different reasons. I was dancing with this girl last night, he thought. Well, not *with* with, but in a group that included her, and making a point of trying to mostly face her, without making it obvious that I’m looking at her, in that way that you do. Sarah’s eyes flicked over him, then away, as if she had never seen him before. Maybe that’s just as well, he thought. I probably did something to embarrass myself, even if it was only pretending to dance with her.

In the cold light of the shopping mall, she didn’t look as stunning as he had thought last night. But then, who would? She was still pretty hot, though. Between Sarah and the thoughts he was trying not to have about Malorie, it felt like his hormones were going wild. But it was too soon to be even thinking about that kind of thing. He had just arrived in London: everything was in a whirl. He had the new job to worry about from tomorrow. New people to meet there. And his university friends who were already down here: he hadn’t met up with them yet.

Romance and sex and all that could wait. Though hopefully not for too long. Moving to London promised new horizons, new experiences. Experience being something he felt short of. He had accidentally remained virginal through most of his time at university. In his

final year he had managed to fix that, thanks to a passionate few months with an American student called Sherry. His declaration of love had been reciprocated at first, but after a while she told him her feelings had changed. She could never explain why, and had returned to Minnesota.

‘On to the docks, then.’ Stewart’s hangover was only deepening as the day went on, no matter how lively Freddy sounded.

‘I don’t know, I think I should go back. I don’t feel so good.’

Freddy and Malorie exchanged a glance. Stewart thought he saw Malorie give the slightest shake of her head. ‘I’ve got something that’ll pick you up,’ said Freddy, in a quieter voice. Malorie rolled her eyes.

‘I dunno,’ Stewart said. ‘I think part of why I feel so bad is what you gave me last night. What was that, anyway?’

Sarah rolled her eyes and looked away. Malorie said, ‘Freddy! Stewart!’

‘Dearie me, don’t you know you should never take an unknown pill? Especially from a stranger?’ Freddy’s eyes were twinkling.

‘Of course I know that.’ Stewart’s head was starting to throb. ‘But you’re not exactly a stranger. I thought I could trust you. And I got caught up in the moment. What the hell did you give me?’

‘Don’t worry, it was only molly. Which is why you felt so loving and dancey later on, right? Even though you were throwing the booze down like it was going out of fashion.’

‘Which, to be fair, is the real reason you feel bad today,’ said Malorie.

‘I know, and that’s what I figured. I did ask what it was. But you didn’t answer.’

Freddy shrugged apologetically. ‘I got distracted.’

‘Also you, Freddy,’ said Malorie. ‘You shouldn’t go handing shit out to people

without letting them know what it is.'

'Hey, it was a welcome present!'

Stewart rested his head in his hands. 'No, don't blame him. I was happy to take it, and you're right, it was stupid. But I don't want anything more than paracetamol just now.'

'I've got some of that,' said Sarah, and pulled a packet out of her bag.

'Good. Wash it down with Coke — the legal kind — and we can get off to the DLR.'

Freddy, enthusiasm undiminished, stood up to lead them to the train.

'Not me,' said Sarah. 'I've got to get back. Got a rehearsal later. And sleeping.'

#

'What do you think, Stu?' Malorie said, as the train crested a rise and the Docklands vista spread out before them.

'It's weird, being able to sit at the front like this, I've got to say. Good view, though.' With no driver and no cab, you got the whole big window to see out of. 'What's with the guy standing back there though?' A uniformed man stood near the doors.

'He's to reassure us,' said Freddy. 'People used to think trains without drivers were scary. Or someone thought we'd think that. So they put a member of staff on them.'

The sun, blazing from behind the train, made the futuristic glass towers of Docklands glitter.

Stewart was feeling distracted by the dazzle from the glass buildings, too. His headache had subsided, but this could bring it back. He closed his eyes and settled back in the seat, and let the little robot train move him along.

The danger in the light is almost upon him now. Flashing all around, sickly, burning, stained, poisoned, the yellow is beyond light, it is fire it is destruction it is singing it is ringing it is crying like a baby it is ringing it is ringing —

‘Malorie, your phone’s ringing,’ he said blearily, dragging himself back from the dream that had threatened to pull him under only seconds after he had nodded off. The train was pulling into a station.

Malorie jerked upright, her head coming off Freddy’s shoulder. ‘Wha tha...’ She fumbled for her phone. It stopped ringing just as she managed to focus on it. ‘My mum. I’ll call back later.’ She pocketed the phone.

‘God, were we all asleep?’ Freddy rubbed his eyes. ‘I was just having the craziest dream. Something to do with lights in the sky.’

Stewart felt the day’s heat rush out of him and then back. ‘That sounds like... no.’

Freddy looked over at him with a quizzical expression. ‘What’s that?’

‘It’s just that... well, that sounded a lot like my dream. The one I was just having. And... but that’s ridiculous.’

‘You both fall asleep with sunlight reflected into your faces, and you both dream about lights? How weird. *Dee-dee-doo-doo*,’ Malorie sang the last part. But Stewart thought she looked worried. ‘We should get back,’ she said. ‘Have you seen enough, Stewart?’

‘I guess.’ There was only so much in the way of glittering buildings and repurposed docks he could take at the moment. ‘Is that the airport?’

‘Coming up on the left,’ said Freddy, ‘a small airport for people with big wallets.’ Stewart knew what he meant. When he had come down for his interview, it had been much cheaper to fly into one of London’s big airports than London City, no matter how much more convenient this would have been.

‘Right, off here and onto the next train back?’ Malorie stood up. The train lurched to a halt, and she was thrown against the front windscreen. ‘Ouch, fuck.’

‘You OK?’ Freddy reached out to her.

Malorie cradled her left hand. 'Hurt my fucking finger.'

'Be careful, you need that hand: we've got a gig in two days!'

'I'm well aware of that! It's not like I did it on purpose.'

'Eh, guys,' Stewart said, 'I think something's wrong.'

'Well of course something's wrong, the fucking train stopped and...'

There was a rising buzz of conversation from behind them. Other passengers were starting to crowd forward to look out the front window.

'What *is* that?'

'Is that a fire?'

'Is it a bomb? I heard an explosion.'

Stewart peered out. They had come to a halt short of the station, and above the roof there was a rising cloud of... something. It could be smoke, but it didn't quite look like it. Parts of it were black, like you would get if there were a fire or an explosion; but parts were a roiling, sick yellow. It glowed, and inside it there were sparks. It was like something he had seen in a dream.

5: This House of Nature

It was too damn hot to be going for a run, even at this time of the evening. But she needed the exercise and needed to be outside after a long day at work. The company might be called GreenDreams, but it was still an office job. There was no actual greenery there except for a few decorative plants. Here, though, jogging along by the River Lea, she was surrounded by green. The breeze shushing in the trees provided a sonic backdrop to the slap of her feet and her breathing. The river gave off its odd pleasant/unpleasant smell

And it was shady. There were lots of other people out too: runners, cyclists, dog walkers. People on their way to the nearby entrance to the Olympic Park. Even some people having picnics on the vast expanse of grass that was Hackney Marshes, visible through the trees to her left. She had just veered to pass a mother with a small child on a balance bike when she heard a shout: ‘Sarah!’

She turned toward the voice. Someone was climbing up from the river bank onto the path. In the shadows she couldn’t tell who it was at first. Then her cousin stepped into a patch of light. ‘Constance? What are you doing here?’ She couldn’t quite remember what part of London Constance lived in, but she would have known if it was anywhere near her, and the

Lea was a hidden treasure, little known beyond Hackney's residents.

'I'm just... checking some things out.' Constance looked over her shoulder back at the brown surface of the river. It had been cleaned up a bit in recent years, but it wasn't a sparkling stream, even if it did feel like it brought the countryside into the heart of the East End. She brushed a strand of hair back from her face and tried to smile. 'I thought I might see you, though.'

'You did? How did you know I'd be out for a run? And here?'

'I didn't. I just had a hunch. I'm going to be in Sarah's part of town, I thought, so I'll probably bump into her.'

'That's... interesting. I'd never expect that kind of thing to happen in London.'

Constance's smile brightened. 'Maybe that's why it never does for you. You should try having expectations. I find they often work out.' She frowned slightly. 'Though not always for the best.'

Sarah shook her head at her cousin's strangeness. 'Aren't you a bit hot in that?' Constance was wearing a long black canvas coat, black jeans, and heavy boots, and looked surprised by Sarah's question.

'This?' She looked down at herself. 'The coat? I need it. To carry things.'

It did seem to have several pockets, but Sarah thought a bag might be better. 'Anyway, how's your dreaming been?' She smiled as she said this, and didn't expect the strength of Constance's reaction.

Constance took her arm and pulled her further under the trees, seeking a dark spot, though there weren't really any with the sunlight dappling all around. 'Has someone said something? Have your dreams changed again? What do you know?'

'Ouch, you're hurting me.'

Constance loosened her grip. 'Sorry.'

'What are you talking about? I just meant that phone call on Sunday. Yesterday.'

'Sunday, yes. Something happened on Sunday.' Constance looked about as if checking for eavesdroppers. 'Look, come with me.' She started to drag Sarah in the direction of the open grassland of the Marshes.

'Hang on, I'm in the middle of a run.'

'Never mind that. Come on.' She let go of Sarah's arm, and strode off so definitely that Sarah couldn't do anything but follow. In sports clothes and sweating from her run and the sun, she caught up with Constance, dressed for the autumn and looking cool and unflustered, but intense. 'Stop, hang on, where are you going?'

They were out in the open now, in the huge grassy area, studded with football goalposts and cricket markings. Constance slowed, looked around. 'OK, this is far enough.' She flopped down on the grass and took her phone out of one of the coat's many pockets.

Sarah sat too, and looked at her cousin's serious, pale face. 'What the hell's going on, Connie? You're making me worried.'

'Don't worry about me. I'm not in any danger. Well...' she blinked a few times, and continued, '... not any more than usual.'

Sarah could only sit and stare, and wait for her to go on.

Constance scanned the open grassland around her, and the trees and buildings beyond. 'See that?' she said eventually, gesturing towards the towers of Stratford's post-Olympic development, visible over the trees.

'What, the... orbital thingy?'

'Exactly. "The Arcelor-Mittal Orbit." What's it for?'

Since she had lived in the area for a couple of years, and often ran here, Sarah had

grown used to seeing the spiralling red structure, visible over the trees in the distance.

‘More importantly,’ Constance went on, ‘why is it red?’

‘Because... someone liked the colour red, I guess?’ Sarah took a drink from her water bottle and began to think about getting on with her run and leaving Constance to her weird wild speculations.

‘I think it’s because red is the opposite of green.’

Constance sat on the grass and stared at her as if she had delivered a profound revelation. ‘On... like, the colour wheel, right?’ Sarah managed eventually.

‘Yes. But more fundamentally than that, too.’ Constance glanced around again, but no one was near them. ‘There are rumours that the Green Man has been seen. And even—’ here she lowered her voice ‘—the Green Knight.’ A pause. ‘Here. In London.’

Sarah could only shake her head. Then she remembered something. ‘There’s a Green Man in Leytonstone. Pub, I mean. But I don’t think you do.’

‘No. But there are many pubs named after him. It, really. Entities like that don’t have a sex. Not as we understand it, anyway.’

‘Wait, is this—’ Sarah paused as she dredged her memory for three-quarters-forgotten fragments of folklore. ‘Are you talking about the idea of some sort of elemental spirit? Turns up in stories all over the world?’

‘Yes, of course. Not the idea. The actuality.’

‘Riiight... and people have been seeing this... thing? Here? In Hackney? Is that what you’re investigating?’ Did her cousin really *believe* what she was telling her? She didn’t seem to be joking.

‘Not here specifically. But this is one of London’s wilder places. *And* it’s close to *that*.’ She indicated the tower again. ‘Not that it needs wildness necessarily. Though who

knows *what* it truly needs or wants?’

Cousin dear, you’re starting to sound completely crazy. Which Sarah knew we shouldn’t say any more, but she could think it. ‘You’re making as much sense as the other day,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘I need to get on with my run, or I’ll get stiff. It was nice—’

‘I’ll run with you,’ said Constance, with a smile. ‘We can keep talking.’

Sarah raised her eyebrows. ‘You’re not exactly dressed for it.’

‘I’ll be fine. Come on.’ Constance was on her feet and moving back towards the trees. ‘It’s important to keep doing what they don’t expect.’

‘What who don’t expect?’ Though she had a horrible suspicion as to the answer, and she wasn’t quite sure what she’d say if she were right.

‘Elemental spirits? Anti-elemental spirits? Whatever it is we’re up against.’ Constance started to jog back towards the path, sure-footed over the grass despite her clumpy leather boots.

Sarah sighed and ran after her. If Constance really believed in this supernatural stuff — and if she was in her right mind, whatever that meant — then it might be best just to humour her. But calling Aunt Clarissa was beginning to sound like a very good idea.

Within a few seconds they were jogging together along the wooded path. Constance seemed to have no trouble keeping up with Sarah, despite her inappropriate clothes.

‘You’re fitter than I expected,’ Sarah said after a few minutes.

‘Lot of running in my line of business,’ Constance said. She wasn’t even breathing heavily.

She couldn’t imagine that her cousin’s job involved running. ‘Remind me what it is you do. I can never remember—’

‘Walking, more, to be fair, and not always in these... parts. But I’ve got to be light on

my feet. Quick to react.’

‘Yes, but what—‘

‘Look.’ Constance stopped dead, grabbing her cousin’s arm and forcing her to halt. ‘In the trees.’

Since they were running along a path shrouded by trees on both sides, Sarah thought that this was unhelpful. But Constance nodded towards a bend ahead of them, where the river shone through the foliage and the leaves moved in the breeze.

Constance’s poised, silent manner forced Sarah to behave in a similar way, though her instinct was to ask her cousin what on Earth she was on about. But in that silent moment, she realised that there was no one near them on a path that had been busy; and as the sweat from her head ran down her neck, that there was no breeze: no susurrus of trees moving around them. Only up ahead where Constance was staring was there movement.

‘What is—‘

‘Shh! It knows we see it.’

Sarah watched the leaves moving up ahead with a sense of bewilderment. They looked like they were being moved by a breeze, until you paid attention. Then — she couldn’t quite believe that she was letting herself think this — you could tell that they were moving with purpose. There was an intention to their passage. And they were passing: the movement was clearly from river to marsh, crossing the path they were standing on, now to their left. Then it paused, just leaves rustling gently; and moved again, back across the path to the river; closer to them now.

Over it all Sarah felt a sense of *presence*. There was — could it be? — behind these rustling movements, an intelligence. One so vast, distant, and unhuman, that Sarah could hardly give it that name; yet what other?

Closer now. She could see that it wasn't just the leaves that were moving. There was motion in the undergrowth too. Yet not as if a wind caressed the greenery there. It was more a movement *within* the life around her. Thinking about it later, she remembered it being like a movie special effect trying to show the passage of something invisible. But that didn't capture the feeling of it. It felt more like how you can sometimes tell, when you enter a silent house, whether or not there is another human inside it already.

This house of nature was most definitely occupied.

Greenness and the smells of life filled her senses. Young growth breaking through springtime forest floors; developing, healthy growth; mature, long life; death and decay leading back to new life: in that instant she knew them all.

Then a dog barked and a couple walked past talking about a soap opera. The moment, and the presence, were gone.

Sarah looked at Constance. Her cousin was glowing. Sarah couldn't recall Connie ever smiling like that. 'Are you OK?' she said. 'And what... what *was* that?'

'Old Green Eyes is back. That was him. Her. *It*. The Green Man. Mother Earth. We are honoured.'

'It really happened. There was actually something there.' Sarah wasn't asking a question, so much as confirming her own experience to herself. She had had hallucinations before, when she had taken psychedelic drugs. Those were not like this, and she was completely sober now.

Constance went on, oblivious to Sarah. 'It's an excellent development. Oh, this is the best news I've had since this dream thing started. In a way, anyway. If *he's* here then I know it's serious. But it's such a sign of hope.

'Don't you agree?' she said, turning to Sarah.

‘I have no idea what’s going on, Connie. But *something* happened just now. And if it makes you happy, that’s good. I guess.’

Constance gazed at Sarah with a new concentration. She almost seemed to study her cousin for the first time. Sarah felt that Constance was trying to look into her soul. Though she didn’t get the impression of success. After a silent moment, she said, ‘Connie, you OK?’

Constance started, jumping out of her trance. ‘Yes! Yes, I’m great. But I’ve got to go now. Thanks for your help. Lovely to see you.’ Then she turned and walked — almost trotted — down the path, back the way they had come. Sarah stared after her. After a few moments she thought Constance might have turned off the path into the trees by the river, but she couldn’t tell because of the dappled light and shade.

She gaped after her for a moment longer, then shook her head and took up her interrupted run again. Constance was as strange and ambiguous as ever, and Sarah still didn’t know exactly what she did. And that experience with the trees and the sense of a presence: it must have been some sort of hallucination. Maybe triggered by Constance’s strangeness? And she was tired. That must be it.

6: Edging Toward Panic

Malorie spent most of the day worrying. She couldn't get the Docklands experience out of mind. Every time her sprained finger twinged she was reminded of it, which didn't help, but she kept going back to the train's sudden stop, the plume of what at first seemed to be smoke, but then somehow didn't; people's confusion, edging toward panic.

Then the train smoothly starting forward again.

Moments later they left the train and no smoke was to be seen, or smelled. No sound of creaking, damaged structures, as you might expect after an explosion.

There was, Malorie thought, an atmosphere: as if the air were buzzing with silent electricity. People filed out of the station, avoiding talking, or even looking at each other. She, Freddy, and Stewart didn't speak at all until they were out on the street, and even then, barely. They walked at random till they came to a main road.

'I'll get an Uber,' Freddy said, and the others nodded assent. While they waited for the car to pick them up, they began to speak, hesitantly, about what had happened.

'Did you feel the sense of doom in the air?' asked Stewart. 'Afterwards, when were getting off?'

‘Doom?’ said Freddy. ‘What do you mean?’

‘There was something,’ said Malorie. ‘In the air: a feeling. I wouldn’t call it doom, but...’

‘I thought we were going to die. No. Well. Or that we had already died. Something like that.’ Stewart looked so lost that Malorie wanted to hug him. Her own fears had faded slightly with the knowledge that the others had experienced it too.

That they had experienced *something* at least. That what she had seen and felt had not been all in her mind.

Her mental problems had previously manifested as anxiety, sometimes reaching the level of panic attacks. Sometimes the fears had been intense enough, had felt real enough, that they might have been called hallucinations. But never anything like this: never seeing something that wasn’t there. That clearly *hadn’t* been there. Not only had there been no sign of damage at the station, there had been no sign of staff or other passengers waiting to board. Had it been evacuated, or were stations normally unstaffed on Sundays out here?

But now, the day after, there was no sign that anything had happened. There was no news: their experience had disappeared, lost in the internet’s daily flux, washed away by the doings of celebrities and pictures of pets. Or it had never been recorded, never made even a ripple in that great tide.

She had been scouring the newspaper websites, social media, random blogs. Stewart said he had done the same. Nothing. No reports of what they had seen on the DLR. No photographs, no videos.

‘We did see that? It happened, right?’ Stewart said to Freddy and Malorie in the living room.

‘We were all half asleep. Could we have dreamt it?’ Malorie sat on the old, brown,

velour sofa, worried. ‘Imagined it. Like a shared hallucination?’

‘Mass hysteria,’ said Freddy, pacing up and down. It was a small room, so he couldn’t take many paces before turning, which was beginning to annoy Malorie.

‘I don’t know if that’s a real thing,’ Stewart said. ‘I think it’s used to dismiss experiences by... some people. There’s a term I’ve heard, “consensual hallucination,” but that kind of implies that everyone agrees on it.’

‘And it wasn’t just us,’ Malorie said, taking hold of Freddy’s hand and pulling him toward the sofa, ‘Sit down babe, stop fretting. All those other people in the carriage, they saw it. You’d think someone would have written something about it. On Insta, Twitter, Facebook, somewhere.’

‘We haven’t posted about it either, though,’ said Freddy, running his fingers through bleached, streaked hair.

‘I wish I’d taken a photo. It *happened*, god damn it!’ Stewart slapped his hand down on the sofa, raising a cloud of dust. ‘I turned up at work thinking everyone would be talking about it, and it wasn’t even mentioned. I felt like an idiot when I asked if anyone had heard about it. I just got blank looks.’

‘God, that’s disgusting,’ said Malorie, waving her hands at the dust, and starting to cough.

‘It was bloody annoying, anyway,’ said Stewart. ‘Now they think I’m some kind of crazy fantasist who freaks out with stories of phantom explosions as soon as he arrives in the big city.’

Malorie laughed, though her eyes were still streaming from the dust. ‘I’m sure they won’t think that.’

‘No, they will,’ said Freddy. ‘You’ll forever be known as Crazy Stu the Explosion

Guy. You should probably just never go back. Maybe burn the place down and plough salt into the site.'

'It's infuriating, though: how could no one know about it? *How?*'

Malorie just shook her head. Freddy drummed his fingers on his thigh and said nothing.

Stewart cursed and went upstairs.

'What do you think?' Malorie turned to Freddie.

'It's just... it's annoying, like he said. We saw something, other people saw it, but there's no evidence.'

'Yeah. I'm glad you both saw it. That it wasn't just me. Otherwise I'd be thinking I'd hallucinated it.'

'You didn't, did you, though? I mean, you didn't have hallucinations back when you... you know?'

Malorie made an exasperated sound. 'It's OK to say it, you know. I have mental health problems. You don't have to avoid talking about it. Not to me. And... well, yeah, I did have some... experiences. That were close to hallucinations, I mean. But no, this was entirely different.

'Yeah, and it's not like you could project a hallucination so me and Stu saw it. If it had been one, I mean. Which it wasn't. God, I'm beginning to doubt that it happened myself.'

'It happened,' said Malorie, waving her bandaged finger at him and wincing.

'Shit, yeah, how is it?' He bent over her hand, all solicitousness.

'Better since Nat strapped it up like this, actually. But I don't know how it'll be for tomorrow night. We might have to do some songs without my guitar parts.' She shrugged.

'Which might work OK. And just the right-hand part when I'm on keyboards.'

‘Well as long as you can still sing. And it might mean we come up with alternative arrangements.’ Freddy’s relentless positivity reasserted itself. ‘They could be better! Not,’ he added quickly, ‘that I think we’d be better if we left you out.’

‘You better not think that,’ said Malorie with a smile, ‘or you and me are finished.’

‘Shit, don’t even joke about that,’ said Freddy, his smile disappearing. ‘I don’t think I could cope if you left me.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Malorie, pulling him into a comforting hug. Over his shoulder she watched the dust from the sofa still dancing in the air as she wished she hadn’t made the joke. It felt a little too close to home.

7: Maybe Only the Irrational

In his room he stripped off his work clothes. Business casual was all very well, but it had been a long day, and he wanted to get into something comfortable.

He continued turning yesterday's experience over, looking at it from different angles, trying to understand it. But the more he did, the harder the events were to grasp, to recall properly. The DLR train's lurching stop, just short of the station. His dazzled thoughts, still barely out of the dream he'd had when he dozed off, and the idea that Freddy had been having a similar one.

'We'll get off,' Malorie had said, and stood up. Thrown against the window, she had shrieked in pain. And then —

And then something exploded. Except... it had felt more like a *bursting*, a release. Something had flowed forth, maybe, into the sky. The rising column above the buildings that had looked like smoke, though he knew it hadn't been.

Had the train moved again? It must have, because they got off in the station. But he couldn't recall it doing so.

The walk. The wait for an Uber. Stunned silence. Babbling disbelief. They had just

escaped a bombing, Freddy said. More like a fire, had been Malorie's idea. He knew it was neither, but he couldn't say what.

A word came into his mind. He pushed it away. Don't be ridiculous.

There was a rational explanation: There *had* to be.

The word came back. Nonsense. He didn't even know what it meant. Not really.

He let himself think it.

Ectoplasm.

Took it out, looked at it in the warm evening light. Turned it round and examined it from all angles. Some sort of spiritualist thing; mediums. This was nothing like that.

And yet.

What else was there? Something that's neither solid, liquid, gas, nor plasma. Phlogiston. The luminiferous aether. Dark Matter. When you've done away with every rational possibility, maybe only the irrational can explain things.

He could hardly remember the drive back from Stratford to Tooting.

And then preparing for today, and the rush of experience starting the new job. That was overwhelming enough, before arriving home to find Freddy and Malorie still talking about yesterday. Was London always going to be this intense?

His bedroom didn't offer much scope for relief. It was little more than a boxroom, and it had the cupboard with the hot water tank. There was a single bed, a chest of drawers, bedside table. A wardrobe out on the landing gave him some space to hang clothes. It was far from ideal. If he had been able to see it before moving down, he might not have taken it. But his friend Jason, already six months in London, had offered to check places for him. Jason had told him it was OK. And he had to confess, the idea of moving in with a band held a certain allure.

None of which had changed. And he liked his housemates. It had just been an exhausting start to it all.

He sat on his bed. The mattress was a bit ropey, but reasonably firm. It didn't pay to think about who had slept on it in the past. It was no worse than a hotel, after all, in that regard. Instead, he should think about who might share it with him in the future.

The image of Sarah dancing at Overtone two nights ago came to him. It was probably his favourite memory of that night, even if he had built it up and expanded it after meeting her again yesterday. The thought of her scornful look when she heard about him taking the pill from Freddy, though, had made him feel ashamed. He had been stupid, there was no denying it. But he would do the same again, there was no point denying that either. Maybe you shouldn't mix your intoxicants: he wondered if he hadn't got the full effect of the molly, the full ecstatic experience, taking it when he was already drunk.

Could it have been a hallucination? The train lurched, Malorie fell against the window, and then...

And in that moment he's back there. His mind jumps the tracks of memory, careering off, a train out of control, driverless, there is no driver because there can be none. The window at the front is huge, mammoth, goliath, containing all that can see or be seen. It shows everything, it sees to the heart, it towers above the city and he is towering with it he rises he rises he rises and when he is high above it all, seeing everything from the glittering towers to the shimmering mouth of the river, from the haze-shrouded hills in the south to the tarmac ribbon to the north; when he sees all, sees down into the Olympic park where the humans once congregated so densely and the red steel monument spirals into the sky; when he sees all

he explodes

in light

Stewart snapped awake, sprawled on his bed, drenched in sweat. What the fuck was that? He must have dozed off, been dreaming, but it felt so real. Real like no dream he had ever had before. Like being on drugs and drunk yet fully compos mentis at the same time. Like he was a TV, receiving a broadcast from a station in another world.

He rubbed his eyes and sat up. Got to take a shower. Is this normal for London in the summer: two showers a day?

#

The next day, before the gig, he helped the band carry their gear out to the waiting van. But now he was going to have to find his way to the venue and he'd be there on his own while they were setting up and performing. He had asked a couple of friends if they wanted to join him, but he hadn't been able to interest anyone. They all had their own things going on. He'd heard London could be a lonely place, but he hadn't expected to experience it so soon.

His job was proving to be challenging, in both good ways and bad. It had only been the second day, but his prediction about people remembering his supposed hallucination in Docklands was proving true. He could take the teasing, but it was like starting at a new school: you don't want to stand out for the wrong reasons.

The front door opened and Nat came in. 'Oh, hi there, Stewart. Have the others gone already?'

'Yeah, they just headed off a few minutes ago.' He looked at his watch: just after six. 'Kind of early, I thought, but I guess they want to get set up in good time.'

'You still planning on going, though?'

'Sure. I thought I'd head over there about seven. Freddy said I could walk it in ten minutes.'

‘Freddy’s always optimistic. It’s closer to twenty. Half an hour if you stroll. I’ll be walking up there, if you want to join me.’

‘Oh, sure, that’d be great. I didn’t realise you were going.’

‘I wasn’t, but somebody wanted a shift swap, so it’s worked out that I can.’

‘Well, cool, it’ll be good to have someone who knows the way.’

‘Just let me get changed and grab a bite to eat. Be good to see the Raiders again. And Tasty, too. Have you heard them yet?’

‘No. I’ve met their singer, though.’

‘Sarah? Oh, yes Malorie said she thought you might have a thing for her?’

‘She did? For... Sarah? I don’t... I, I mean, she’s nice and... shit. Was I *that* obvious?’

‘Apparently so,’ said Nat with a grin. ‘Though Malorie’s very perceptive. Anyway, there’s nothing wrong with being attracted to someone.’

‘Yeah.’ Stewart was worrying that Malorie would think he was being creepy. And that she’d also have noticed his attraction to her, Malorie. ‘Sarah’s a bit unattainable anyway.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘She’s kind of out of my league, don’t you think? She’s gorgeous. And a big rock star. Plus, she’s probably got a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend.’

Nat laughed. ‘I don’t think you could call Tasty “big.” And, not that I know her that well, but I’ve never seen her with anyone. Though I believe you’re closer with the second option. But, for what it’s worth, I don’t see why she’d be out of your league.’ Nat trotted off up the stairs, leaving Stewart only gradually realising he’d been complimented on his appearance.

For what it’s worth, he thought. Nice to hear, but it’s about confidence, isn’t it?

Something he wasn't feeling at the moment.

An hour later they were making their way through the back streets up towards Tooting Bec, and the pub where the Raiders were playing. 'So you've seen them live a few times?' Stewart said.

'Couple of times,' said Nat. 'They're pretty good these days. Not really my kind of music, if I'm honest, but I like to show a bit of support. Especially when it's easy to get to, like this one.'

'What about Tasty, do you like them?'

'I do actually prefer them to the Raiders, I'm afraid. Don't tell Malorie. Well, tell her if you like, she knows. Or maybe she doesn't. She thinks I'm just teasing her.'

'You've known her a long time, yeah?'

'Since school, so quite a while, yeah.'

'Freddy too?'

'Only since he and Malorie got together. Not quite a year, I think.'

They came to the main road and stopped to let the traffic clear before crossing. 'That recent?' said Stewart. 'I kind of thought they'd been together for years.'

'I know what you mean, they feel like an old married couple sometimes.'

'I wouldn't go that far,' Stewart laughed, 'but I would've thought a couple of years at least.'

'That's it just up there,' said Nat, indicating the pub in the distance. 'What about you, then? Anyone special back home? Or down here, for that matter?'

'Nah, 'fraid not. I have hopes, though.'

'Oh yeah? Got your eye on someone? Other than Sarah?'

'No one specific. I just mean I'm available, or looking, if you like. What about you?'

He would rather talk about someone else's love life than his nonexistent one.

'Ha. Things are a little complicated there. It's not that easy negotiating the dating world when you're like me.' They paused, and Stewart was wondering how to respond to this, when they continued. 'Non-binary, I mean.' A half smile creased Nat's lips.

'Uh, yeah, I see what you mean. Well, I don't, of course. Not really...'

'C'mon, we're here.' They had reached the Wheatsheaf. Stewart was glad, because he could sense that the conversation had been about to get uncomfortable. He was fine with the idea of Nat being non-binary, though he knew he would sometimes struggle and use the wrong pronoun for them. But he didn't understand what it really meant to *be* non-binary, and he would have liked to quiz Nat on it. Except he knew he wouldn't be comfortable doing that, and he wasn't sure that Nat would be comfortable talking to him about it. You don't want to be nosy, or offend a person, but you do want to understand.

The pub door opened onto a babble of voices, music playing quietly in the background. From above he could hear someone bashing a drum kit.

'Nat! Stu!' Freddy was waving at them from across the bar.

#

Stewart put drinks down in front of the band members. 'How you guys doing? Not too nervous?' He thought Freddy looked unusually sombre, and Robin the drummer was broodingly silent. Which might be normal, for all Stewart knew.

'Nah!' said Freddy, with what sounded like forced cheerfulness. 'Shouldn't drink before, really.' He took a long swallow from his pint. 'Ah! Just the job.'

Malorie scowled at him.

'When are you on?' Stewart asked.

'Supposed to be eight,' said Malorie, swirling the ice in her mineral water. 'But we

haven't even been able to set up yet.'

'Tasty are taking all the time,' said Freddy. 'Or that sound guy, really. He's still got the hots for Sarah. Rosie too, actually.'

He's a fuckin old lech,' said Malorie, her braids swinging as she shook her head. 'I can't stand him. It's the worst thing about playing here.'

'He does get a good sound, though,' said Freddy.

'That doesn't fuckin!— OK, it *does* matter,' Malorie interrupted herself. 'But it's no excuse. His tongue's hanging out whenever there's a woman on stage. It's ridiculous.'

'I'm gonna call him out for looking at my woman,' said Freddy, trying to sound stupid and possessive.

'Don't...' Malorie exhaled noisily. 'Don't do that, babe. I know you're joking, trying to lighten things up. But *don't*: this is serious. People *should* be calling him out. *Men* should. But we don't want to start a fight, and we don't want him to mess up our sound. *Or* Tasty's.' She looked down at her drink.

'Has he...' Stewart hesitated. 'This sound guy, has ever, like, *done anything*? I dunno, touched anyone or...'

'I don't think so,' said Malorie. 'Not that I've seen, or heard about. But you know he would if he ever got the chance.'

'Hey you guys,' came a voice from nearby, 'go on up and get set up.' Sarah and the other members of Tasty were coming out from the door that led to the stairs.

'At last,' Malorie said under her breath. 'We're supposed to be on in twenty minutes.'

'Can we help, or anything...' said Stewart.

'Nah, we've got it, thanks,' said Freddy. 'Just come up when they open the door.' The band trooped off towards the stairs to the performance space.

#

While Nat got another round of drinks, Stewart fiddled with his phone and tried not to stare over at Sarah. She was sitting a couple of tables away, deep in conversation with her bandmates.

‘I’m guessing this seat’s free, since all the Rapture has moved upstairs.’ Stewart jumped in surprise at the unexpected voice so close behind him. The pub had been filling up steadily, but it wasn’t crowded. Before he could answer, the woman who had spoken had edged round the table and sat down opposite him. Woman? Girl, surely: how old was she?

‘I guess. How did you know I was with—’

‘I know lots of things. Oh, hi Nat.’

Nat put a pint down in front of Stewart, and sat down next to the newcomer. ‘Oh, hi. Didn’t expect to see you here.’

‘I get around, you know. Actually, I’ve got to go and talk to Tasty.’ And she was up and away.

‘Who was that? And is she old enough to be in a pub?’

‘That’s Uncanny Annie. I think she’s much older than you’re probably imagining. Take a close look at her eyes next time.’

‘Uncanny? That seems a little... rude.’

‘Oh. Yes. That’s just what everyone calls her. Not to her face, I guess. I don’t think I’ve actually heard her last name.’

Stewart looked over to where the strange woman was talking animatedly with the members of Tasty. ‘She a bit of a hanger on? Or a genuine fan?’

‘I couldn’t say, to be honest. Like I said, I’ve seen Malorie and the others play a few times, not always with Tasty, and Annie has... sometimes? been there. Maybe always. I’m

not sure.’ Nat scratched their head. ‘Come to think of it, we saw Tasty one time when the Raiders weren’t playing, and she was there too. Maybe she’s somebody’s friend.’

‘Of course, the other common factor is that *you* were there all those times, too,’ said Stewart with a smile.

Annie straightened up from where she was bending over Tasty’s table, and walked back to them. ‘Time to go upstairs,’ she said, ‘they’re opening the doors.’

Stewart glanced over at the doors to the stairs. A man in the t-shirt of the pub’s staff was just opening them and pegging them back. A few people started moving towards it. ‘How did you know he was going to—’

‘Just being observant,’ Annie said with a smile. Stewart looked into her eyes, as Nat had suggested. When he did, she no longer looked like a little girl, but instead — he wasn’t sure what he was seeing in her eyes, but he had clearly been wrong about her age. ‘More observant than you’d think,’ she said, twinkling back at him. ‘C’mon.’

They took their drinks and made for the stairs. As they passed the table where Tasty were sitting, Sarah glanced up and caught Stewart’s eye, then looked away.

8: Nodded Off

Sarah put down her drink. ‘Come on, we should go up and watch the Raiders. Give them a bit of support.’

‘Check out the competition, you mean?’ said Rosie.

‘We know what they’re like,’ said Ted. ‘We’ve heard them plenty of times.’

‘Not for a while, though. Malorie says they’ve got some new songs.’ She fiddled with her rings, as she always did when she was nervous. That creepy Annie girl had come over and spoken to them, and it had left her disturbed. She had hardly understood what Annie was on about, but it had somehow reminded her of the weird experience with Constance yesterday. ‘I’m going up, anyway. At least for a bit.’ She got up and made for the stairs, aware that Ted and Rosie were getting up to follow her.

In the upstairs performance area a few people were standing around, chatting, vaguely looking towards the low stage. The Rapture Raiders’ equipment had been set up in front of their own, the stage crowded with two drum kits crammed on there. We really should share things more, she thought, but everyone likes to use their own gear. Maybe especially drummers.

The Raiders were huddled together off to one side, looking tense. Nat and their new housemate stood nearby, that weird Annie standing by them. Why were so many people being strange at the moment? She thought of Freddy and the new housemate and the drugs. This whole summer had been weird. The heat was destroying her during the day, and now, this room was so hot already that she almost hoped the crowd would be small. The windows were wide open, but they weren't letting in much of a breeze.

Jeff, the horrible sound man, was standing at the mixing desk halfway back from the stage. Sarah led her bandmates towards the back of the room. No point letting that tosser notice them. He was a creep, and vastly over-proud of his tiny sound system. But to his credit, he did do a decent job with it. His main fault there was his permanent refusal to take advice from anyone else. No one got to touch Jeff's mixing desk. You could have a professional band turn up here with their own crew, and he'd refuse to let their sound person near the desk. Not that you got professional bands in the room over the Tooting Wheatsheaf.

Some subtle alchemy governs these things, not clock or logic: it was time for the Raiders to take the stage. Sarah watched as Robin settled in behind the drum kit and Leon strapped on his bass. Malorie ignored her guitar on its stand and stepped behind the keyboards. Interesting. They usually started with a two-guitar song, but, she noticed, Malorie's left hand was bandaged. Freddy stepped up to the mike and looked about to speak, but the music that Jeff had going through the sound system was still playing. She liked 'M5' by Sports Team, but she wasn't sure it was quite right for the Raiders to follow.

Freddy tried to catch Jeff's eye, but he was busy chatting to two women who were standing near the desk. Trying to chat them up, more likely, Sarah thought, feeling sorry for Freddy. She had been there. You want to make a dramatic start, and some glitch or lack of attention by someone else throws it off.

Freddy took the initiative. He strummed a chord on his guitar, then said into the mike, 'Hi, we're...'

Sarah smiled as she saw Jeff jump. Turning away from the two women — who, surprisingly, seemed interested in him — he faded down the song.

Freddy started again. 'Hello. We are—' and all the other members of the band joined in: 'The Rapture Raiders!' Malorie played a chord on the keyboards that turned into a swooshing, swirling, psychedelic sound effect, and Freddy began to chug a chord.

The others joined in and the first song started. It was one Sarah didn't recognise.

'Well that was cheesy. But kind of effective,' she said, leaning over to speak into Rosie's ear.'

'Mostly cheesy!' Rosie shouted back.

Over near the front, Nat and the new housemate were going mental, Sarah saw. Well, mental for something this sized, anyway: there was serious nodding of heads and tapping of feet going on. She wondered if the new guy had heard the Raiders before he moved in with them. Her thoughts jumped to whether he had listened to any of their, Tasty's, stuff. Then she wondered why she was thinking about the Raiders' new housemate so much. Especially when she couldn't even remember his name. Anyone would think I fancied him, she thought. Anyone who could see inside my head, that is. Was this what it was like when you were attracted to a guy? *Did* she fancy him? No, definitely not. She had seen, when they had met in Stratford last weekend, that he was attracted to her: you could always tell that. Usually, anyway. But even if she was actually 'a bit bi,' as Pattie had suggested, she didn't think Stewart would be her type. Stewart! At least she had remembered the poor boy's name.

No, she had been slightly obsessing about his behaviour around taking pills from near-strangers, ever since she had heard about it on Sunday. He couldn't be the only person

she had met who had done something like that, but something about it just riled her: the casualness of it, the way he could behave that dangerously and not really *be* in any danger. Or not much danger, anyway. Guys were more likely to get into fights, get stabbed, it was true. But she had so internalised the danger of getting a drink spiked that the idea of taking something unknown, from an unfamiliar source, just set her teeth on edge.

Men get away with everything. Goddamn patriarchy. Which was exactly what Malorie was singing about up on stage, she realised. The Rapture Raiders had reached their third song while Sarah had mused. She knew this one well, and it had influenced her thoughts: ‘Get Out of My Night.’ She had even helped Malorie out on some of the lines. I should get a co-writing credit, she thought.

She propped herself up against a table and gazed over the heads of the small crowd. She had to lean to one side to see Freddy, because Jeff the sound man was in the way. Her mind wandered as the Raiders stormed through their next few songs. Then the dreamy swirl of ‘Sparkle Lake’ started and she was transported.

She is dreaming by the sea by the water the water is rising it is filling everything it fills the world it is people it is emotion there is power there is fear there is mind no body no soul no no no.

Everything around her is liquid and she is in it she is of it it is her it is the river it is the city it is life it is greenery, the green, the green man.

The face in the trees.

The face is before her in front it is after all around it comes fro her the trees are sweating they are falling falling on her they enclose her close around her.

They are its mouth.

The Green Man opens itself and reaches out for her reaches her it will have her it will

absorb her.

The greenery closes around her. It is everywhere. Everything. The scent of life is the smell of decay, the taste of rot. The wind's roar turns into a wail like a tortured animal.

Like an abused guitar.

She gasped and her eyes snapped open. Feedback wailed from Freddy's guitar. Ted and Rosie were staring at her. The Raiders had finished playing and there was a scattering of applause.

'Are you OK?' said Rosie.

'I... yes, just... I think I nodded off.'

'Jesus, they weren't *that* bad,' said Ted with a sneer.

'Asleep on your feet?' Rosie's voice was more gentle. 'You must be exhausted. You've been working too hard.'

'And all that running,' Ted added. 'Exercise. Bad for you.'

'It's the heat,' Sarah said.

'You OK to play?' Rosie looked at her watch with concern.

'I'll be fine. Might just pop out for some fresh air.'

As she made her way towards the door she saw the Raiders being congratulated by their friends. She caught Malorie's eye and gave her a wave and a thumbs-up. They would talk later. Stewart looked very pleased with the whole thing, and that strange Annie seemed to be hanging on to his every word.

#

Outside, the air was far from fresh, between the nicotine-addicted pavement-standers and the fumes from passing traffic, but at least it felt less oppressive than in that upstairs room. She moved away from the smokers and leaned against the pub's old brick wall. That experience:

Ted and Rosie thought she had fallen asleep. She had said as much, but that wasn't it. Or at least, it hadn't felt like sleep. It felt like she had been back on the riverside with Constance, seeing that vast presence in the trees. She had tried not to think about that since then, and maybe that was the cause of the problem. But this hadn't been a suppressed memory suddenly popping up.

She had *been there*. Been somewhere, somewhere else. She knew that was impossible: she hadn't left the room, it had only been a few minutes, the length of one of the Raiders' songs. It didn't change the fact that she had been wide awake, completely sober, and transported in some way. In her memory the riverside entity had felt benevolent. Ancient, powerful, but almost *kindly*, were the vibes she recalled getting from it.

Tonight's experience was different. It felt like the same — being, if that's what it was — but this time it had been *terrifying*. The ancient power was still there, the wisdom; but also a sense of malice. Or if not quite that, then at least a vast, cold indifference that might even be worse.

Something had happened, and if she didn't understand what, she had a cousin who would.

#

Back upstairs she reassured Ted and Rosie, and they started preparing to go on stage. Sarah had just put her guitar into position on its stand and stepped down from the stage when she saw Constance crossing the room towards her, skilfully avoiding the knots of people waiting for the headliners to start. Still wearing that damned long coat.

Like I summoned her by thinking about her. 'Hey! I didn't know you were coming tonight. Did I even tell you about this?'

'You must have. How else would I have known about it?'

‘Glad you’re here, whatever. You’ve missed the Raiders. We’ll be going on in twenty minutes or so. But I’ve got to—’

‘Don’t care about the bands. I’m here to see you. Although, there’s something...’ she looked distractedly around, then shook her head. ‘No, it’s probably nothing. Just a sense...’

‘What is it? Cos I wanted to talk to *you*. I just had the weirdest experience.’

Constance raised an eyebrow. ‘Tell me later. For now I need to look around.’

Constance strode off, circumnavigating the room, her long coat swirling about her. She looked at everything, from the equipment on stage to the old plaster mouldings on the walls and the open windows. Eventually she rejoined Sarah. She was about to speak, looked around the room again, then did a double-take.

‘What’s *she* doing here?’

‘Who?’

‘That... *woman*.’

Sarah followed her gaze. Annie was still standing near the Raiders, with Stewart. Interesting to learn that she triggered similar feelings of annoyance in Constance. ‘How do you know her?’

Constance shook her head in exasperation. ‘We go back a long way. We travel in similar circles. But she... is *infuriating*.’

‘OK, well, just don’t get into a fight with her. I have to get ready to go on stage. Talk after.’ Sarah turned away, still wondering what Connie did for a living. ‘Similar circles,’ indeed. Not a bad name for a band.

‘Not a problem, I’ve got things to do anyway,’ Constance said. ‘But I’m going to be over your way in a couple of weeks. I need your help to check some things out. I’ll come by.’

‘OK, I guess... I mean, text me in advance. I’ve got rehearsals and stuff.’ Though it

would be nice if you asked instead of stating. Her recent interactions with Constance were becoming annoying, as well as confusing. ‘Sometimes I have to work late.’ She almost never did, but her cousin needed to learn some manners.

‘Wednesday the 28th. I’ll see you at seven,’ Constance said, and slipped off into the crowd.

9: Lost You for a Minute

Malorie worried about the sound, worried about her performance, worried about the other members of the band, and worried that Tasty were better than the Raiders. She worried that ‘Rapture Raiders’ was a terrible name for a band, but they had never been able to come up with anything better. And they had now reached the point — almost, anyway — where they couldn’t change it because people knew it. Some people knew, at least. Changing it now would be like starting all over again.

But half an hour on stage had eased all of her worries. There was no feeling like it, she thought as she followed the other Raiders down the stairs to the bar. She always forgot how good it felt, and always remembered afterwards. Even if the gig wasn’t that good, the feeling during and after playing was the best. And this gig had been really good. The only downside was that the audience was small. She knew they could please a much bigger crowd if only they got the chance.

Still, not bad for a Tuesday night.

‘Beers?’ Leon said, as he stepped towards the bar.

‘Deffo,’ Malorie said, with relief. A nice cool lager would just hit the spot.

‘Just a Coke for me,’ Robin said. ‘Gotta drive you bastards’ gear back.’

‘We need a roadie,’ said Freddy. ‘A teetotal one.’

‘I don’t think you get those,’ said Malorie. ‘Or at least, you probably have to pay them not to drink.’

‘Getting paid ourselves would be good.’ Freddy took a drink from Leon and passed it to Malorie. ‘Doing it for the exposure, though, right?’

Malorie looked round for a table, and saw Stewart coming out from the door to the stairs. She was about to wave to him when she saw him turn to talk to someone, and recognised Annie, whose regular appearance at gigs like this she was used to. She didn’t like people calling her ‘Uncanny Annie,’ though she sort of understood why they did. She was surprised to see that she seemed to be getting close to Stewart, though. Surprised, and a little pleased, if it distracted him from Sarah. Not that Sarah would have any interest in Stewart.

Stewart and Annie made for the bar, and Malorie led her bandmates to a table that was just coming free. ‘Not worth sitting down,’ said Robin. ‘We’ll be going back up in a minute for Tasty.’

‘You were sitting down on stage, though,’ said Leon. ‘The rest of us have been on our feet.’

‘For half an hour,’ said Robin, flopping onto a chair.

Malorie tried to circumvent the nonsense: ‘What do we think, then?’

‘About the gig? Went great,’ said Freddy, and took a swig of his lager.

The others agreed. Malorie smiled, and drank her beer. ‘Good. Mind you, it would have been better if I’d been able to play properly.’ She wiggled her bandaged hand. ‘How do you think the audience took it?’

‘Pretty positive, from what I could see,’ said Robin.

‘There was definite applause,’ said Leon.

‘Though mainly from Stewart and his new girlfriend,’ Freddy added.

‘New — oh, you mean Annie?’ She glanced over to where the two were standing at the bar. ‘They do seem to be getting close, don’t they?’

‘The witchy woman has cast her net,’ said Freddy.

‘It’s a spell she’d cast, surely?’ said Leon.

‘Stop it, you two. It’s really horrible the way people talk about that woman. What’s she ever done to you?’

‘It’s what she’s going to do to our housemate I’m worried about.’ Freddy sat back. ‘But let’s see what happens after Tasty have cast *their* spells. C’mon.’ He stood up. ‘Time to go upstairs.’

Malorie stayed sitting at the table as the other two followed Freddy towards the stairs. The afterglow from their performance felt sullied by Freddy and Leon’s sexist comments. Annie wasn’t a friend, but she didn’t like to hear people talk like that about someone behind their back. Especially another woman.

Sighing, she got up from the table and made for the stairs behind the others. Before she reached them, Stewart and Annie cut in front, not noticing her, and started up, drinks in hands. Not wanting to crowd them, Malorie hung back.

As she reached the top and walked into the performance area, a tingling sensation ran all through her body, feet to head.

The room is dark, the sounds of the room die away, and she thinks she is going to faint.

Her vision clears, but the room has changed. It is empty of people, dark, and full of sheet-draped furniture. Dust hangs in the air, visible in the odd beam of setting sunlight that makes its way through the dirt-occluded windows.

Looking around she realises she isn't alone. Stewart and Annie are there too. Stewart is gazing around the room, looking as mystified as she feels. But Annie — Annie looks somehow brighter, as if she were in sharper focus than everything else. The other woman turns her head and looks at Malorie. She gives a half smile, and then gestures with her hand: a twisting, pushing away motion, as if to say, go away, you're not meant to be here.

With a rush the tingling left her body and she was in the upstairs performance room, just as it had been half an hour before, as it had always been. Leon and Robin were moving towards the centre of the room, and Freddy was looking around. Seeing her, he came over. 'There you are. I thought we'd lost you for a minute.'

'I —' her voice caught in her throat, as if she hadn't spoken for hours. 'I got stuck behind someone on the stairs.' She looked around, saw Stewart gazing at Annie with a surprised look; or was it a confused one? What had just happened?

'You OK? You look like you've seen a ghost,' said Freddy. 'Actually that's a strange expression, when you think about it,' he went on.

'I'm fine,' Malorie interrupted, before Freddy could go off on one of his meandering muses. 'Just thinking about the gig.'

'Don't fret over it babe, it all went fine.'

Tasty started playing their first song, which at least meant Malorie didn't have to answer, and instead she could 'fret' over what had happened as she had reached the performance area; and what on Earth was going on with Annie. Maybe that 'Uncanny' nickname was appropriate after all.

Malorie's biggest fear was that it had all been in her mind. She had had experiences when she was younger — just dreams, not quite hallucinations or visions; maybe just an overactive imagination, as her mum had called it — and they had been terrifying at times.

She had never been sure whether they were caused by her anxiety or were a cause of it, but they had happened at around the age when her anxiety attacks were starting. This hadn't been like those, though.

Some people would tell her — her mum *had* told her — that she shouldn't be getting up on stage, performing in front of people, if she suffered from anxiety. But performing on stage was when she felt the least anxious. When everything worked right, when she was flying with the band and the audience, that was when her mind was in its best place. Maybe the best place it could be. 'Better than sex,' people say, when they're trying to be hyperbolic. But it really was that good for her. When they hit a soaring chorus like in 'Sparkle Lake,' it was better than any sex she had ever had.

Not that she told Freddy that. She just told him he was the best she'd had. Which was true, but singing and playing on stage brought her more joy than anything they could achieve in bed.

But the thing, the illusion, she had seen, heard, felt, when she came up the stairs. It must have just been her imagination. Probably caused by thinking about Annie's nickname. Or something. Definitely not anxiety-related, because she could still feel the fading buzz of playing, despite the conversation downstairs and the vision up here. She wasn't worried at all.

'This is for my friend Malorie,' Sarah said from the stage.

10: Comes From Within

Stewart wished Annie would stop standing so close to him. The woman was attractive enough, but he wasn't really interested in her, for reasons he couldn't quite have put into words. Something about her strange young/old appearance, the way she tried to give the impression that she knew things were about to happen before they did. Maybe she was just being over-familiar: he had never met her before tonight, yet she was behaving as if they were old friends, or closer.

The Rapture Raiders had been a surprise, and a pleasant one. He had found their music unexpectedly joyful. When he had listened to them on SoundCloud, before moving south to join their household, he had thought they had a much darker sound. At times they still did, but here, on this hot summer night, they sparkled.

As the band came off the tiny stage he wondered whether it would be right to go straight over and congratulate them. Would they want a bit of space first, time to decompress? The gig had been short, but he could see that they had been putting a lot of emotional energy into it. Especially Malorie, he thought. Or maybe that was just because he had watched her more than any of the others.

Annie preempted his thoughts, though. ‘Come on,’ she said, and started over towards the band. Stewart looked at Nat, who shrugged. They followed her.

‘Nice work, you lot,’ Annie was saying when they caught up with her. The band were ignoring her, looking at each other and smiling.

‘Well, that went well,’ Freddy said.

‘Better than I expected,’ Malorie squatted down to put her guitar in its case. ‘Actually much better.’

‘What did you think, Stu?’ Freddy looked over Annie’s head to speak to him, which Stewart thought was rude, even if Annie was intruding.

‘Yeah, it was great. You sound a lot different live. In a good way,’ he added hurriedly. ‘Better live.’

‘Live is best,’ said Leon.

‘I’ve gotta get my keyboard,’ said Malorie. Give me a hand, Freddy.’

‘No roadies for the wicked.’ They went back to the stage and started moving gear off it.

‘Are you staying for Tasty?’ Stewart realised Annie was speaking to him.

‘Sure, yeah. I want to see what they’re like.’

‘Good. Buy a girl a drink, then?’

It wasn’t what he wanted, but he didn’t want to just turn her down. They went downstairs to the bar.

‘Ah, young Dave,’ Annie said, as they stepped into the now-crowded space.

Stewart looked around to see who she was talking about. With a smile she bobbed her head toward the ceiling, where concealed speakers were playing David Bowie’s ‘The Jean Genie.’ Stewart had no complaints about the choice of music, but, ‘Young?’ he said. ‘Dead,

don't you mean?'

‘Well, he was young back when I knew him.’

‘Wasn't he, like, old enough to be your grandfather? I mean, when he died a few years back?’

Annie giggled, covering her mouth with her hand. It was a strangely coy gesture, considering how forthright she was otherwise. ‘Oh, yes, that's right. I must be thinking of someone else.’

Stewart shook his head in confusion and turned to the bar. While he was trying to attract the attention of the busy staff, he was keenly aware of Annie standing close behind him. This woman was troubling. Maybe was trouble. On the other hand it felt good — good for his ego, at least — to have her showing an interest in him.

He got the drinks, then looked around, but couldn't see any of the others. Have to talk to Annie, then, I guess. ‘Come on, what was that about knowing Bowie when he was young?’

She hesitated for a long time before answering. Or at least, waited a long time. Rather than hesitant she looked like she was appraising him: trying to determine what she should or could tell him. She held his gaze, then said, ‘How old do you think I am?’

‘Not old enough to know David Bowie!’ She didn't answer, just calmly stared at him till he got flustered. ‘Well, I, at first I thought you looked under age. For the pub, I mean. Like seventeen or something?’ More like fifteen, he thought. ‘But now I guess you're older. I dunno, sometimes you sound like you're in your... forties.’ She laughed at this. ‘I know, sorry. So I guess you're... twenty-five? Twenty-six?’

She finished her gin, still smiling at him. ‘That'll do for now. We can work with that. I was just joshing about knowing Bowie, because I know people sometimes say I seem old beyond my years or some such nonsense. C'mon, we'll need another drink before we go up

for Tasty. You fancy that Sarah, don't you?'

Is it obvious to *everyone*? Stewart thought.

#

As Stewart reenters the upstairs room, he thinks for a moment that he has missed the band and that everyone has gone. The room is dark, empty, quiet. Even the music from downstairs is inaudible. The only light is a faint orangey glow creeping in through dusty windows. The furniture is piled up and draped in white sheets. There is a smell of dust, of age, of abandonment. What the fuck, he thinks. He turns to Annie, who has climbed the stairs behind him. 'Wha—' he starts to say.

Annie is glowing. Or is standing in a glow, as if caught in a spotlight. She smiles at him, a knowing smile, he thinks, and then shakes her head.

The room was back to normal, lights on, half-full of people all chattering away, and the underlying hum of speakers from the stage.

'What just happened?' he said to Annie, but Tasty began to play, and she took his arm and dragged him toward the stage.

Stewart couldn't concentrate on the music. He stared at the band and tried to focus on the sounds, the words, but nothing made it in to his head. There was no space for it, because it was full of the vision of this room, dark, shabby, draped in dust sheets. And somehow feeling *ancient*, he realised. It felt like he had seen an ancient version of this room, a view into the past. Or was it that the room itself had felt ancient? Had he seen into the far future, when the pub he was standing in was long-disused?

And how could he be seeing visions of other times, anyway? Who sees *visions*? People with mental problems, that's who. His brain was quite all right, thank you very much. Even thinking this, he started to argue with himself: mental health issues can be serious

problems, I shouldn't be dismissive of them. Of course. But he didn't have any mental health problems.

Did he? He'd had that same kind of flash of confusion a few days ago, when he first entered The Spice of Life. But that had been momentary, just a distracted instant. This — this had been much stronger, more intense. Almost like he had been translated to another time or another place. And the thing in his room yesterday, and in the Spice. Those had been dreams. But the DLR: the others had seen that too...

He rubbed his eyes. Maybe lay off the booze for a couple of days. Things had been intense since he'd arrived in London. He took a sip of his beer, aware of the irony, and looked up at the stage as the crowd applauded. Sarah was smiling, standing at the microphone. 'Thanks. The next one's a new one.'

With a wail of feedback they launched into an upbeat rocker that actually got the crowd moving. Stewart was buffeted by some of the people around him, and spilled some of his beer. He looked down to see where it had splashed, and was captivated by Annie's feet. The Doc Martens were normal enough, and the fishnet tights sheathing her legs were far from unusual. What caught him was the way her feet were moving. Even though she appeared to be standing still — her drink wasn't spilling, wasn't even disturbed, when he glanced back up — her feet were moving like an entire *Riverdance* performance in one person.

He looked up at her face. 'How are you doing that?' he shouted.

'Doing what?'

He glanced down again. Her feet were stationary, apart from the slight tapping of one toe. 'Aw, come *on!*' he said.

The song ended. In the slight quiet after the applause had died down, Annie said, 'You've got to be careful about believing everything you see.' She looked away for a

moment, then back at him, holding his gaze. ‘And about disbelieving things that you *know* you saw. Look.’ She indicated the stage. Stewart looked in the same direction. Sarah had put down her guitar and stepped behind her keyboards. Annie sidled closer to him, till her thigh was pressing against his. He started to step away, then decided he quite liked the feeling.

The next song started. As Sarah started singing she lit up as though a spotlight was shining on her. Stewart hadn’t noticed any lighting effects until now, and he glanced up at the ceiling to see what was casting the beam. There was nothing there except an ancient chandelier and some retrofitted downlighters.

‘The light comes from within, if you only know how to see it,’ Annie whispered in his ear. He turned to look at her, opened his mouth to ask what she was talking about. She covered his mouth with hers, her tongue slipping into his mouth.

On one level he thought he should reject this unrequested intimacy. But on a more fundamental level it felt so good that he wanted to keep the kiss going. He put his arms around Annie as hers went round him. They pulled each other close.

On stage the song finished. Sarah said, ‘Thanks. That’s for my friend Malorie, who helped me with the lyrics.’

#

After Tasty finished playing, Stewart and Annie went back down to the bar.

‘What did you think?’ said Annie.

‘It was... pretty special. Wait! Do you mean the gig, or...’

Annie smiled at him over her glass. ‘I meant the gig. But you can tell me about “or” too, if you like.’

‘The gig was great. Tasty sound really professional. But I think I prefer the Raiders’ songs, slightly.’

‘Loyalty to your housemates. That’s admirable.’

‘It’s not that.’ He put his pint glass down on the bar. The pub was crowded now — for a Tuesday, at least — and all the tables were taken. ‘Or it’s not just that. Hell, I’ve only known them a couple of days.’ He stopped, rubbed his chin. ‘Though we’ve had some experiences already.’

‘Would it make things hard if you *didn’t* like their music?’ Annie had a permanent glint in her eye, he thought. And in her voice, if that was possible.

‘I don’t think so. I mean, I hope they’re mature enough to know that not everyone’s going to like what you make. Nat doesn’t really like their stuff. He told me. Sorry, *they* told me.’

‘Have they told *them* that, though?’

‘They said Malorie knows. Anyway, I liked them. The Raiders.’

‘That was probably the best I’ve seen them, actually. Both bands. Pity it was such a small crowd.’

‘I saw someone taking notes, so maybe they’ll get a review.’

‘Probably just someone texting.’

‘Nah, this was a notepad and pen: old school.’

‘Probably a cop.’

‘The music police? Checking for illegal chord progressions?’

‘Badly quoted references to old songs. Fined £1000.’

‘They should come for you: claiming to know ancient rock stars they couldn’t *possibly* have met that long ago. Fined—’

Her arms were around his neck and her lips on his again. Their tongues intertwined. After a long time, she pulled back, and said, ‘Snogging innocent boys from the Frozen North

on the dancefloor. What do I get for that?’ She tilted her head to one side.

Stewart opened his mouth to speak, his lips still tingling from the kiss, and couldn’t get anything out.

‘At the very least I’d expect to be detained overnight.’ Annie broke loose from his arms and sipped from her beer again. ‘And to be honest, I’ve always wanted to see the famous house of the Rapture Raiders. Does it live up to the first part of their name, I’ve always wondered?’

His mind skittering between wondering how long she had known the Raiders and trying to be sure that she meant what he thought she meant — and at the same time not having any doubt about what she meant — he tried again to answer. ‘I — I mean, yeah, sure, whatever.’

Annie laughed. ‘Typical boy: tangle tongues with them and they get all tongue-tied. I was hoping for a bit more enthusiasm, though.’

Stewart cleared his throat. ‘Yes. Yes, please come home with me.’

They finished their drinks and left the pub. Stewart had lost track of where his housemates were, but didn’t stop to worry about that, his mind full instead of thoughts of what would happen when he and Annie got to his room.

‘I fancy a kebab,’ Annie said as they walked down the road. They crossed to a nearby shop, and soon were eating from greaseproof-paper-wrapped packages. It’s a messy business, Stewart thought, and not conducive to eroticism, but he supposed things would work out.

Back at the house, kebab-remains discarded, Stewart inserted his key in the front door with some trepidation. Were the others back already, and would they still be up? As soon as the door was open, he got his answer: The hall was full of musical equipment, and the laughter coming from the living room suggested the band were celebrating their success.

‘Partying on a school night,’ said Annie. ‘I’m impressed.’

Stewart hesitated in the hall, unsure about whether to go to the kitchen and living room, or lead Annie straight upstairs. He wasn’t embarrassed about bringing a woman home, exactly, but some of his housemates had said negative things about her, and he didn’t know how they would react to her arrival in their home.

‘We should get some water before we go up to your room,’ Annie said, deciding the first step for him.

‘Sure.’ He walked the length of the hall, into the tiny kitchen, and waved through the doorway to the living room, where Freddy, Malorie, and Leon were drinking beer and smoking.

‘That’s a nice smell,’ said Annie, taking a deep breath of the smoke from the joint that was circulating.

‘Oh, hello,’ said Freddy. ‘Are you —’ he glanced between Stewart and Annie, and nodded and grinned.

‘We’re just getting some water...’ said Stewart, feeling sheepish and annoyed at himself at the same time.

‘Join us if you want,’ said Malorie with a smile.’ Leon humphed.

‘Thanks, but we’re off upstairs, I think,’ said Annie.

Glasses filled, Stewart hurriedly led her toward the stairs.

‘You ashamed to be seen with me?’ said Annie, as they climbed.

‘It’s not that.’ Stewart kept his voice low. ‘It’s just that... I don’t really know. Something about the atmosphere.’

‘Oh yeah, I know. The temperature dropped so far when they saw me that the joint nearly went out.’

Stewart laughed. 'Stop, I'm gonna spill this.' He opened the door and ushered her into his tiny room.

'I should make a joke about spilling your seed, but I expect we'll get to that in time.'

A few minutes later they were naked on the bed. 'I'll get a condom,' Stewart said.

'Don't bother, I'm on the pill,' Annie whispered into his ear.

Thoughts of disease tickled his mind, but they were displaced by the thought of the ease of not having to bother with the condom, and the purported extra sensation. 'I've never done it without one.'

'First experiences are worthwhile. But, umm, is something wrong?'

Something *was* wrong, Stewart realised, as his erection flopped. 'Oh shit. I'm sorry. It's not you...'

'It's OK, it happens. Has it happened to you before?'

'There haven't actually been that many before, but... yes. The first time with my last girlfriend.' Stewart looked away. It had been OK with Sherry after a few times, but was it always going to start like this?

'First-night nerves,' said Annie. 'A great songwriter friend of mine said they always happen on a one-night stand. Of course he was talking about gigs, not sex. But maybe sex as well. Probably, come to think of it.'

'Is that what this is? A one-night stand?' He wasn't sure he wanted any more than that, but it felt bad to have it described that way right at the start.

'It can be. Or it could be more, maybe. Depends. One thing it can't be: forever.'

'OK, no, that's fine, I mean... I wasn't thinking *that* far ahead.'

'Good. That would be weird.' She ran her fingers through his hair. 'You're a sweet boy. That last girlfriend you mentioned: she's been the only one, I'm guessing?'

‘You could say that.’ Stewart’s embarrassment wasn’t helping things.

‘Don’t worry, there’s no shame about it. Now: would you like to try going down on me?’

He would; he did; and things improved after that.

11: Putting You in Danger

‘Come on up.’ Sarah pressed the button to open the downstairs door, and soon heard Constance’s booted feet on the stairs.

‘Hey, you,’ said Constance, with surprising cheerfulness. ‘How are you this fine evening?’

Sarah ushered her into the kitchen. ‘Knackered. Rehearsing last night. I didn’t get back here till nearly one. In bed after two. Then I was up before eight to go to work.’

‘I hope you’re still up for some exploring. I—’

‘I never said I was up for anything.’ She slumped down into a chair and put her head in her hands. ‘I just wanted a restful evening. Glass of wine, Netflix—’

‘There’ll be time for all that afterwards,’ Constance said. ‘Look at me: I haven’t even been to bed since yesterday afternoon.’

Sarah lifted her head and gazed at her cousin. Constance, smiling, seemed to be in the same clothes she had worn at the gig a couple of weeks ago, but that could just be chance. But she didn’t look like someone who had been up all night. Unless her over-cheerful manner was a kind of manic response to extreme tiredness. Sarah had sometimes felt that in herself.

‘What were you doing all night? And what — where are you planning to explore?’

‘Ah!’ Constance dropped into the chair opposite. ‘That’s where things get interesting. This area is a hotbed of them.’ She took out her phone, poked at the display, and turned it to face Sarah.

‘Storefront churches of the East End?’ Sarah read from the web page.

“‘Storefront’ sounds a bit American, I always think. But there’s lots of them round here. Little strange denominations, tucked away on backstreets, in buildings that were meant for something else. Not necessarily shops, but garages, workshops, sometimes just houses. You must have seen them, with their long elaborate names: Church of the Holy God of the Blessed Jesus His Name Be Praised, all that kind of thing.’

‘I — sure, I’ve seen some of those. I mean, I think you’re exaggerating about the names, but yeah, they’re there.’

‘Not by much. Am I exaggerating, I mean.’

‘So what about them? Are you looking for one to join, or—’

Constance let out a snort. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. Of course not. I’m trying to find the one that’s really a cult.’

‘Aren’t they all cults, kind of by definition? I mean, isn’t “cult” just what established religions call new ones? What the big church calls the little church?’

‘Yes,’ said Constance, ‘to some extent. But some of these ones are just alternative versions of Baptists, or whatever. Others are more... intense.’

‘You mean with the whole lovebombing, cutting people off from their families? All that?’

‘Well yes. But some are also into darker stuff. Devil worship. Summonings.’

‘Summonings? In the Church of Christ Our Lord On High? Doesn’t that go a bit

against the brand?’

‘Hiding in plain sight.’ Constance jumped to her feet. ‘We’ll know the right one when we find it. If,’ she concluded.

Realising she wasn’t going to get to rest until she had humoured her cousin, Sarah stood up. ‘Well, if you want to go and look at them, we should get going before it gets dark. Have you got a list of them on that website, or are you just going to wander the streets?’

‘A bit of both.’ Constance stood and stashed her phone in one of her coat’s many pockets. ‘I want to start just round the corner from here.’

As they left the flat and walked down the stairs, Sarah said, ‘Why do you need me? Not that I don’t like to spend time with you, but...’ She realised she had forgotten the most important question.

‘Company is good,’ Constance said. ‘I like spending time with you. And I don’t think there should be any difficulty tonight, so it’s not like I’ll be putting you in danger.’

Sarah froze as she pulled the outside door behind her. ‘Wait, what? Danger? What are you talking about? Why would you put me in danger? *What is it you do, for god’s sake? And why are you looking for cults?*’

A woman walking past on the pavement with a small child, a dog, and a phone to her ear, stopped and stared. ‘I dunno, it’s just Hackney,’ she said into the phone, and walked on.

Constance took Sarah by the arm. ‘Walk with me. I’ll try to explain.’ She pulled gently, and Sarah grudgingly went along.

‘I know you’ve asked me what I do a couple of times,’ Constance said as they walked to the end of Sarah’s street. ‘I’ve avoided answering, because it’s — kind of embarrassing to put into words. Kind of hard to understand, maybe. And I guess... because I don’t expect you to believe it.’

‘Got it,’ said Sarah, feeling sheepish about her outburst. ‘You work for MI5. 6. 7, 8? Whatever.’

Constance stopped, turned to face her, a half smile on her lips. ‘You joke. But... you’re not actually that far off.’ Over Sarah’s gasp, she went on. ‘I don’t work for that kind of agency. Or for anyone, really. But I do investigate things. Look...’ She fished in another pocket and brought out a small box made of lacquered wood. As Constance flipped it open, Sarah realised it was a business-card case, like she had seen some salespeople carry. This was much more ornate. The shine of the black wood was dulled in comparison with the gold inlay. Or was it silver? It changed as Constance moved it, and Sarah couldn’t make out what the design was.

Snapping it shut, Constance handed Sarah a card. ‘This one kind of explains what I do. The others are too... dramatic.’

Sarah looked at the card. It was plain, white, and in simple sans-serif type it said, ‘Constance Johnston: Occult Investigator.’ An email address and phone number. The other side was blank.

‘That’s what you do? You investigate the occult?’ She stared at her cousin, half expecting her to break into smiles and share the joke. But at the same time she remembered a green presence in the trees, to say nothing of its terrifying recurrence last night, and had a creeping feeling — really, the certainty — that Constance was far from joking about this.

In fact she thought Constance looked slightly shamefaced, embarrassed by her admission. Outed as a believer in uncanny, impossible things. (But that figure by the riverside.)

‘Yes. That is, I investigate problems... situations, whatever — that people would call occult.’

‘Like — hauntings? Stuff like that?’

Constance looked away and sighed. ‘Yeah, kinda. I mean, most hauntings aren’t real, or aren’t actually ghosts. But it’s a starting point.’

‘But... do you really believe in it?’

‘I don’t have to *believe* in it, Sarah: it just *is*. Belief doesn’t enter into it. Though to be fair, the general public’s *lack* of belief in these phenomena is part of what helps to keep it occult. Occluded. Hidden. So I guess you could say that belief *does* enter into it.’ She finally met Sarah’s eye again. ‘You saw the Green Man down by the Lea: you know that was real.’

They had started walking again, slowly. They turned a corner into a narrow backstreet — hardly more than an alley — and Constance now stopped in front of one of the premises.

‘I saw *something*, I’m not denying that. There was a definite sense of presence, of awareness. But I don’t understand what it was. I’m pretty sure I didn’t hallucinate it, specially since you saw it too. But it could just have been an effect of the wind in the trees and our imagination.’

‘Sarah...’ Constance’s voice had an unfamiliar edge.

‘I’m not saying that’s what it was. I really don’t think it was that. But I can’t — I can’t get my head around the idea that it was, like, a *ghost*.’

‘It wasn’t! It was in no way like a ghost. Like I said, most hauntings aren’t what people think. What we saw by the river was the Green Man. You said it at the time, it’s a figure from stories all over the world. Sometimes male, sometimes female. Mother Earth, Pandora, others. It’s an elemental spirit, for want of a better term. It has probably existed since before humanity. Though maybe not. Some people theorise that such entities arrived with human consciousness. Which is not to say they’re imaginary, though perhaps our imagination — humanity’s imagination — feeds them, or empowers them somehow.’

Sarah shook her head. ‘I don’t know, Connie. You obviously believe this stuff, and I know Aunt Clarissa had some... strange ideas—’

‘Don’t bring mum into it, her ideas are *years* out of date—’

Sarah spoke on over the interruption. ‘... But whatever you or she believe, something’s going on. I’ve had a couple of — I dunno what you’d call them: illusions? Visions, maybe? Are they connected with this? You asked me about dreams...’

‘They’re all connected, yes. Well, almost certainly. And look.’ She waved in the general direction of behind Sarah.

Turning, Sarah saw a wood-fronted, blue-painted building, part of the row of them on this street. The door was screened by a metal roller shutter. She had assumed it was some kind of workshop, but she read the brightly-painted sign over the door.

“‘Church of Jesus Christ in God Our Lord the Most High’”? That *is* kind of long-winded. Not to mention vague.’

‘Like I said, there’s lots of them around here. Tiny, strangely named, and you never see anyone going in or out.’

‘Well maybe on Sunday mornings? Anyway, how do you know? You don’t live round here.’ Though even as she spoke, Sarah was reminded that she didn’t know where Constance did live.

‘No, but it’s much the same everywhere. London is littered with these things. That’s what makes this job so hard.’

‘Wait, that reminds me: you’ve got *business cards*. Are you really saying that this is your *job*? Hunting... occult... *things*?’

‘Of course. Come on, let’s try the door.’ She pushed past Sarah and marched up the few metres to the front of the small church.

She knocked on the roller shutter. Predictably, Sarah thought, there was no response. 'Come on,' said Sarah, 'It's deserted. You should try on Sunday.' As she spoke, Constance knocked again, and at the same time there was the sound of a window sliding up over their heads.

'Can I help you?' came a voice from above.

Constance stepped back to look up at the head at the window. 'Oh, hello. We just wanted to learn a little about the church.'

'No-one's here,' said the figure at the window. 'Come back on Sunday.' The window slid down with a bang.

'Told you,' said Sarah.

'Not very friendly,' said Constance. 'And there obviously *is* someone there.' They started to walk down the road.

'Probably just the caretaker. Of course, that means he's probably behind it.'

Constance came to a halt. 'Behind what?' she said, eyes wide.

'The mystery... the haunting... you know, the fake monster? "I would've got away with it if it hadn't been for..." Don't tell me you've never seen *Scooby Doo*?'

Constance shook her head and started walking again. 'You're not taking this very seriously.'

'It's hard to, I've got to admit.'

'Let me remind you again of the Green Man.'

Sarah sighed. 'You know what? I don't care about the Green Man or whatever it was we saw. I just want to be sitting at home with a glass of wine. But... I think you might be likely to get yourself into trouble with this. So I'm going to stay with you and keep an eye out for you.' She stopped and turned to look at her cousin. 'There's no saying what kind of

crazies you'll dig up at these places. Someone needs to look out for you.'

Constance raised an eyebrow. 'And that would be you?'

'Yes. With my superior self defence skills.'

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Sarah burst into laughter. 'All, right, all right, I've got no self defence skills. But I can run! I can run away as well as anyone.'

Constance was laughing too. 'And that would help me how? When these church crazies come after me?'

'I would... lead them away from you. Wait, no, then they'd be coming after me. That's not a great plan.'

'Maybe best if we stick together, then. Fight them together. Run away together.'

Sarah shook her head. 'OK then. And wine afterwards?'

12: Tingling All Over

‘And it just felt so real, you know? I was *in* that room, I could see it, I could *smell* it. Then she waved at me and I popped out of it, back to reality.’

‘And how did you feel afterwards?’ the therapist asked.

‘I mean... fine, really. I was confused for a bit, and worried, but — I felt OK in my head, you know? It didn’t feel like I was having a panic attack or anything.’ Malorie shifted position in the comfortable chair. ‘But it stayed with me. I’ve been going over and over it in my head. Freddy’s started to get worried about me. So it’s like, the *event* maybe wasn’t a problem, but my reaction to it is.’

The therapist made an agreeing sound. ‘And you mentioned another occasion where you had a hallucination...?’

‘Oh, well, I’m pretty sure that was just a dream. Except...’ she trailed off.

‘Except?’

Malorie decided to risk a question. ‘Did you hear anything about an incident on the DLR? About a month ago?’

‘An incident?’

‘Like an explosion, or a fire. Something kind of major. Near the Airport. London City, I mean.’

‘No, I don’t recall hearing about anything like that. Why?’ Malorie thought the therapist sounded disapproving. She got to ask the questions: why was Malorie daring to ask one? She knew that couldn’t be what call-me-Mabel was thinking, but ever since Malorie had realised that the therapist had reminded her of one of her primary school teachers, she hadn’t been able to shake the idea that criticism was never far away.

‘Because if it was in my head, it was also in my friends’ heads. Three of us witnessed it, as well as other people on the train. But there were no reports about it. Nothing on social media. It’s weird.’

‘Maybe your...’ Malorie could hear her avoiding the word ‘hallucination.’ ‘...your illusion, or dream *included* the idea that your friends experienced it too?’

‘It went on for a hell of a long time then. We were talking about it all the next day, and for a few days after. It still comes up, a month later. Especially from Stewart. This was all on his second day in London.’

‘And is this Stewart somebody special to you?’

‘Stewart? Not especially. He’s my, I mean, he’s our new housemate. He shares the chores, the bills. Or I hope he will, once he gets paid. He came out to see us play.’

‘Your band, this would be?’

Of course it would be her band. What the hell else would she mean by ‘see us play’?
‘He’s very quickly become a fan.’

‘That’s good. And are you still finding it calming when you play on stage?’

‘I’m not sure calming is the word, but, yes, playing live makes me feel better than anything else. Even rehearsing is good, but it’s no substitute for the real thing.’

‘And Stewart, is he a fan of the band, or of you?’

Malorie couldn’t speak for a what felt like several minutes. That was not the kind of question she had been expecting.

‘I... well... I mean, I think he fancies me. Is attracted to me. Or he was at first. But now he’s hooked up with someone else, so...’

‘And were you attracted to him?’

‘No! No. Not at all. But... it’s always nice to know someone fancies you, I guess. Except when it gets creepy, or makes things complicated. Which it would.’

‘Is it creepy? Is he?’

‘No, Stewart’s fine. I think he was just latching onto the first women he met. Newcomer in the big city and all that. He was more interested in my friend Sarah, anyway.’

‘But you said it was complex?’

‘Would be. Could be. If he was interested in me, with Freddy there and all. But he’s not, so it’s fine.’

‘It’s just that it seems you’ve had these unusual experiences just when there’s somebody new in your life, with a potential romantic attraction. Your emotional response to him may have been a trigger for these experiences.’

Malorie considered this for a few moments. ‘No. That’s not it. At least... that doesn’t *feel* right as an explanation. And it’s all about feelings, isn’t it?’

‘Certainly our feelings are very important. I’d like you to consider the possibility that yours might have been disrupted more than you think by this new arrival. Try to examine your feelings toward him, and see if his presence might be what’s disturbing you.

‘And I’ll see you next month.’ She smiled in the way that Malorie always thought looked fake.

#

As she walked to the Tube station, Malorie wondered whether the therapy sessions were helping her. In an American film, she realised, her therapist would have said, 'See you next week' — or maybe even 'tomorrow' — instead of 'next month.' But monthly visits were all that the NHS offered, and she couldn't afford to go private. She wasn't sure call-me-Mabel was helping her with her suggestions, exactly, but it did feel good to open up about what had happened, and her feelings about it all. She ought to be able to talk to Freddy about it, but he hardly ever took anything seriously. Except music. She just couldn't talk to him about this stuff.

Maybe that was another clue about whether they had a future together. Which didn't bode well for the band. You probably shouldn't get involved with people you're in a band with, she thought, though the two connections had happened together, approximately. The attraction had come slightly before the musical attachment, if anything.

She turned over the conversation with call-me-Mabel all the way in to Waterloo. Maybe that wasn't what you were meant to do, she thought, but it's hard not to. You spend an hour — or forty minutes, whatever — talking over your problems, to someone whose insights are supposedly going to help you: what else are you going to do next but think about those insights?

Except she hadn't really provided any insights, as far as Malorie could recall. I should take notes, she thought. But again, it was the talking itself that was meant to help, not necessarily the response of the therapist. The talking cure, they called it. Why wasn't she cured, then? Why were these weird things still happening? Though actually nothing else *had* happened since the Wheatsheaf gig.

And what was all that about Stewart? She wasn't attracted to him. And any attraction

he had felt for her had been swept away by his involvement with Annie. Was that even still going, she wondered. She hadn't seen Annie round theirs for a while. And hadn't he said that he had never been to Annie's place? Odd sort of relationship, whatever was going on. But she didn't see how it related to those illusions, or whatever they were. True, they happened just after Stewart had arrived, but that was just coincidence.

At Waterloo she realised she was early for her shift at the gallery. The sun was shining weakly, so she took a walk along the South Bank. She stopped to look over the railing. The tide was low. There was quite a large beach visible, all gravelly stones and washed-up waste. Plastic bottles and old shoes. There were a few people down there, wandering about seemingly randomly.

That guy looks like Stewart, she thought. It's just because I've been thinking about him and talking about him this morning, though. It can't be him, he'll be at work. The figure came closer, bent over to pick something up. He looked towards the bank. It *was* Stewart. She was fairly sure of it. And who was he waving at? Not her, he hadn't seen her. Someone else. Someone down on the beach.

She looked down. A figure emerged from under the overhang of the embankment on which she was standing. Another familiar figure. Annie made her way towards Stewart.

Malorie stared. You *never* meet people you know randomly in London; it's too big. That had always been a principle of her understanding of the place. Occasionally she'd bump into one of her housemates when they happened to be walking home from the Tube station at the same time as her. That was about as far as it went. So to see not just two people she knew, but ones she had just been thinking about, seemed — she didn't like to use words like 'mad' or 'crazy,' but those were what came to mind.

Annie and Stewart had their heads together now, and were laughing at something they

had found in the beach's muck.

Malorie wondered if she should call out to them, let them know she was there. It felt a bit like she was spying on them, watching them without them being aware of her. But she had every right to be here. Why did she feel guilty about it?

Annie looked up. She didn't glance around, or gaze vaguely and then notice her. She looked straight at Malorie. Even across the distance, their eyes met. And it happened again.

Her body tingling all over, and the light has changed. It is no longer a sunny morning in late summer. It feels like autumn or winter. The muddy puddles on the foreshore below her are tending toward slush, and the river waves look chill and grey. The river is full of traffic. She has never seen so many boats on it at once. Everything from tiny wooden rowing boats with two people squeezed in, up to huge multiple-masted affairs that look as if they belong at sea in a film about pirates.

She wants to turn and flee, but she is transfixed, filled with terror that, if she moves from this spot she will be trapped in this other, older London, unable to get back to the places and the people she knows.

'It's OK.' She can hear Annie's voice, even though she is far below and maybe thirty metres distant. 'We know you're not spying. This will clear. Just hold the line.'

What line? What is she talking about? And how can I hear her, Malorie thinks. I don't even think her lips are moving. I'm hearing voices in my head. Like before...

'Not like before,' says Annie. 'This is for real. We just have to wait ' Down below, Annie makes the same gesture she had in the Wheatsheaf, twisting and pushing away; and everything is back to normal.

The sun was shining, seagulls crying, people walking past on the walkway behind her. The tingling left her body.

Annie held her gaze for a moment longer, then gave a half wave — an ordinary sort of gesture this time, not like the arcane-seeming one from before — then she turned back to Stewart.

Malorie staggered back from the railing, almost falling over. A passing woman asked if she was OK. Malorie mumbled something and ran off toward the gallery.

13: More Often Junk

These first weeks in London had been an adventure. He had been terrorised by an unexplained event in his first few days. He had been made nervous and challenged by learning his new job. He had been thrilled by music and dancing on nights out.

Above all, he had been confused by Annie. Since the gig in his first week, she had shared his bed on several occasions. Things there had improved after his early difficulty. Between times, she had disappeared, dropped out of contact. That was OK — it wasn't like they were dating, or together, as such. It was just casual, they had agreed. He suspected — knew, really — that Annie had other lovers, and that didn't bother him.

What was beginning to annoy him was the way she expected him to drop everything and accommodate her whims. Like last night: they had a good time, and as he was drifting off to sleep, she had said, 'Can you take the day off tomorrow? I want to show you something.' He had startled awake. She wouldn't tell him any more.

He had lain awake for some time turning it over, as Annie slept squeezed up against him in the single bed.

Now she was downstairs, showering, and he was pulling on his clothes. At least jeans

and a band t-shirt made a change from his work clothes. Why did he give in to her notions like this? It wasn't the sex — well, it was, at least partly, he had to be honest. But as well, it was his dislike of conflict. If he had said no to taking the day off today, it might have meant a fight with Annie, and the very idea of that made him feel slightly sick. But it wasn't just the thought of arguing with Annie — he wasn't even sure that disagreeing *would* have led to a fight — but the idea of any sort of argument disturbed him. With Annie it was tied up with sex, which just made the feeling stronger.

He sometimes felt he didn't know what was going on in his own mind. Why was his desire to avoid conflict so strong? Other people were able to have arguments, disagreements, and get over them. Did he actually have a medical problem? Would he need years of therapy to understand himself? But his conclusion was always that conflict is bad, is unpleasant: why *wouldn't* you want to avoid it?

At least there had been no return of the visions or illusions. He had stopped worrying about them.

He had messaged his work and told them he wouldn't be in today. His first sick day was also the first time he had lied to his employers. So far, despite a number of hangovers, he had always managed to make it in to the office.

Annie came back into the bedroom, wearing his dressing gown. 'That's better.' She slipped the dressing gown off and he admired her nakedness. 'No time for that just now,' she said, grinning at his gaze, then starting to dress. 'Time and tide wait for no one, as they say.'

'What's the hurry?'

'I told you: time and tide. Well, just tide. I was being literal there.'

'The *actual* tide? Are we going to the beach? The seaside?'

'You don't have to go to the seaside to get the tide. Or a beach, for that matter. We

live in London.'

'Oh. So where *are* we going?'

'Waterloo.'

#

An hour later they were in a cafe on the South Bank. Stewart sipped cappuccino from an orange, thick-sided cup. Its asymmetric saucer provided space to hold his pastry, but not quite enough. 'You know, a separate plate would work better for this,' he said.

Annie smiled as she stirred a second sugar cube into her espresso. Outside the tall windows, tourists streamed past on the walkway between the cafe and the river. She was about to say something when the roar of the coffee grinder drowned everything out.

Stewart rolled his eyes. 'Those things are—' he started to say, but it was too noisy to compete with. He let his gaze roam around the space. The bare brick walls seemed at odds with the steel and glass window area in which they sat. And wasn't everything on the South Bank made of concrete? The brickwork seemed fake. A framed poster of a sports car caught his attention. Bright red, a Ferrari. Trying to evoke Italian cool. What was wrong with London cool? Still, the image pulled the eye.

He took a bite out of his pain au chocolat, just as the grinder's noise stopped.

'See, it wasn't so bad coming here,' said Annie.

Stewart had been nervous about coming through Waterloo, because he knew a lot of people from work passed through there on the way to Wimbledon. He kept his head down when they were going through the station, and didn't see anyone he knew.

They finished their breakfast, and Annie led Stewart along the path to where some steps led down to the river. He looked over the railing. 'Wait — the beach is *here*? I didn't know the Thames had beaches.'

‘Only at low tide,’ said Annie with a smile, as she pushed open the iron gate to the steps. ‘That’s what makes them so interesting.’ She led him down the steps. They didn’t look too safe, Stewart thought. Wet, with green patches that looked slippery. He trod gingerly.

‘OK, but why are we here?’

‘I just wanted to show you. Think of it as part of your ongoing introduction to London. Plus,’ she said, spinning round to face him as he crunched down onto the gravelly surface, ‘they’re interesting. Fascinating places, really. Coming and going with the rhythm of the tides. They’re what you call liminal. Come on.’ She turned and walked toward a pier that towered over the narrow strip of beach.

Stewart didn’t follow her immediately. He looked around, up and down the beach. It extended all the way between the two bridges he could see —Waterloo Bridge, he knew the further one was, but he wasn’t sure what the closer, more colourful one in the other direction was called. He gradually realised that there were other people down here with them. He hadn’t noticed them at first, he realised, because they were all dressed in drab, dark clothes, clothes the colours of the environment. very much as if they wanted to blend in to the background. They weren’t camouflaged, exactly, but their colours matched the browns and greys, duns and beiges, of the beach and the river.

Annie was already quite far away, and talking to one of them. The man gesticulated in the direction of Waterloo Bridge. Annie looked around, caught Stewart’s eye, waved, and set off in that direction.

Sand quickly became gravel under his feet, as he rushed to catch up with her. Further down, where waves caused by passing boats washed up against the beach, the foreshore was lined with rocks.

‘Who was that? Where are we going?’ he asked as he reached her.

‘Mudlarks. I need to talk to one of them.’

‘Mud — what?’ Stewart stumbled on the surprisingly steep slope of the gravel. Annie was as sure-footed as she was on a dancefloor.

‘Thames mudlarks. People who search on the beaches and find — things. Treasure occasionally. More often junk. Very rarely, what I need.’

‘Which is?’

‘Information.’ She would say no more as they strode on towards the bridge.

#

Annie found the person she was looking for, under Waterloo Bridge. Stewart had almost got his feet wet twice from waves, where the beach narrowed almost to nothing. He was not happy with this turn of events, or with Annie’s lack of responsiveness, so he moved away when Annie was talking to the person — a woman, Stewart thought, but it was hard tell from her nondescript clothes and aged appearance and with the large hat that hid her features.

He kicked a rusty can around for a minute, then realised he was behaving like a sulky teenager.

He walked back over to where she was talking to the ancient-looking figure. Strands of greying hair spilled out from under the hat. What skin he could see looked almost grey, too. A sullen eye glanced in his direction. As he approached, Annie reached out and took something from the person, then they shook hands and Annie turned away.

And something changed.

He knows he is going to die. The cold light is closing all around him. Grey clouds cover the sky and an icy wind blows. And he knows he will die soon. The woman turns toward him and there is venom in her smile. Death walks beside her. He is immobile, beyond motion, rooted like the ancient trees that crowd the riverbank.

The sky darkens further. All light goes. Consciousness starts to slip away. He falls to his knees.

Icy water chills him.

And he was back on the beach, in the sunshine. What the fuck was that?

‘Oh, there you are.’ Annie was walking towards him. He stumbled to his feet. She put her arms around him. ‘Come on, let’s go. It’s obvious you don’t like it here.’

He returned the hug. ‘I just — I, I, I mean, something just happened.’

‘What happened?’ She was staring up into his eyes with a half smile and a tilt of her head that looked so normal, so comforting, that he couldn’t find a way to explain his — vision, hallucination? What *was* it? Already he felt it slipping away like a dream.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know what’s going on. I just felt strange for a minute.’

‘I like strange,’ she said, her smile widening.

‘But... I don’t mind it down here. I mean, I like beaches, though this is...’ he gestured around, at London’s ancient and modern buildings across the water, the view of St Paul’s and the City skyscrapers downstream. ‘... unusual,’ he finished.

‘Perfectly usual for London.’

‘Yeah, I guess. But it’s not exactly Margate, is it?’

‘Have you been to Margate?’

‘No, just trying to think of an iconic English seaside town, on the assumption that you wouldn’t know what Largs is.’

‘I’ve been to Largs many times, actually.’

‘You have? When?’

‘Well, not *many*, maybe, but a couple. Caught the ferry over to that weird island with the rocks in the shapes of animals.’

‘Millport? Cumbrae is the island, actually. Millport’s the town. We used to go there on holiday when I was wee. I loved the shows there. The, ah, fairground, that is. I don’t think they’re called shows in these parts, are they?’

‘No, but I know what you mean.’

He leaned back slightly in Annie’s embrace and looked closely at her. ‘So what were you doing in Scotland? Going to Millport, of all places?’ The little town on the small island in the Firth of Clyde seemed like an odd destination for someone from the South of England. If that was actually where Annie was from. ‘Have you got family up there, or...?’

Annie gave a half smile and broke their embrace. ‘Come on, let’s walk.’

Stewart walked with her along the gravel and sand, wondering if she was going to answer, or if she was just being mysterious for the sake of being mysterious.

‘I was on Cumbrae for the same reason I’ve been to many, many places on these islands,’ she said. ‘For the same reason I needed to come here today, actually.’

Stewart decided not to prompt her to go on this time. If she was going to tell him anything more, she would.

They walked on a little way, until they couldn’t any more. Their way was blocked by the dock for one of the tourist boats that plied the Thames. There was a flight of stairs up from the beach, but they could see it had a closed gate at the top.

‘Well, we can walk back to where we came down. Unless you fancy a bit of climbing,’ Annie smiled at him.

‘Doesn’t look like much of a climb,’ he said, with a shrug. They walked up the stone steps and easily pulled themselves over the waist-high metal gate. Tourists queueing for the ferry watched them, some disapprovingly, some with smiles.

‘I told you I was looking for information,’ said Annie, as they walked back along the

South Bank, through crowds of tourists, past cafes and bars serving snacks and drinks in the sun. 'Here, today, and also on Cumbrae, and elsewhere.'

'OK,' said Stewart. He didn't feel that told him anything he hadn't guessed. 'About anything in particular?'

'Or maybe the word is *wisdom*. Information is everywhere, but it's what you do with it that matters, right?'

'I guess.'

By this time they were approaching Waterloo Station. 'Right, I gotta go,' Annie said. She kissed him and quickly withdrew.

'Wait, I wanted to—'

'Sorry, something came up. I'll call you.' Then she was gone into the crowd around the station. Stewart stared after her. What the hell was going on with that woman? She drags me up here, makes me bunk off work, and then just... fucks off? What the hell could have come up while they were down on the beach? Something the mudlark had told her?

He slammed his hand against the side of a stall selling hotdogs. 'Oi, watch it mate!' said the vendor.

'Sorry, sorry,' said Stewart. He shook his head, shrugged and walked back toward the South Bank. Might as well have more of a look around, since he was here.

#

Stewart was in the kitchen, cooking, when Malorie got home. 'Hey, I thought I saw you up near Waterloo today,' she said. 'But I guess it couldn't have been.'

'Oh, well, it probably was. I, er, took the day off. Went up that way with Annie.' He tried to keep the embarrassment out of his voice.

'Call in sick, did you?' Malorie raised an eyebrow.

‘Yes! Oh god, I felt like a kid bunking off school.’

Malorie smiled, and set her bag down. ‘I saw you down on the beach.’

‘It’s such a weird idea that the Thames has beaches.’

‘Don’t most rivers have beaches?’

‘Sure, but it I guess it’s cos it’s in a city. It’s all built up along the banks and that.’

‘Any chance of a cuppa, if you’re brewing up?’ Malorie sat at the kitchen table while Stewart filled the kettle. ‘Those Thames beaches are only there at low tide, though, aren’t they? They come and go.’

‘That’s what Annie said makes them interesting. She thinks they’re special. Almost... magical. They’ve got a whole history: people finding treasure and stuff.’

‘Mudlarks,’ said Malorie, accepting a mug of tea.

‘I thought that was just a word for kids playing in dirt, but apparently it’s got this specific meaning.’

‘So did you find anything? Any treasure?’

‘Nah, of course not. Just rubbish. Rusty cans, broken bottles. I did find a coin.’

‘Roman?’

‘A 2p piece from 1978. Ancient, but not exactly valuable.’

‘Exciting.’

‘Yeah. It was a bit of a waste of a day off, really. You should have called when you saw us.’

‘Oh, I was on my way to work. I wasn’t totally sure it was you, anyway. Well not at first. Then I thought, it is, it must be, but it can’t be, you know? Then I saw Annie too, and I thought, am I imagining this? What would they be doing there?’

‘Yeah, it was a bit odd. She said she wanted to show me some unusual parts of

London. Said I needed to know about... some kind of places. What's that word? Means like, temporary, transitory...'

'I'm not sure what you mean.'

'Agh, it's on the tip of my tongue. One of those words you see written down, but hardly ever hear anyone use.'

'Sorry, I can't help you. It's annoying when that happens, though.' Malorie finished her tea and stood up. 'I'm going to change. Thanks for the tea.' As she was walking out of the kitchen, she turned back and said, 'Did anything odd happen while you were there? Since it was such a strange and magical place?'

Stewart almost jumped. 'No, of course not. What sort of strange thing would happen?'

#

A few weeks later he was still wondering how much Malorie had seen. And what she thought might have happened. Did anything odd happen while we were there? Well, hell yeah! He'd had one of those strange dissociative experiences, if that was the word. The effect of Annie's weirdness, or of the London beach's liminality — the word he'd been trying to tell Malorie.

It wasn't the first hallucination he'd had since coming here, if that was what they were.

Thing was, these events, whatever — they only seemed to happen when Annie was around. Well, except for the thing on the DLR, but that had been different. Or had it? Actually, if Malorie was there this morning, the hallucinations had always happened when *she* was around. But that didn't prove anything.

I'm losing my mind, he thought. I should see a doctor. The thought scared him, and he asked himself why that was. What is it that would happen if he told someone he was seeing

things? They didn't send the men in white coats any more, did they? Maybe more like the men in black. But he was thinking nonsense. His mind was running away with him.

Downstairs, the doorbell played a tinny, electronic tune, a random one of several it had: 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.' God, how old is that thing?

'Stewart! Someone at the door for you!' Leon called. Who would come round without texting first?

Leon was bounding up the stairs as he left his room. 'A woman. She looks kinda familiar.'

The woman at the door was wearing a long black canvas coat, despite the heat of the late summer evening.

'Hi,' she said, holding out her hand. 'I think you know my cousin, Sarah. Sings in a band, Tasty? My name's Constance. Constance Johnston.'

14: If You're Here

It was two weeks since Constance had dragged her round the area looking at weird little backstreet churches. They had gone back to her flat and drunk wine afterwards, and Sarah had tried to get Constance to tell her more about what she was up to, what her ‘occult investigator’ cards meant, but her cousin had clammed up.

As she set up her equipment at the rehearsal room the band rented in Holloway Road, she was lost in thought. Constance was serious about what she had said. She did seem to be genuinely investigating a cult. Or at least, trying to find one to investigate. But what was she looking into them for? What was she hoping to find, or expecting to find?

‘Hey, are you ready?’ Rosie said.

‘What?’ Sarah turned and saw her bandmate with her bass guitar strapped on, ready to play. ‘Oh. Sorry, I was miles away.’

‘I noticed. Are you OK?’

‘I’m — Yeah, I’ll be fine. I was just thinking about my cousin.’

‘Is she—’ Rosie’s question was drowned out as Ted played a loud fill on his drums.

‘Can we get started?’ he said.

For the next hour Sarah's thoughts were concentrated on music. They took a break to buy unhealthy snacks and drinks from the woman at the front desk who ran the place, and sat around talking, the railway-arch smell of the room surrounding them.

'I reckon it's years of fags and sweat from all the bands that have played here,' said Ted, when Rosie commented on the smell. 'It clings to the bricks.'

'And the carpet,' said Sarah, toeing a rip in the rotting brown flooring.

'Yeah, but there's something else,' Rosie said. 'There's something mouldy about it. I think it's because it's a railway arch. I smelled something similar when they were doing work at Hackney Downs. They had one of the arches opened up, and when you walked past you got a hint of this place.'

'What were you saying before, about your cousin?' Ted said.

'I didn't think you were even listening,' Sarah said. She drank some of the foul coffee and made a face.

'Is it your cousin who turned up at the Wheatsheaf gig?'

'Yes. Did you meet her?'

'I got talking to her afterwards. She seemed interesting. Not really into the music, but I guess she just came along to show support.'

'When you say she was interesting,' Rosie said with a smile, 'do you mean you fancied her?'

Ted blushed. 'Well, yeah, I guess. A bit. She didn't seem interested, though. Thought she might be gay.'

'Because every woman who's not interested in you must be gay, of course,' said Rosie, raising an eyebrow at Sarah, who shook her head.

'I don't mean that! You know me better than that. Jeez. I just got that sense, that

feeling off her. Wait, that sounds bad.'

Sarah laughed. 'I don't think she's gay, but I've never heard of her having a boyfriend either. She's maybe just very discerning.'

'Waiting for the right person of whatever gender to come along?' Rosie threw her Coke can at the bin. It hit the edge and dropped outside. 'Damn.' She got up to pick it up. 'Maybe she's ace.'

'Asexual? Connie? Could be. How would you know? It's not the kind of thing that comes up, really.' Sarah stood up and stepped towards her keyboards.

'It might if you were talking about relationships. I thought you were pretty close to her.'

'Not that close, I guess. I mean, we visited fairly often, growing up, but I've seen her more in the last couple of months than in years.' She played a chord on her keyboard. 'Come on, let's get back to it.' Talking about Constance like this was making her uncomfortable.

#

Back home after rehearsal, Sarah sent a text to Constance.

— *How's the church hunting going?*

There was no reply, and she went to bed early.

The next morning there was still no reply, and Sarah was thinking about Constance as she ran along her usual route by the River Lea. She was running faster than usual, and she stopped to catch her breath by a bench. This is where we saw the Green Man, she realised as she took a drink of water. She gazed around, trying to remember exactly what it had looked like when she saw all that strange movement in the vegetation. She could almost convince herself, she thought, that it had been a trick of the wind; that the trees and undergrowth had been moved by moving air. But that summer day had been almost windless. At the time she

knew it was something else, something *other*. She couldn't deny that now. Today it *was* windy, and the effect was very different. She turned around on the spot. There was no one else around. She almost expected Constance to pop out of the undergrowth.

'If you're here,' she said aloud, not really understanding why, 'I wish you'd let me know what's going on. Especially with Connie.' It felt almost like a prayer, though she hadn't prayed since she was a little child.

Just as then, there was no answer.

#

That evening, still no word from Constance, she called her mum. After the usual chat about family and her job and who she was seeing, she said, 'Mum, can you send me Aunt Clarissa's number?'

'Of course, dear, I thought you had it already. You should have all the family numbers. Just in case.'

'I guess. But just Clarissa for now, please.'

'I'm surprised you didn't get it from Constance. Have you seen her again? I'm glad that you two keep in touch.'

'Yeah, it's Connie...' Sarah hesitated, unsure how much to tell her mum. She didn't want to worry her, or for mum to call Clarissa and alarm *her*. It was probably nothing. Just Connie being up to her own Connie things. But still... 'Actually I'm a bit worried about her. I haven't been able to get in touch with her for a couple of days. She's not answering my texts.'

'Did you have a falling out? Or maybe she's just busy. I can't remember what she does...'

'We didn't fall out, mum, and she's probably just lost her phone or something. But I thought I could call Clarissa and get Connie's address, maybe go round there.'

‘Oh, well, you don’t need to worry Clarissa if that’s all it is. I’ve got her address. I’ll send it to you.’

‘OK, great. But Clarissa’s number too, yeah?’

They hung up shortly after, and a text came through almost immediately with Clarissa’s number and an address for Constance: Ponder’s End? That was one of those weird, far-out parts of London that she was never quite sure where they were. Though her phone soon told her she could get a train there in forty minutes or so. Not too bad. In fact, she realised, it was further up the Lea, where she ran. She thought about going straight there now, but it was getting kind of late. She had the next day off work, though. She could head up there first thing. What sort of hours does an occult investigator keep?

#

The train the following morning was almost empty. She was heading in the opposite direction to most commuters — north, out from Central London — and at the late end of rush hour. There was only one other person in the carriage, a woman with a large black dog. Sarah made sure to sit well away from her.

She watched the houses give way to countryside as they crossed the marshland around the Lea, and then houses surrounded them again. Though she realised from her phone’s map that they were following the Lea all the way. She knew it well down around Hackney and Walthamstow, but this was further north along its valley than she had ever been. Hints of reservoirs appeared off to the right of the tracks as the journey wore on.

The address she had for Constance was only a short walk from Ponder’s End station. A two-story house converted into flats, as was common across London. 33b was the upstairs flat, and the button led to a satisfying buzzer sound from inside.

There was no answer at first. She had texted ahead to tell Connie she was on her way,

but if she had lost her phone, or worse, that wouldn't have helped much.

She buzzed again. There was a crackling from the speaker and a man's voice said, 'Hello?'

'Hi, I'm looking for Connie. Constance?'

'She's not here.'

'I see. Do you know when she'll be back, or—'

'She moved. Away. Last month.'

Shit. 'Oh. Do you have a new address for her?'

'No.' There was a click and the intercom went dead.

'Well that was fucking rude,' she said aloud.

She turned from the flat and started to make her way back toward the station. The houses were featureless, unimposing; it could have been any of a thousand streets in London. Maybe a million. A bit more spaced-out than what she was used to in Hackney, maybe: more suburban. But familiar.

She found a cafe, ordered a latte, and called her aunt.

Clarissa was pleased to hear from her, and after a few pleasantries they got to the point. 'First of all, you don't have to worry about her. I'd know if anything had happened,' Clarissa said. 'And second, she's not in Ponder's End anymore, she moved away from there a few weeks ago. I forgot to let your mum know.'

'Have you heard from her, then?'

'Not... exactly, no. Not for a while. But I'm sure she's fine.'

It sounded like Constance was just as mysterious with her mum as with everyone, Sarah thought. How could Clarissa be so sure she was safe? 'Well... can you give me her new address, please? Where is it she moved to?'

‘She wanted to be closer to the centre of the city. She said she was just moving a bit downriver, which I thought was odd, because she’s nowhere near the Thames. Then I remembered there’s another river near her, a tributary.’

‘The Lea, yes, so where did she—’

‘Just let me look, it’s got a funny name, something old and industrial sounding... here we are: Coppermill Lane.’

Sarah wasn’t sure, but she had a nagging suspicion about the name. ‘And where’s that, Auntie?’

‘Walthamstow. E17. Oh yes, like the boy band.’

Sarah held her phone away from her ear and cursed silently. Her cousin had moved significantly closer to where she, Sarah, lived, so this whole trip had been a waste of time.

Composing herself, she managed to break into Clarissa’s ongoing stream of consciousness to end the call. ‘Thanks, Auntie. I’ll be sure to tell her to call you.’

She finished her coffee and headed for the station. Fucking Walthamstow! How long ago had she moved there? She must have already been there when she came round that time.

Her head full of anger about Constance not telling her she had moved — or where she lived in the first place — Sarah had been walking for several minutes when she stopped, realising she must be going the wrong way. She should have reached the station by now. She looked all around her, not recognising the street, and was pulling her phone out to find her way back when she froze, staring at the building across the street. It looked like some kind of business centre, but it was the large sign on the front that had caught her eye. She shook her head, and said aloud, ‘Oh, Constance.’ She carried on pulling her phone out, took a photograph of the building and made a note of the street name, then turned and made her way to the station.

15: Nothing is Going to be OK

It had been a surprise, but not a shock, to see Stewart and Annie down on that beach. But the experience with everything going strange and hearing Annie's voice in her head; that had been a shock. She had tried to play it cool when she spoke to Stewart about it, and she couldn't really judge his reaction. Surprised by her question, obviously, but she thought he might be hiding something too. It was so hard to be sure. Especially when it's someone you don't know that well.

On the other hand, it was hard to be sure with someone you *do* know well, sometimes. Or think you know well. Her thoughts turned to Freddy. What was it about him that was starting to annoy her? His lack of seriousness? Start from the other side: what was it about him that had attracted her in the first place? Apart from looks. His sense of fun. When they had met, started hanging out, talking about making music, she realised that he took the music seriously, but joked about other things. He didn't take himself too seriously, not like lots of other musos she had met.

But Freddy took it too far. Not taking yourself too seriously is one thing. Not taking *anything* seriously (except the music) was too much of another. She had tried to talk to him

about how she was feeling, about the experience by the Thames, about the things her therapist had said. He had laughed it off.

Not in a cruel way. But in a way that said he didn't take her problems seriously; didn't think that mental issues were real.

Didn't care.

Didn't care about her.

She hadn't let it become a fight because there was no point fighting about it. It was time to end it. Being honest with herself, she realised she'd have ended it months ago, if she hadn't been worried about the effect on the band. But if the band broke up, well, these things happen. There would be other bands. Maybe.

But she thought just now, sitting on the bed she had shared with Freddy this last year, that maybe they could keep the band going even as they broke up as a couple. Look at Abba, Fleetwood Mac. Who knows, maybe they would get some great songs out of it. The effect on the house would be more of a problem.

She held the pills in her hand, feeling their tiny weight as if it could pull her down. She was increasing the dose she was taking of her anti-anxiety medicine, with her doctor's agreement, but not without some trepidation — the irony of anxiety about anti-anxiety, she mused. There were side effects to be concerned about, even feared. But things had been getting too much for her. If only Freddy was more supportive.

She swallowed the tablets and washed them down with a mouthful of tea from the stripy blue mug. Stewart seemed to know that was her favourite. It was like he was more supportive than Freddy: at least he made her tea. Maybe the mug choice was just chance, though.

She finished the tea and got up to go to the kitchen. She had to tell Freddy as soon as

possible. If she delayed she would back out of it, or talk herself out of it, or something. But she had to have a plan for what to do. She couldn't stay here. Or he couldn't. Or something.

She had no friends nearby that she could stay with, but Sarah was a possibility. She lived on the other side of London, but it wasn't hard to get there.

She washed her mug and put it on the side to dry. Maybe she should pack, so she could tell him it's over as soon as he gets home, and just go. He'd try to stop her. Not physically, she didn't think, he wasn't like that. But he'd try to talk her out of it. Would he cry? Would she? She could imagine all these things happening, and none of them. It didn't feel quite real that she'd made the decision. Maybe she hadn't made it, not really.

But no, the more she thought about it the more she knew it was right. Imagining herself still living with Freddy made her feel unhappy; imagining herself not with him made her feel happy. Or closer to happy, anyway. It was as simple as that.

She typed out a text to Sarah: — *Hey, could I come and stay with you for a few days? I'm leaving Freddy.* Her thumb hovered over the 'Send' button. Way to break it to your friend, though. Was it too sudden? Too harsh? Should I call her instead? Why do I overthink everything? Her thumb stabbed down on the button.

Sarah's response was almost immediate: — *shit, that's some big news. of course, stay as long as you need. *hugs**

Another came a few seconds later: — *when should i expect you?*

— *Not sure. I haven't told him yet. I'll let you know*

Sarah's reply to that was just a startled emoji. Malorie returned to her bedroom and started stuffing clothes into a backpack. Cosmetics and toiletries. Laptop. Chargers. Other bits and pieces. This backpack is getting too full.

She was just stepping out into the hall to go upstairs to collect her toothbrush from the

bathroom when she heard footsteps on the stairs. She thought she was alone in the house; who was home? Then Annie appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Oh, hi,’ said Malorie, ‘I didn’t realise you were here.’

Annie looked confused, Malorie thought. Almost panicky.

‘I — didn’t realise I was either,’ she said, stepping down the last step and staring into Malorie’s eyes. Smudged eyeliner, mascara just beginning to run. Had she been crying? It seemed such an unlikely thing. Annie always seemed super tough. And she’d sent her voice into my head that time, Malorie thought. Only she couldn’t have. That’s not possible.

‘What do you mean? Are you OK?’

‘Nobody’s OK. Nobody and nothing is going to be OK.’ She looked around feverishly, then grabbed Malorie’s arms. ‘You should go,’ she said. ‘Get out of here. Out of this house.’

‘Ow, you’re hurting me!’ Annie’s grip slackened. ‘What do you mean? Why should I go?’ Though she had already decided to, but Annie couldn’t know that...

*Then everything explodes, she’s in her head she’s in my head I’m in this one’s head how did I get here where even is here? Malorie tries to pull away but it doesn’t work. Annie tries to pull away but it doesn’t work. Nothing works. Everything is black. Everything is doomed. It’s because **she** has been here. Who has been here? The constant one the constant inconstance one she breaks things she makes everything wrong everything confused. That’s what you do you confuse me you confuse Stewart you were in my head before. That was different you’re in my head now.*

*There is the smell of seawater of the shoreline of salty death. The sound of wind in a forest at night. How can I tell it’s at night? Night sounds different. The taste of — what **is** that? No taste at all. And all over the feeling of skin crawling, two sets of skin crawling like*

they're in the same place and don't want to be. Finally sight returns but it's not where they were, where we were, where we... aren't? Dim light through trees that are too tall, a night sky full of stars, like no stars I've ever seen or ever will. I am me I am MalAnn AnniMal animal human I am me I am we we are us we are before everything I am ancient, ancient of days, of ways we play we slay. No. Must part must pull apart get back get home get away.

And the wind in the trees rises it turns into a whistle, into a wail, and the crawling of the skins is a pulling, a tugging, a parting a separation.

The wail becomes a scream and they tear apart are thrown apart I'm animal I'm Annie I'm Mal, Malo, Malorie I'm me we're we.

Then everything implodes and they're lying on the hall carpet in the house in Tooting.

Malorie pulled herself to her feet. She could feel her eyes as wide as saucers. Her throat felt raw — the screaming had been at least partly from her. She didn't even stop to ask Annie, recumbent but stirring, 'How did you do that, what did you do?' She knew she wouldn't get a meaningful answer. Annie probably didn't understand it either.

She staggered back into her bedroom, grabbed the backpack she had prepared earlier, and lurched for the door. Without a word to Annie, now on her feet and looking around dazedly, Malorie went out and slammed the door behind her.

#

She knew she had got to the Tube station, changed trains twice and walked the rest of the way to Sarah's; but she couldn't remember it. It felt like she came to, woke up, recovered consciousness, standing pressing the buzzer at Sarah's front door.

It was only when she was sitting on Sarah's sofa with a cup of hot chocolate that she burst into tears.

'What did he do to you?' Sarah asked, as Malorie's sobs subsided.

For a moment she couldn't understand who Sarah was talking about, then she remembered why she had had her bag packed in the first place.

'It's not— I'm not— he didn't—' She took a deep breath and started again. 'I'm not crying because of Freddie. He didn't do anything. I... oh god, this is terrible. I didn't even see him. He doesn't know.'

'You left without telling him?'

'He wasn't there when it— when she—' Malorie ground to a halt, realising how her story would sound. 'I think I'm going mad.'

Sarah hugged her tighter and said, 'Anything I can do, I will. You can talk about it or not. Whatever you need: I'm here for you.'

After her new tears quietened, she managed to get out a curtailed version of what had happened to her that afternoon. Sarah's reaction was not quite what she would have expected. She sat looking appalled, staring open-mouthed. 'You think I've completely lost it, don't you?'

'What? No, not at all. Quite the opposite. Or if you've lost it then I have as well.'

'What do you mean?'

'You said Annie was there, right? And that when you came out of your vision, hallucination, whatever, she was still there, and you were both on the floor?'

'Yes. If she was even there at all. Maybe I imagined her.' But Malorie knew as she said this that Annie had been there. The experience after that had been in her head. Must have.

'And... you weren't surprised she was there? She's been there before?'

'Lots of times. I was surprised to see her there without Stewart, but it's not that strange.'

'She's been seeing Stewart since the Tooting gig? And you said something happened back then?'

'Yes. That's when I started going back to therapy regularly.'

'Something happened to me that night too. A vision or a hallucination. Or... well, Constance would tell me it was something real. If I could find her...'

'What does Constance have to do with it? Wait, she was there that night too. And what do you mean about—'

'Hold on,' Sarah interrupted. 'Let me get my thoughts together about this, and I'll explain. But I'm beginning to think what's happening to us both might be related. And that we're both experiencing something real.'

#

Malorie lay on Sarah's sofa bed, trying to fall asleep, and turning over the events of the day. She was still convinced she was losing her mind, but Sarah had helped her to calm down about it. If Sarah was going bonkers in the same way, maybe it wasn't so bad.

Thinking like that wouldn't help, though. Maybe neither of them was going bonkers and something weird was really happening, but that was too hard to believe. Visions of other times; green men in the trees like Sarah said she'd seen. And that impossible telepathic union she had had with Annie today. Things like that didn't really happen.

Things like the phone call with Freddy really happened, she knew that. That had been hard. She had cried, Freddy had cried. He had tried to hide it, but she knew him too well. The worst thing was she had hurt him more by not telling him in person. Now he thought she was scared of him, had been scared to face him, when that wasn't it at all. It was just her stupid brain.

Or that stupid Annie. What the hell was Stewart doing with her, anyway? Or was it

what she was doing with him? He still seemed like an innocent, buffeted by the winds of fate. Or overwhelmed by his few months in London, anyway.

What was she going to do now? She couldn't stay on Sarah's sofa for more than a few days. She'd have to find a new place to live. Or go back to her mum's? But that would mean a long commute, as well as being back with her mum, which would be problematic at best.

Eventually she dozed off into dreams of fear and hallucination.

16: Magic, if You Like

‘Uh, hi,’ Stewart said. ‘Are you looking for Sarah? Cos she’s not—‘

‘No, no,’ said the unfamiliar woman. ‘She sent me. To see you. Well not *sent*, exactly. You’re Stewart the new housemate, though, yes?’

Stewart felt the metal of the doorframe in his hand and sweat forming on his brow. The sun was in his eyes — it was the only time of day when it shone exactly onto the front of the house — so he couldn’t quite make the woman’s expression out. ‘That’s me, yes. Why did Sarah—‘

‘Are you going to invite me in?’

With inevitable thoughts about vampire movies overridden by politeness, he stood back and said, ‘Of course. Come in.’

The woman stepped past him in a swirl of black coat and a whiff of something that he couldn’t place, but it made him think of the countryside. At the same time a vague memory popped up: the night at the Wheatsheaf. The Rapture Raiders and Tasty. The night he met Annie. She had been there, this interloping woman.

She followed the hall through to the kitchen, and Stewart followed her. Freddy and

Nat looked up, Freddy with the scowl he had had for two days now.

‘Ah, this is...’

‘Constance. Hi everyone.’ She turned to face him. ‘Can we go somewhere private?’

‘There’s only really my bedroom, and it’s a bit—’

‘Lead on.’ She gestured in the general direction of the stairs.

As he led her into his boxroom she said, ‘Oh, yes, it is a bit small, isn’t it?’ She pushed the door closed behind her and stood looking around. ‘I don’t think I’ve been in a boy’s bedroom before. It doesn’t smell as bad as people say. Quite nice actually.’

Stewart didn’t know how to respond to this at all, so he sat down on the bed.

Constance followed suit.

He looked sideways at this strange woman who had invaded his personal — well, ‘domain’ was too grand a word for it, but as it was the only private space he had, he felt the intrusion keenly. The only person who had been in here apart from him since he moved in had been Annie.

‘She’s been here, hasn’t she,’ Constance said suddenly. ‘Annie Sparks; the uncanny one.’

‘Are — are you reading my mind or something? I was just—’

‘No, don’t be silly, no one can read minds as easily as that. If at all, really. And it’s not so much *reading* as — well, never mind that. No, I sensed her presence. Smelt her, you might say. Which is not pleasant. I don’t know how you can stand it. But I suppose your sensitivities are different.’

‘What are you talking about? Why are you here? What do you *want*?’

‘Annie. I told you, Sarah suggested I talk to you. To ask you some questions.’

Stewart shook his head as he processed Constance’s answers. Some deep, macho

instinct made him want to protect Annie, or her reputation, or something, from this woman who obviously had a problem with her. But he suppressed it. Annie could more than look after herself. ‘Go on then, ask away,’ he said, turning towards her.

‘What do you know about mudlarks?’

‘I only learned about them a few days ago. I saw some up at Waterloo. Went and met one with, err, Annie.’

‘Hmm, I thought so. What was their name?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t really *meet* her, it was just Annie talking to her. Anyway, what’s it to you?’

‘Did she — the mudlark — did she give anything to Annie?’

‘I dunno, I don’t think so, but why do you want to know about this anyway? It’s none of your business what Annie does.’ Even as he said this, Stewart remembered that he had thought the mudlark *had* given something to Annie.

Constance stared at him for what felt like a long time. ‘Well that’s where you’re wrong,’ she said eventually. ‘It very much is my business. Or it could be, or is likely to be.’ She looked away. ‘We travel in the same circles.’

‘You and Annie? Do you — have you worked together or something?’

Constance started to laugh, and it turned into a rueful smile. Or what Stewart thought might be rueful. ‘Worked together? Not exactly. But kind of. Worked apart, you might say.’

Stewart, none the wiser for this, stood up and looked out his window at the overgrown garden below. Two magpies landed in a neighbouring tree. That’s supposed to be a good omen, he thought, before a third one joined them and they started to squabble.

‘What —’ he paused, trying to formulate his question. ‘What is it that you do? That you’re trying to find out? And how is it connected to me?’

‘Ah, well, that is exactly the part that I’m trying to work out,’ said Constance. ‘How *is* it connected to you? You’re nobody special. At least as far as I can tell,’ she added quickly, seeing his expression. ‘No offence. Everybody’s special, but there’s *special* special, you know?’

‘Not really. Look —’ Stewart hesitated. He wasn’t one to talk about someone behind their back, especially not someone he had been intimate with. But despite the intimacy, Annie was a mystery to him. This strange visitor was mysterious too, but maybe she could tell him some things about Annie. It didn’t feel right to find out about her behind her back either, but he was becoming frustrated with her lack of communication. ‘— Do you know something about Annie? About whatever it is she’s involved in? Because she doesn’t tell me anything, and there’s been some weird shit happening, and I don’t understand it and she won’t tell me and maybe you do...’

Constance smiled more broadly this time. ‘Sounds like that’s been building up for a while. I’m no relationship counsellor, but I think you two have some problems. But,’ she said, standing up and stepping over to look out the window as he had, ‘not telling people what’s going on is just normal for people in our business. Which is —’ she held up a hand to interrupt the comment he had opened his mouth to make, ‘— which is what you might describe as ghostbusting.’

There was a long silence as Stewart stared at her, his mouth still open. He hadn’t known what he had expected her to say, but it wasn’t that.

‘Thought that’d get you,’ she said, turning back to face him. ‘That’s what some people would call it, anyway. It’s a very inaccurate name. Ghosts are rarely if ever involved, and how could you “bust” one anyway? What would it mean?’ She shook her head. ‘I love the film — I mean, who doesn’t? But it’s not anything like what I do. And what Annie thinks she

does, in her blustering, mean-spirited way.'

Stewart closed his mouth, started to speak, and had to clear his throat. 'You don't like her very much, do you?'

'It's mutual, I can assure you. Ask her the next time you see her. When will that be, incidentally?'

'I don't know. We... keep it casual...'

'And she sets the rules? Doesn't surprise me. But now, you have to tell me what you know about all this. What she knows, or what you might have learned from her.'

It was hot in the tiny room, and Stewart became profoundly aware of the countryside smell coming from Constance. Fresh fields and meadows, she reminded him of. Very different from the musky scent that Annie wore. 'I don't see why I have to tell you anything. And wait a minute, you changed the subject. What was all that about ghosts?'

Constance's face fell. 'Hmm. I hoped you wouldn't notice that. Got carried away. Said a bit more than I should have.' She stopped, obviously considering what to say next. 'Oh well, maybe it's time to be a bit more open. I told Sarah more, after all.'

'Are you thinking aloud, or...'

Constance stuck her hands in the pockets of her voluminous coat. 'OK, look: I investigate things. Weird things, dark things. The occult, if you like that term. Psychic phenomena, maybe you prefer that.'

Stewart got a sinking feeling. Oh dear, this one's madder than I thought. But even as the notion crossed his mind, it was swept away by memories of the weird things that had happened recently. 'Suppose I accept that: like *The X-Files*, right? How do I fit into whatever you're investigating? How did you even hear about me, come to think of it?'

'I told you, my cousin Sarah.'

‘But I hardly know her. I’ve exchanged maybe ten words with her, and most of those were me apologising for... doing something stupid. I’ve seen her band play, but... hey, you were there, weren’t you? That night at The Wheatsheaf? I remember your coat.’ He nodded at her. ‘Thought you must be too hot.’

‘A lot of people say that. I have very good temperature self-regulation. Sarah didn’t tell me to come and talk to you, specifically. She just told me Malorie had a new flatmate and that Annie was involved with him. I already knew there was something weird swirling around Malorie, or her home, or her band. You were the recent change.’

The recent change. Not the best description of his place in the world. ‘Shouldn’t you be talking to Malorie then, instead of me?’

‘There’s time for that.’ She turned around, scanned the room again. ‘It’s cramped in here. Could we go outside? You’ve got a garden.’

‘Of sorts. It’s pretty cramped too.’ He led her out of his room and downstairs. Leon and Freddy were still sitting in the living room. It sounded like they were having a curtailed band conference. He waved at them, slid open the French window, and stepped out into the lean-to of a conservatory. From there he unbolted the metal-framed door, and turned its handle while lifting, to unjam it from its warped frame. ‘This place is a bit makeshift,’ he said to Constance, who was watching his every move with great interest.

‘It’s kind of charming,’ she said. ‘In a rundown, badly-built sort of way. Buildings have souls, though, or something like them. It’s sort of like character. Don’t you think?’

Stewart had no idea what she was talking about, and didn’t answer. Out in the garden some of the undergrowth was starting to die back as autumn approached, but there was still a lot of growth reaching above their heads.

‘Mind your feet: we get a lot of foxes shitting out here.’

They stood in the small space that was clear of vegetation. Stewart leaned against the fence between their garden and the neighbouring one. Constance stood in place and turned all around, taking in everything.

‘It’s a lot... something happened here. Once. Not recently, but not that long ago.’

‘Something?’

‘That left an emotional imprint.’ She completed her second full rotation and Stewart saw that her eyes were closed. She opened them. ‘Psychometry. That’s what it’s called, when you... reach out and feel the emotional state of a place.’

Stewart ran a hand through his hair. ‘Look, you’ll understand if I don’t entirely believe all this stuff. I mean, magic? It’s a bit—’

‘We don’t really use that word. It’s no more or less accurate than the other terms, of course, but it has too many associations. Some people still use it, but they spell it with a “K”, and sometimes pronounce it “mage-ick”.’

Stewart realised he had seen the ‘magick’ spelling somewhere. In a book, or a game, maybe. ‘Isn’t that, like, the black magic thing? Evil, or whatever?’

Constance looked at the ground. ‘Oh dear. Definitely not that special,’ she murmured. ‘That’s what too many people think, and it’s just not right,’ she went on, looking up at him and at a more normal volume. ‘This thing, these powers, entities, call them what you will: think of them like electricity. It’s dangerous, if you don’t use it carefully. And it can be used for evil: torture, the electric chair... but mostly it’s used for good or neutral things. Medical scanners, phones, TVs. Light, of course’

‘OK, but—’

‘Most importantly,’ Constance went on right over him, ‘we can’t live without it. It’s fundamental to life.’

‘Do you mean electricity, or—’

‘Both! The electricity in our nervous systems, our brains; and the higher or lower power — magic, if you like — in everything. It permeates. Binds together, some say.’

‘That sounds like The Force,’ Stewart said with a smile.

Constance remained serious. ‘That Lucas guy — well, I won’t say he knew what he was talking about, but... he was touching on things that might not be too far from the truth, let’s say.’

‘In that faraway galaxy, sure, but—’

‘In this one too, my friend. Universal laws are like that.’

Stewart could see he wasn’t going to get anywhere sensible. Time to bring this conversation to an end, he thought. ‘Well, whatever. What do you want with me?’

Constance drummed her fingers on the fence. ‘You know, I’m not sure I want anything, now. Sarah made me think you might be involved somehow, but now...’ she stopped talking and looked into the distance. Stewart stood and stared at her. ‘I had got the idea that you might be... I shouldn’t really say this, but I guess it’s not true anyway.’

She stopped talking and looked away. Stewart was tempted to prompt her, to find out where she had been going. But he didn’t want to encourage her any more, so remained silent.

Eventually Constance spoke again. ‘Chosen-one narratives are a cliché, but they exist for a reason. Sometimes someone really *is* chosen. Sort of, anyway. I thought you might be like that. But you’re just ordinary. And that’s fine.’ She straightened, and made as if to leave.

‘Wow, you definitely have been watching too much *Star Wars*. Or is it Harry Potter?’ Stewart mused. ‘Maybe *The Matrix*? Just call me Neo Potwalker. Actually that’s not a bad name. I might start using it.’ He shook his head. ‘No, I’ll be The Unchosen One; The Rejected One.’

Constance frowned. 'Don't say things like that. Names have power.' She pulled her coat around her. 'I'll go. I'm sorry to have wasted your time. I'll just have a word with Malorie.'

'Uh, Malorie's not here. She's kinda... moved out.' Constance started at this news. 'Why, did you think she might be chosen too?'

'No, she's the constant. I think. In this house, I mean. Or she's supposed to be. I thought she might know what the change is. But if she's left...'

Constance was almost at the front door now.

'I think she's gone to stay with Sarah,' Stewart said, 'so you shouldn't have too much trouble finding her.' He wanted to see the back of this oddity. Something about her made him feel nervous, insecure. Was it guilt? He had had a strange woman in his room. Not like *that*, as he thought, but what would Annie think. No, that wasn't it. Or shouldn't be, anyway. He and Annie hadn't agreed to be exclusive, and he was sure she had other lovers. And Constance had just burst in unannounced anyway! Why was he trying to rationalise this, when it was nothing?

But this Constance was some kind of... enemy of Annie? That seemed like such a weird thing to say, even to think. But as well as Constance's obvious dislike for Annie, hadn't Annie made some snide remark back on the night of the Raiders' gig? It was hard to remember, in such a flurry of events, but he thought there had been something.

Constance pulled the door open. The sun had dipped behind the houses opposite now, and the street was starting to be in shadow.

'It was nice meeting you, Stewart. Thanks for your help. I hope we meet again.' Constance smiled at him so warmly, and her words were so conventional, that Stewart was thrown off course again.

‘Uh, yeah, sure. No problem,’ was all he could get out.

‘Of course, you’ll do better for yourself if you stop hanging out with... you know. You should break all connection with her. She’s dangerous.’ Constance walked down the short path, and turned back before stepping onto the pavement. ‘Just my advice. Bye!’ Her smile now looked a lot more pointed. Sinister, almost, Stewart thought, as he stood there watching her long black coat swing around her calves as she strode away.

17: Eyes of the Universe

Hackney Wick. It was a part of the borough that Sarah hadn't visited before. She was impressed by the decorations of the buildings. When, she wondered, did graffiti become street art? The effect here was certainly the latter.

There was a rehearsal studio around here somewhere, that she had told her bandmates she would take a look at. It would be more convenient than Holloway Road. But that was only her secondary reason for visiting this street. She still hadn't managed to get in touch with Constance, but she had decided to do a little research on her own. The curiously-named church she had seen in Ponder's End, a little searching had told her, also had a branch — parish? — right here in Hackney.

Church of God's Thunder on the Mountain, it seemed to be called, and it was bigger than she would ever have guessed, at least in terms of number of branches. Or parishes. 150 around the country, they claimed, and more overseas. All, presumably, in little backstreet light-industrial buildings like the one in Ponder's End, or like the rundown old warehouse, she thought it might be, that she was standing in front of now.

Most of the buildings around were decorated in brightly-coloured artwork that

reminded her of photographs a friend had shown her of Valparaíso in Chile. Huge faces and distorted bodies, political slogans, adapted logos.

God's Thunder on the Mountain had nothing like that. If it had ever had any, it had been painted over with plain white. A simple sign named the establishment.

A high wire fence surrounded it, with a stretch of broken concrete inside leading up to the building. Not very inviting, Sarah thought. But at least there wasn't one of those signs saying 'Guard dogs on patrol.' And, she realised, the fence had a gate, which hung ajar.

Pushing it open, she walked onto the cracked concrete apron. There were a couple of cars parked there, and she wondered how they got in. The gate must open wider. One looked old, dusty, and somehow in keeping with the area. The other was a shinningly new SUV, its number plate suggesting it was this year's model. The early autumn sun glinted off its paintwork.

'Somebody's got some money round here, then,' she said to herself.

A frosted-glass door stood closed in the front of the building. Beside that there was a clear glass window. It reminded her of a primary school entrance, somehow. The red paint on the window frame was faded and starting to flake off. A paper notice stuck to the door listed the times of services. Every day, Sarah noticed, and wondered if the faithful were required to visit daily. Then she remembered a school friend, whose mother, a Catholic, had gone to church every day, even though it was optional on all but Sundays. Maybe this lot were the same.

The daily services were in the evening. Catering for working people. Sundays at 11. No reason why there would be anyone here just now, and she didn't even really know what she was trying to find out. But she hadn't been able to get in touch with Constance, and this church matched the kind her cousin was interested in; and it felt like it had fallen into her lap.

Maybe the universe is sending me a sign, she had thought.

Not that she believed in that kind of thing. If the universe — or some all-powerful entity within it — was in the business of sending signs, why would it pick on *her* to send them to? She was just a nobody amateur musician and environmental employee: meaningless in the eyes of the universe. And why were her thoughts leading her on such a swirling dance, anyway? Eyes of the universe, indeed!

In fact she had come to look at the church for two reasons: checking on the rehearsal place was real, if not urgent; and it was easier to come here than to visit Constance's new address.

Easier both in terms of travelling — Hackney Wick was a short walk from her home, while Walthamstow was a bus trip and a walk — and psychologically. She had started to think that maybe Constance was avoiding her. Maybe she had pissed her off somehow, when they were looking at the churches near her a few days ago. It didn't seem likely, and they had parted on good terms. But she could never be sure with her cousin.

She hoped this would be the odd church that Connie was looking for, and that she, Sarah, could bring it to her. A peace offering, even if there was no war. A votive, even if they weren't there for the religion.

She knocked on the door, on the frosted glass. The sound was dull and echoed inside the empty hallway that she could see through the window. There obviously wasn't going to be anyone standing around waiting for her to knock. And if they were further inside the building, there was no way they'd hear her. Churches — conventional ones, with spires and stained glass — used to never lock their doors, she recalled. Maybe this modern one was like that.

The cold metal of the handle turned under her hand. The door swung open — inward,

she noticed, which was strange for a public building. Illegal, she thought, or at least against building regulations. Thoughts of people trapped, a building on fire, trying to get out a door that won't open, as others crowd in behind them so they can't step back.

She shook her head. That was too vivid an image. The floor inside the door was lined with old, cracked linoleum. It reminded her of her grandma's kitchen. A more calming image than the trapped people. Where had that one come from?

'Hello?' she spoke, barely above a conversational level. Cleared her throat. 'Hello?' again, louder. 'Is anyone here?'

Her voice echoed. Ahead, a set of double doors, one slightly ajar, looked as if they would lead into the main space of the building. Into the body of the church, if this were a conventional one. To either side a dark, dusty corridor, the old lino absorbing what little light found its way in. Closed doors in both directions.

'Hello?' She stepped to the double doors and peeked round the one that was ajar — this one opening outwards, she noticed. A large, dim space. She saw chairs lined up in rows, a raised area at the far end. It looked more like somewhere you might watch a company presentation than her idea of a church, but it must be where the services happened. Whatever a God's Thunder on the Mountain service looked like. The name was so ominous, she thought. It didn't have the ring of a loving, forgiving god that most Christian churches spoke of. More the wrathful one of the Old Testament.

'Can I help you?'

Sarah jumped as someone spoke behind her. She hadn't heard a door opening, a footstep, but as she span round she saw a woman standing just behind her.

It was hard to take the woman in, for some reason she didn't understand. She thought at first it was that she was silhouetted against the window, but she *could* see the new arrival's

face. She just couldn't get a handle on what was strange about it.

Something glittered at the woman's neck, and that distracted her. That must be it.

'I said, can I help you?'

'I — yes. Yes. I, err, I wanted to find out about the church. About what your beliefs are. Stuff like that.' Stuff like that? Very eloquent, Sarah, she thought.

'Did you.' The woman said it like it wasn't a question. 'And what has led you to our humble premises?' Above the gold glitter, Sarah thought she saw just the hint of a smile cross the woman's heavily-lipsticked mouth. Nothing in the eyes, though.

'I don't know. Nothing specific. I was just passing, and the name looked interesting. I'm always, ah, looking for... something...'

'Just passing, were you? And yet you approached so definitely.' Did they have CCTV out the front, Sarah wondered. She hadn't noticed a camera, but they could be very small nowadays. 'No,' the woman went on, and then was interrupted by her phone ringing.

As she turned away to speak into it, Sarah felt as if her thoughts were becoming clearer, and that she could see the woman better. White, middle-aged, dressed smartly but not like she was going to work in an office. Dyed blonde hair bouffant above her forehead in an old-fashioned sort of way. A bit like pictures she had seen of Margaret Thatcher, she thought.

'She says she's interested in the church,' the woman was saying into her phone. 'But I'm not convinced.'

'I'll — I'll just go,' Sarah said, and turned towards the door.

'Yes, I'll do that,' the woman said, then much louder, 'Stop!'

Sarah froze. She didn't want to, but she didn't seem to be able to move her feet forward. She turned back to face the woman.

'You have the spoor of the enemy on you.' Face to face like this, Sarah lost all sense

of what the woman was like. The glitter of her pendant or whatever it was had intensified as it caught the light from the dirty windows. ‘You’re going to stay here till we can ask you a few questions.’

‘I — don’t mind answering some questions,’ Sarah struggled out. ‘But I don’t have long, I—’

‘Quiet!’ The sound was sharp and echoed in the hallway. ‘You’ll speak when I ask you questions, and not until.’

What the fuck, Sarah wanted to say. She wanted to tell this weird Thatcher-woman to fuck off; to turn on her heel and walk out. To tell Connie and let *her* investigate this place if she wanted to. She wanted to run.

She couldn’t do any of those things. She couldn’t do anything but stand still and look at the woman, who got closer and closer to her, until the glittering necklace filled her vision. And turned it to darkness.

#

She became aware running. She was running along a wooded path, just out for one of her normal daily runs. Feeling good. A bit tired, maybe, but the run would clear her head and she’d be fine. The tarmac cracked and potholed in places, but not too bad, not much likelihood of turning an ankle. The trees around her rustling gently in the breeze.

She remembered running along here, not that long ago, and being surprised by Connie popping out of the trees. She had just been thinking about Connie; now what had she wanted her to do?

She stumbled to a halt. A cyclist, coming up behind her, swerved to avoid her.

What the fuck had happened? She tried to remember setting out on her run; what she had been doing before; even what day it was. Nothing.

The weird backstreet church. The woman. The glittering necklace. Darkness.

Then she was here, running. What had happened? *What had happened to her?*

Staggering to one of the benches that the council had kindly installed along the path, she fumbled for her phone. It was strapped to her arm in its holder, the way it always was when she ran. It was just after 8 in the evening on Thursday the 17th of October. She had gone to the church that morning. Between then and now there was nothing in her memory. Just blankness, a hole, a gap. She felt normal: as if she had recently got home from work, changed into her running clothes, and come out. But she had no memory of doing those things.

She briefly wondered if she had left the church, met friends, gone out on the piss. Got so drunk that she couldn't remember anything. But she would still be drunk if that was it. She wouldn't have been able to get home, go for a run, if she had drunk that much.

There was no sense of either hangover or drunkenness at all. Just the missing time.

As she stared at the date on her phone, its screen lit up with an incoming call: 'Cousin Constance'.

'Connie, where have you been? I've been trying to get you. And something happened to me...' her voice cracked as she said this, tears filling her eyes.

'Phone troubles, sorry about that.' Constance sounded as normal as she ever did, at least. 'It got fritzed by a — well, never mind that. What do you mean, something's happened?'

Sarah quickly outlined her visit to the church and her blankness after that. She felt she could almost hear Constance's mind whirring in the silence that followed.

'Where are you?' Constance said, eventually.

'Down by the Lea. Where you met me that time. Also you didn't tell me you'd moved to Walthamstow! We're practically neighbours. And I trooped all the way to bloody Ponder's

End to try to find you. That's where I found this thunder church. They've got a branch near your old flat.'

'Shit. I new there was something that drew me there. I never liked it, though.' From the noises on the line Sarah could tell that Constance was moving around. 'Will you be back at your place soon?'

'I — I guess so?' She realised she wasn't sure how far along her run she had been when awareness had returned.

'OK, I'll see you there in half an hour.' The line went dead.

As she stood up and started to run on, heading homeward, among her storm-tossed thoughts, she wondered if Connie had a bike. Otherwise getting from Walthamstow to Hackney in half an hour was pushing it, even though they were close.

Twenty-five minutes later, home, showered, and dressed in normal clothes, she answered the door to Constance.

#

'She did what?' Constance was pacing up and down while Sarah sat on the sofa, her head in her hands.

'Hypnotised me, I guess. She had this glittery kind of necklace on, and I remember it distracting me, and her speaking, and the next thing I was out on my run.' Sarah looked up at Constance, who had gone silent. Constance was staring at her, her mouth wide open.

'Jaw-dropping story, obviously,' Sarah said.

'Describe it,' Constance said, snapping back to herself.

'The story?' Sarah was bewildered.

'The necklace. This glittery thing.'

'Oh. It was... I don't know, really. Kind of complex. I didn't get a good look at it,

because I was busy looking at this woman who was harassing me. Except... I couldn't get a good look at *her*, because of *it*. It distracted me. But I don't know what shape it was or anything. It was confusing.'

Constance was nodding her head. 'Was it like this — wait, this could be upsetting. I'm going to show you something, and it might remind you of the thing she was wearing..' Constance knelt on the floor in front of Sarah and looked into her eyes. 'You're at home, you're safe, I'm here. No one can hurt you, OK?'

'Of course. What are you going on about? Of course I'm at home.'

'I know, but... OK, then.' She reached into her top and grasped a thin silver chain that Sarah had hardly noticed around her neck. She pulled out whatever was hanging on it.

It was silvery and it glinted only slightly under the artificial lights. But Sarah immediately knew it was the same as the gold thing she had seen around the woman's neck. Or if not the same, at least a sibling of it. Something from the same school of jewellery-making.

Of *charm*-making. The word came into her head and felt right yet not right at the same time. Neither meaning of charm fitted her experience at the church, what she could remember of it.

And as the silver light from Constance's necklace hit her retinas, some of the darkness that covered those memories cleared. Clouds parted, mist burned off. Up to a point. She was sitting on a chair in an office; not tied up, not restrained physically at all, but completely unable to move. The woman was asking her questions.

Who was she? Why had she come to the church? Who had sent her? Who did she work for? She remembered trying to resist: she would tell the woman nothing. Because why should she? It was nobody's business but her own. And in any case, she hardly knew herself

why she was there. She wanted to protect Constance, to keep her out of it. Her cousin was strange, and seemed vulnerable sometimes. Even though it had been for her that she had gone there, best not to mention her.

She had set her mind to tell the woman nothing. She had told her everything.

The words had come pouring out of her. She couldn't stop herself from answering everything she was asked, as truthfully as she knew. Her words, her thoughts, were drawn from her by the golden, glittering threads of the woman's necklace.

'You don't have to protect me. But thank you for trying.' Constance's voice brought Sarah back to herself. She was sitting on her sofa, safe at home. Constance was kneeling in front of her, slipping her silvery necklace back into her top.

'Did you— did I... repeat everything?'

'Pretty much. The gist, anyway. It was hard to get you to stop once you'd started.'

'What the fuck *is* that thing? Are you like her? Using some sort of — *mind control*?'

Constance stood, and sighed. 'First of all, if it *were* possible to control people's minds, it would be hugely unethical to do it, and I wouldn't. Second, it's not possible. Not in the way you're probably thinking of anyway, like in stories. Turning people into human robots or whatever.' She slumped onto the sofa next to Sarah. 'The glamour encoded in this amulet;' — she gestured toward her chest, where the glittery silver object was hidden under her top once again — 'it's more like a drug. A disinhibiting one like alcohol. But one that's taken in visually. Well, partly visually. Partly what you might call psychically.

'Or at least...' She became hesitant for the first time. 'At least, I think that's what it is. What that woman used on you, I mean. And what this one is trying to replicate. I don't fully understand it, in all honesty.'

'How can such a thing be? Who made it? How does it work?'

‘I wish I could tell you. I wish I knew. I got mine by — well, that’s a story for another time, but it wasn’t easy. It was messy, and someone still holds it against me. Plus, I don’t really know how to use it. When you told me what had happened I just got the idea she must have used one of these — they’re sometimes called amulets of clarity — and I brought mine in the hope that it might counteract the effects somehow. I didn’t expect it to replicate them.’

‘Well, it’s counteracted some of them. I can remember most of it now. Though not how I came to be running.’

Constance tapped a thumb against her teeth as she thought about this. Eventually she said, ‘Post-hypnotic suggestion, at a guess.’

‘But you said it’s not—’

‘It wasn’t hypnosis, what you experienced. Not in the way that’s usually meant: either stage tricks or therapeutic. But you’re familiar with the idea of post-hypnotic suggestion, right?’

Sarah nodded her assent. ‘Of course.’

‘I’m guessing it’s a bit like that, then. Aided by her just telling you to go and do something you normally do. So you ended up going for a run.’

‘I must have come back here first! Shit, I’ve just realised! I must have come here and got changed.’

‘Well, yes, but—’

‘Well what if she came here with me? Or sent someone? They could’ve been in here, going through my stuff.’ Sarah got up and started to pace around the flat, looking at her belongings, opening drawers. ‘Shit, where’s my laptop?’

‘On the table.’

Sarah flipped it open and logged on. ‘Everything looks OK,’ she said after a few

minutes. But what if they've installed something on it?"

'They're cultists, not Russian hackers.'

'Are you sure of that? That woman did have a strange accent. Could have been Russian.'

'Oh, I don't know. Get someone to look at it if you're worried. Or wipe it and start again.'

Sarah looked aghast. 'And lose all my music? Are you insane?'

Constance shrugged. 'I only deal with computers that are possessed. Not ones infested with malware.'

Sarah shook her head. 'I assume you're joking, which this is no time for. If you're not... I don't even know where to begin. Someone's been fucking with my mind, my *mind*!'

'I know, cuz, I know. It's scary and horrifying, and there's nothing we can do about it now.'

'She knew about you.'

'What?'

'I told her... I said I'd come investigating because of you. It's just coming into focus now. Shit, I told them so much. Said I'd seen their other branch near where you lived, but you didn't live there now. Fuck.'

'It doesn't matter. You're not to blame.'

'No but you're not understanding me. They *already knew about you*! She recognised your name. Even before that: "The spoor of the enemy is upon you." She said that.'

Sarah was surprised to see Constance smile at this. 'Good. Good. That's excellent.'

'Is it? Why?'

'Because it means they're scared. And they'll be looking for me. Which will bring

them to me.'

'Scared? You think they're scared of you?'

'Maybe not of me personally. But of what I represent. Which is,' she went on, before Sarah could ask, 'the opposition, you might say. Their enemies.'

'Plural?'

'Hmm. Well, maybe not exactly. I'm not the only one that's against them, but I do work alone. Mostly.'

'God, you're as enigmatic as ever.'

Constance was pacing now. 'The next move is up to us. They'll think it's their move, because you went in there to investigate. Very bravely, I might say, if unwisely. Don't do anything like that again without telling me.'

'I'd have told you if could—' Sarah started, but Constance talked over her.

'But that wasn't really a move, and now they've revealed their hand. Or part of it, at least. They'll try to attack me, most likely, but I'll be moving against them first.'

'What will you do? And, wait — what if they've bugged us?'

Constance pulled out her phone, thumbed through something, shook her head. 'Nope. We're clear.'

'You can scan for *bugs* with that?' Sarah was beginning to think her cousin was delusional.

'It's an additional feature to the one that checks we're not being scanned magically. We're clear on that front too, but of course I added some protection the last time I was here.'

'Of course you did. So your phone's magical, now? Isn't that an iPhone 11?'

'Constance glanced at it, almost affectionately. 'I added some modifications.'

18: Something's Not Right

It wasn't Stewart's fault, she knew. Not really. He wasn't to blame for the craziness of his girlfriend. But he *was* to blame for bringing her into the house. Worse, for leaving her there alone, when he had gone out to work. Leaving her there to meet me and do... whatever it was she had done.

Malorie's thoughts swirled uncontrollably as soon as she woke up. This wasn't going to work, sleeping on Sarah's sofa, fretting about Annie, about Stewart. About Freddy and how she had hurt him.

She had to go and talk to them.

She wanted to talk to her therapist first, but her next appointment wasn't for a couple of weeks. Last night Sarah had let her vent about it all for hours, it seemed like. She was a good friend, but too much of that was a recipe for losing her friendship.

So Malorie thought, anyway. Sarah would protest that she was fine with it, that's what friends are for and all that. But you could push too far. Impose on a friendship too much and it might break.

She found she liked sharing a place with Sarah more than she did with her Tooting

housemates. But there was Sarah's actual flatmate, Ronnie. He wasn't around much. He seemed to be out most evenings, and had just started rehearsing for an acting role. When she had seen him he didn't seem to mind her being there, but it was another potential stress on the whole situation.

On top of all that, she owed her share of the rent for the Tooting house. She was in a contract, and could only easily get out of it if she found someone else to take it over. But it wasn't like she had a room there that they could let to someone else: she had been sharing with Freddie. It had seemed like the right thing to do at the time. They were enjoying being together, the band was starting up, everything seemed ideal. And it saved them money.

She hadn't thought about what it would be like if she wanted to leave.

Or had to. She didn't want to leave, not really. she had to. It was that Annie.

No, be honest with yourself, Malorie, she thought. The thing with Annie was only the trigger that had made her run out when she did, without telling anyone. She had been packed and ready to go because she wanted to split up with Freddy.

But now, a few days later, with everything up in the air, she couldn't tell whether that had been the right decision or not.

Sarah had told her it was. Not that she, Sarah, had anything against Freddy, but based on what Malorie had told her about their relationship and how she had felt in it, Sarah said Malorie was better out of it.

But was Sarah right? She wasn't a dispassionate observer. She was Malorie's friend, and was going to say what she thought Malorie wanted to hear. Or would she? Would she say what she thought was best for Malorie, which might not be the same thing?

She would hardly say that the best thing for a woman was to be with a man, though, would she? As a feminist and especially as a lesbian, she was hardly going to think that.

Best to talk to him. To them. it was nearly eleven in the morning. She wasn't working today, luckily.

She messaged Freddy:

— *Can we talk? I'll come to house tonight?*

No answer right away. No dots to show he was typing. She tried the house group chat.

— *Hey, I need to talk to you guys. OK if I come down tonight?*

Stewart answered almost immediately:

— *Sure, fine by me*

— *Will Annie be there?*

— *Don't think so, but you know what she's like*

I know what she's like all right, Malorie thought.

— *She keeps her own hours, I mean, Stewart added.*

That's one way of putting it.

— *Did you want to see her too... or... not?*

She could almost hear Stewart's voice in his message, hesitant, aware that his girlfriend wasn't popular with his housemates.

She replied to say that she'd prefer if Annie wasn't there, and added a sad-face emoji by way of apology. But could she turn up there tonight if Freddy didn't answer? And talking to Freddy and talking to the other housemates were two different things. She had to do both, but not at the same time.

What if she went, and Annie was there? Or she turned up while they were discussing... whatever it was they had to discuss? And what was that, exactly? She wanted to explain something about why she had moved out, and why it had been so sudden. They probably thought she and Freddy had had a big fight, and that wasn't really true. Freddy, of

course, knew they hadn't, and that had left him even more confused.

Maybe talking to all of them at once wouldn't be too bad. It wasn't like she was going to be giving up any intimate secrets. They others must realise that Freddy wasn't an ideal partner. Not, at least, if you wanted to take some things seriously. But it would be cruel to bring up their personal relationship in front of the others. It would humiliate him.

Then there was the band. Overlapping with, but separate from, the situation with the house. Where did they go from here? Should she ask Robin to come along tonight, too? Make it a band meeting?

No, that had to be separate. And it didn't affect Stewart and Nat. Not directly, at any rate.

The band should go on. Definitely. She had to keep making music, and she loved doing so with those three people. She and Freddy probably couldn't be together as a couple, but they could still be band mates. It would work out. She was sure of that.

#

'It won't work!' Robin's anger and frustration came clearly down the phone. 'I was never sure about having a couple in the band. And don't give me any Fleetwood Mac stories. They were already super-successful when they had whatever breakups they had. We're... not.'

She had called after Robin asked what was going on on the band's group chat. She hadn't felt able to answer there.

'Maybe you're right,' she said. 'I don't know, then. Maybe you guys can go on without me...'

'What? Don't be ridiculous. I'd rather go on without Freddy!' Malorie felt a wave of pleasure at her bandmate's affirmation. 'But I'd rather go on with both of you,' Robin went on. 'You're good together, you know. Songwriting and performing both.'

‘I know.’ She had to bite down on saying ‘and in other ways’ in a wistful tone. ‘But here we are.’

‘Shit,’ said Robin. ‘Well, I don’t know. I’ll need to talk to Freddy and Leon as well. I guess we should have a band meeting?’

‘Yeah. But can you wait till I’ve talked to my housemates? And, err, Freddy?’

‘Wait, you haven’t told *Freddy* yet?’

‘No, no, I have, it’s just...’ Malorie sighed. This was going into more detail than she wanted to share. ‘It’s just I need to talk a few things over with him first. Set some ground rules or whatever.’

#

They arranged to meet on neutral ground. A pub near the house, but not one they frequented. She didn’t want their local spoiled by an ugly emotional scene. If that was what happened. She hoped it wouldn’t be, as she bought a gin and waited for Freddy.

‘Not seen you in here before.’ The voice came from the next table over. Malorie looked up and saw an older white man, someone who looked like he had been there as long as the pub. He was sitting in front of a half empty pint of Guinness, and something told her he had been nursing it for a long time.

‘Yeah I’m meeting... someone.’ She gave a weak smile, not wanting to encourage conversation, but her natural inclination against rudeness stopping her from just flatly ignoring the man. I’m so British, she thought.

‘Ah, he’ll be here soon enough. You don’t want to keep a pretty girl waiting.’ Oh god. ‘Don’t mind me, I’m just biding my time till it’s time to go home.’ The man took a sip of his Guinness, and Malorie drank from her gin at the same time. Now he’ll think I’m mirroring him and we’ve got a connection.

‘Connections. That’s what it’s all about.’ What! Was he... ‘You’ve got to connect everything up, otherwise things fall apart.’ The man gazed at her, then downed the rest of his pint and stood up. ‘Right, message delivered. Time I was going.’

He crossed the pub, pushed the door open, and left. Malorie stared after him in confusion. Before the door swung closed, Freddy walked through it. Malorie’s stomach turned over, reminding her of the first time they had met for a proper date. The same worry, even fear. A different reason.

And then he was sitting opposite her, this man that she had told herself she was in love with. No, be honest, that she *had* been in love with. And maybe still was, on some level, but it was all so different now.

She could see the hurt and confusion in his eyes. I put that there.

‘Hi Freddy,’ she eventually managed to say. ‘How have you been?’ Oh god, what a pathetic question.

‘Not great,’ he said. ‘I’ve had better weeks. Went to see my mum yesterday.’

Oh god, he never went to see his mum without being persuaded. ‘How is Marnie?’

Freddy was silent for a long time, just staring at her. Then, ‘*Why*, Malorie? Why did you do it?’

Now Malorie was silent. She had rehearsed this in her head constantly over the last couple of days, but now that the moment was here, she couldn’t find the way to begin. She drew a breath to tell him about Annie, about how it was her fault. To tell him about the psychic or psychotic experience she had had with her. But as the words formed in her mind she knew they would come out garbled, confused. They would make no sense, like the experience itself.

Like her life now.

She lowered her head, no longer able to look at his sadness. 'I... didn't want to.'

'Didn't want to what? Leave?'

'Yes. Well, I did, but not like that. Not without telling you.'

'I went there, did you know that? To Sarah's.'

Her head jerked up. 'When?' She hadn't even known Freddy knew where Sarah lived.

'Couple of days ago. Got her address from Ted.' Of course. Old school friends.

'What did... I didn't know. Did you...'

'Her cousin was there, at the door. That Constance girl. She warned me off.'

Annoyance at the infantilisation flared briefly in Malorie, but was overwhelmed by confusion. Constance hadn't been at Sarah's in the last few days. Unless it had been while Malorie was asleep, but...

'Standing at the door like a guard, she was. Said you wouldn't see me. Or... no, it was more like shouldn't. "She shouldn't see you," she said. "Not yet." No, it was, "The time is not yet right." Something like that. All portentous, dramatic.'

What the hell? Malorie's mind was in a new whirl. What did Constance have to do with this? Maybe Sarah had asked her to stand guard, but that was ridiculous. 'Constance? I don't know anything about this.'

'I should have pushed past her, but...' As he trailed off Malorie imagined the scene. Freddy was much bigger, but Constance could be an imposing presence. And she knew there was no way Freddy would have forced his way past anyone, man or woman. Especially woman. If there was one man she had never feared violence from, it was him.

'Did you—'

'I tried to call you again, from round the corner. But you weren't answering.'

She hadn't been answering anyone's calls or messages over the last few days, but it

had been especially hard to ignore Freddy. 'I know. I'm sorry. I've been trying to get my head into a better place.'

'And have you?' A glimmer of hope in his eyes.

Malorie sighed. 'Not really. I just know I can't be around her.'

'Constance? Sarah?'

'No, Sarah's fine. She's great. I mean Annie.'

New confusion on Freddy's face. 'What does she have to do with — wait, you left because of *Annie*? It should've been her who left, not you. This is bloody Stewart's fault. He should leave. I'll fucking kill him.' Freddy started to push his chair back, as if preparing to leave.

'No you won't, don't be silly. It's nothing to do with him.' The idea of Freddy and Stewart having a fight popped into her head, and she almost laughed. She couldn't think of two less pugnacious men. Though people could surprise you.

'I didn't leave *because* of Annie,' she went on, 'but I can't come back because of her. She's too... powerful.' Malorie hardly knew what she meant, but she could almost feel the force of what had happened between Annie and her, emanating from the direction of the house.

Freddy shook his head. 'I don't know what's going on with you. I don't understand you at all at the moment. I came here to say I want you back, but... when you talk like that I'm not so sure.'

Malorie opened her mouth to speak, and only then processed what Freddy had said. She closed her mouth and sat in silence.

Eventually Freddy spoke again. 'I mean, I *do* want you back, of course. But I think you need help. I don't know if you've talked to that therapist of yours, but... I mean, you

sound crazy. I know I shouldn't say things like that, but... you do.'

Malorie looked down at the table and half smiled. She took a sip of her gin before speaking. 'I know. I sound crazy to me. What happened felt crazy. It *was* crazy.' She raised a hand to stop him, seeing he was about to speak again. 'Look, I *was* planning to leave. Maybe just to get away for a while. But I was going to talk to you first. To tell you. I would never have run away like that. I know how much that must have hurt you. But then this... *thing* happened with Annie. And I just ran. I was too freaked out, too scared.' She swallowed the lump in her throat, determined not to cry. 'I'm so sorry. But I can't come back till Annie's out of our lives. And that's not fair to Stewart.'

'Fuck Stewart. What was this "thing" with Annie? What do you mean? Did she attack you? Hurt you?' Freddy squirmed in his chair, again looking like he was going to get up and run out.

'Nothing like that. I'm not even sure it was something she did. It was something that *happened*. To both of us.'

Freddy's mouth twisted, he shrugged, unable to form a question, Maybe unable to even understand her.

'Look,' Malorie went on, 'I know this is going to sound mad. But you already think I'm mad, so—'

'I don't, it's just—'

'Let me explain. Try to. Try to tell you, at least.' Deep breath. 'We had a psychic experience. That's the only name I have for it. Our minds were linked. Like telepathy. Just in the hall there at the house, without any warning. I didn't even know she was there. And it was terrifying. It felt like I was dying, like everything was dying, everyone I loved was gone, the world was doomed.'

Aghast. That was the word for how Freddy looked. He was silent for a time. Malorie was about to speak again, ask what he thought, when, for a third time, he made to get up. This time he finished the action and stood looking down at her. 'Babe... Babe. I don't know what's going on with you, but you need help. I think you need to call a doctor, or your therapist. But something's not right in your head. And I — I'm sorry. But I can't handle it.' Tears in his eyes, he turned and walked towards the door.

'Freddy, wait!' But he shook his head without looking back. Reached the door and went out as the strange old guy had. Why think about him at a time like this, Malorie? She almost got up and followed Freddy, but it would only make it worse.

#

Malorie sat with her head down, staring at the table, thoughts swirling.

'Are... you OK?' Tentative, Scottish accent.

She looked up. 'Hi Stewart. Were you waiting outside?'

'Aye. We thought we'd be coming in to join you. After you and Freddy had talked. Thought — well, hoped, really — it'd all be back to normal. But then Freddy came out and stormed off. Didn't even say a word. I've never seem him look so angry. Never seen him angry at all, come to think of it. But then I've only been here a wee while, so what do I know? Anyway, we thought we should come in and see if you were OK.'

Stewart's unusual garrulousness ran to a halt, and just as Malorie was puzzling about who he meant by 'we', Nat came over from the bar with Leon trailing behind, each carrying two drinks. Nat put a large gin & tonic down in front of her. 'Though you'd be ready for another one.' Nat stepped round the table and slid onto the bench seat next to her. Stewart and Leon took the chairs opposite, Stewart where Freddy had just been. 'Now, tell us what's going on, and how we can make this all better for you.'

Malorie burst into the tears she had been holding back. Nat enclosed her in a hug and held her. 'OK, love, let it all out.'

'I'm sorry, I'm—' Malorie choked out.

'Don't be. It's fine. Well, I mean, it's far from fine, but it's fine to show it,' Nat said.

Eventually she dried her eyes. Stewart and Leon were sipping their beers and looking embarrassed. She started to say 'sorry' again, then caught Nat's expression and smiled slightly. 'Thanks for... putting up with that. I didn't expect things to go that badly with Freddy, but... well, I guess that's it.'

'Really?' said Nat. 'You don't think there's any chance you'll get back together?'

Malorie picked up her new glass and raised it towards Nat in thanks. 'Hard to imagine now.' She drank, enjoying the cool of the liquid and the burn of the alcohol.

Stewart and Leon both spoke at once:

'So what happens now—'

'What about the band?'

'What happens about the house? I don't know. It's not like you guys can just get someone else in to replace me. My rent's paid up to the end of the month, but after that?' She shrugged, shook her head. 'And about the band? I thought maybe we'd be able to go on. Even if Freddy and me aren't a couple, we could still play together. But now? I don't know. I just don't know. I'm sorry.'

'That could work, I guess,' said Leon. 'If you're both OK with it. Did Freddy...' he trailed off, seemingly unsure of what he meant to ask, or what he could ask without causing hurt.

'We didn't get as far as talking about the band. Just... us.'

'We'll just have to split it four ways instead of five, then,' said Stewart. 'The rent and

everything. Bit more expensive, but...'

There was a lot of trailing off in this conversation, Malorie realised. Unfinished thoughts, people unsure where to go next, what to say without upsetting anyone. They didn't know where they could tread because they didn't know where they stood.

'I guess I owe you guys an explanation,' she said.

'You don't have to tell us any more than you're comfortable with,' said Nat. The other two nodded.

'Look, I... I was going to break up with Freddy, OK? Last week, when I left the house. I had been thinking about it, had more or less decided. I'd even started packing a bag. It's because — well, maybe I won't go into that. Let's just say we were growing apart.'

She took another sip. Her companions sat in silence, intent on her face. The faded leather of the bench seat creaked as Nat moved slightly next to her.

'But I'd have done it to his face, let him down as gently as I could,' she went on. 'I didn't want to hurt him. And I'd have told you all too.' She looked from Stewart to Leon, and finally turned to look at Nat. 'You do understand that, don't you?'

'I knew when you went off without saying anything that something pretty bad must have happened,' said Nat. 'I may have... accused Freddy of some things.'

'I overheard that,' said Stewart. 'I wouldn't say "accused". You were just asking him questions. It was pretty loud, though.'

'Well. I think I might have made it worse. Or not helped, at least. I was just worried about you.' They turned back to face her. 'I guess we all were.'

'I know. I'm sorry I worried you. The thing is...' She turned to Stewart. 'It's kinda your fault.'

Stewart literally jumped in his seat. The others both made startled movements too.

‘My—!’ Stewart stopped speaking, his mouth still open. The thoughts that must be hurtling through his head plain on his friendly face.

‘Indirectly, I mean.’ Malorie sighed. ‘It was Annie.’

Stewart’s mouth closed, his face clouding. But it was Leon who spoke. ‘Annie and *Freddy*? I can’t believe that.’

‘Oh, no, not that,’ said Malorie quickly. ‘It was nothing like that. I told you, Freddy’s not to blame here. Or maybe I didn’t tell you that, but he hasn’t done anything wrong. Except maybe be a bit too... not serious?’

There were nods all around the table at that, and she nearly smiled.

‘So what does Annie have to do with it? I know none of you like her much, but...’

‘I don’t think *you* like her that much,’ said Nat.

‘I — she’s — I have mixed feelings,’ Stewart said, reddening and looking away from them.

‘It’s OK if it’s just sex,’ said Leon. ‘Nothing wrong with that.’

‘Sure, as long as they’re both OK with it,’ said Nat. ‘But she does seem to rub people up the wrong way. And I hope that’s not an innuendo.’

‘But what did she *do*?’ Stewart looked pleadingly at Malorie.

‘It’s hard to explain,’ Malorie said. ‘I had an experience... something happened with her... I’m not even sure it was something she did. Maybe it happened to her as much as it happened to me.’

‘You’re not making a lot of sense there, Mal dear,’ said Nat.

‘I know. It didn’t make a lot of sense to me.’ Even sitting here in the pub with friendly faces around her, Malorie still felt some of the fear of that day in the hall with Annie. When the two of them had merged into one mind. For a brief moment that had felt like an eternity,

that's what seemed to happen. You'd think, she thought, that something like that would bring people closer. But she hadn't been able to think of Annie with anything other than revulsion since that day. 'Has she said anything about it?'

'Annie?' Stewart looked startled to be asked, she thought. 'No, I don't think so. In fact—' he paused, thinking, '— I don't think I've seen her since then. Since the day you left, I mean. Or, no, wait. Once. She came round once, but we didn't really talk.' Malorie thought she saw the hint of a smile start to twitch on Stewart's face, before he suppressed it. I don't want to go there, then, she thought. 'She stayed the night before though: the night before you left. I had to rush out for an early meeting at work, so I left her here. At the house, I mean.'

'That explains why she was there when you weren't, at least.' Another sip of gin. 'I know this sounds mad, but we — had a psychic connection, you 'd have to call it. Our minds became linked. At first I thought she was doing it on purpose, attacking me. Like she'd invaded my mind. But I don't think that was it. She was as confused and surprised as I was. When we separated, I mean.' She looked round at their faces, seeing scepticism, disbelief. 'I just freaked. Grabbed my bag and ran. Been scared to go back to the house since.'

They sat in silence. I've really blown it, Malorie thought. No one's going to believe that. Now they'll think I'm really crazy. Probably stage an intervention and get me sectioned. Even Nat, her oldest friend, was looking quizzically at her.

'I believe you.' It was Stewart who spoke first. 'And... I'm sorry. I don't know if it makes sense for me to say that, but I am. I'm sorry you went through that.'

'You believe me?'

Stewart nodded, nearly smiled.

'Of course we believe you.' Nat spoke up at her elbow. Leon was nodding too. 'We know Annie's weird. That's why she gets that nickname. But we've all had odd experiences

round her. Nothing like yours, mind. But it's of a kind.'

'The space/time continuum distorts wherever she goes,' said Leon. 'That's why people don't like her.' He half turned towards Stewart, looking slightly apologetic. Stewart shrugged.

'Did she tell you something about this?' to Stewart.

'Like I said, I haven't seen her since then,' he said, shaking his head. 'But I've had a couple of weird experiences round her, so... Actually that day you saw us down on the beach. Something weird happened then.'

'Oh yeah.' Malorie hadn't even thought to bring that up. 'To me, too. When I saw you. She spoke inside my head. And that time it seemed like it was deliberate.'

Stewart looked startled at this, but before he could ask more, Nat spoke. 'Running out of the house I see, but what I don't understand is how this came to make you leave Freddy.'

'It didn't. Like I said, I was planning to leave him anyway. Or at least thinking about it. No, planning: I had a bag packed. The Annie thing... that just triggered it happening then. Made me run off without saying anything. Made me hurt him more than I wanted to. I mean, I didn't want to hurt him at all, but...'

'So what now?' asked Leon. 'Where do we go from here?'

'To the bar,' said Nat. 'It's your round, I think.' Their glasses were empty.

'Yeah, but—'

'Go! We can't carry on a conversation like this without booze.' Leon got up with a laugh, and headed towards the bar.

'I'll help,' said Nat, and followed him.

'Are they leaving us alone on purpose?' said Stewart.

'I guess maybe? In case there's anything you can tell me about Annie, but not in front

of everyone?’

Stewart raised his eyebrows in a look of realisation. ‘Right. Well, not really. I don’t think there’s anything.’

‘But you said you’d had an experience like mine?’

‘Not exactly like what you described, but... a couple of times. It was like I’d time-travelled. Or had a vision of another time, you know? Just for a few seconds, maybe a minute or so. It happened at the gig you did just after I arrived. That’s when I met Annie, of course. It was just like, seeing the upstairs of the pub all ancient and run-down.’

‘That sounds like what Sarah saw.’

‘Sarah’s had this too?’

Malorie nodded vigorously. ‘Same as you guys: that’s why she found it so easy to believe me. Though she’s got even more going — but never mind about that. What else about Annie?’

‘Nothing, really. Well, the beach thing: that felt like a time jump too. Like I was in the far future when everything was dying. And... and I thought I was going to die too.’

‘That does sound similar. I thought maybe a psychic link would lead to some great sex.’

Stewart flushed. Malorie had rarely seen a boy look so embarrassed. ‘Ah, no. The, the sex is fine. No, it’s great. But we don’t have some great mental connection when we come or anything.’ He paused, before going on, even more hesitantly. ‘In fact, we don’t even really have that much of an ordinary connection. Outside of bed, I mean.’

‘Just the sex, then?’

‘Pretty much, yeah.’

‘As Leon said, that’s OK, as long as it’s what you both want.’

Stewart scoffed. 'I'm not sure what I want. And I've no *idea* what Annie wants.' He looked at Malorie. 'I'll tell her not to come round anymore. If that'll help, I mean.'

Malorie shook her head and smiled. 'Thank you, it's very sweet. But don't do that. It won't change what's between Freddy and me, and I can't really come back to the house anyway, so...'

Stewart nodded, looking sad, 'I hope you and he manage to get back together. Or work something out, at least.'

19: Trick of the Light

The main problem with working in London, Stewart had learned over his first few months here, was that everyone lives all over the place. They come together in one part of town for work, and then go home to many different parts, or even outside of the city, to commuter towns. So if you were going to socialise with coworkers — make friends, even — you had to do it at work. Or nearby and just after. In practice that meant going to the pub straight from work.

Which he didn't object to in principle, but there was the problem of drinking on an empty stomach. He remembered his dad warning him about that when he was leaving home for university. He hadn't thought much about it since then, because he nearly always had a good meal before going out. Had something to eat at least. And the difference there was that — nearly always, except at the end of exams, really — you went home to halls or flat, after lectures, and before going out to drink. The added effect being that you went out later. Except at the end of term, he didn't recall going to the pub before 7 or 8. Same with his friends at home in Helensburgh: a good home-cooked meal, then out later in the evening.

Here, though, they spilled out of the office and were in a Wimbledon pub sometimes

before 5:30. Not every day, but often enough, and always on Fridays. Always. The first pint or two slipped down so easily. The pubs usually sold food, but nobody stopped to eat; or if you did, everyone was standing at the bar or around the tall tables or wall-mounted shelves. It all made eating anything more substantial than crisps problematic at best, if not downright frowned on by some of the more macho types. British binge-drinking culture, he thought. No wonder it we've got a bad reputation.

But he joined in, because that's what you do when you're trying to be accepted in a group, trying to make friends. It meant he had often staggered back to Tooting on a late bus or by Uber — and not that late, either: if you start drinking at half five, you aren't going to carry on into the early hours of the next day, as he'd been used to doing in Edinburgh.

This night, though: this one had quickly got out of hand. 'We're going to the dogs,' Cynthia said, as they were discussing what to do after work.

Stewart raised a puzzled eyebrow. 'I mean, we've got our problems, sure, but things aren't *that* bad are they?

'Yeah, yeah, we've heard them all before.' Cynthia was older than most of the other people he worked with, but didn't seem to be senior. Stewart could never quite understand her position in the hierarchy. But she liked to party and he found her entertaining, if intimidating. 'I'm talking about the *dogs*. The racing. Greyhounds, you know?'

'Oh. Is that still a thing people do?'

'Still a — of course it is! It's bloody traditional. Maybe not in Jockland, but down here, it's important. They were gonna close the Wimbledon dogs last year, but we stopped them. Big campaign. Anyway, it's traditional to take the new kids out there in their first couple of months.'

And so they'd set off — after a couple of pints in the pub near work — to the

Wimbledon Dog Track.

‘I don’t really gamble...’ Stewart said. In fact he felt terrified of gambling, though he could never quite put his finger on why. No one in his family had a gambling problem, none of his friends ever had, that he knew about. It was more a feeling like there was an abyss nearby, and if he got too close, he thought he might fall — or even jump — into it.

‘It’s low stakes,’ Cynthia said. ‘Just take a few quid. Or don’t. Just come along for a drink and watch the races. Watch us lot lose our money.’ She laughed.

He went, of course. The peer pressure was too much to do otherwise, and anyway, it was Friday night and he hadn’t planned anything else.

He hated the dog track. Full of lagered-up boys waving money and making sexist remarks at any scantily-dressed women. It just left him cold. That he was a lagered-up boy himself was not lost on him, but he thought he held himself to a higher standard than these louts.

Oh god, did I just use the word ‘louts’? Even if only in my head? His thoughts swirled around

I wish Annie was here. No, I don’t, she’d hate it too. She wouldn’t even come into a place like this. Or would she? He didn’t really know what sort of places she would go. She’d come here if she was looking for ‘information,’ he didn’t doubt. If there was some weird old guy at the bar who she could ask about... what? Just what was it Annie was trying to find out about? She had been unforthcoming ever since the time on the Thames beach. In fact he had only seen her once since then, and that had been — actually an amazing experience. Annie had dragged him into bed and — he felt the right term was ‘ravished him,’ if that wasn’t so gendered. To say nothing of archaic. A bit like ‘louts,’ his drunken mind pointed out.

Annie had rushed off in the morning before Stewart was fully awake. She seemed

brighter than ever when she did, he thought, as if their passionate night had recharged her batteries. Was she some sort of sexual vampire, sucking the life energy out of him? But if that was happening, he'd have felt weak and drained that morning. In fact, once he woke up fully, he had felt bright and energised too. As if their passion had lit a fire in both of them.

But since then he hadn't seen her, and she hadn't answered any of his messages. Maybe it had been a last hurrah, a goodbye fling. He could have coped with that, but he'd have liked her to tell him.

Despite his reservations, caught up in the excitement of the others, he found himself picking dogs at random and putting down small bets.

When the races were finished he had lost some £40, and was considerably more drunk than when he had started. When the call went up to go on to another pub, he decided to go home. Wilder voices convinced him to join them. On the way he realised he was likely to be sick, and hung back from the group. After a few minutes the queasiness faded, and he realised he didn't know where they had gone. He just wanted to go home anyway.

There were Ubers in the area, but with a fifteen minute wait. His phone told him it would take half an hour to walk to Tooting, but that felt beyond him.

This had proved to be an expensive night, and he hadn't really enjoyed it very much, if he was honest with himself. His work colleagues were OK, but it wasn't like being at university, where there was always a stimulating conversation about politics or music or books. These people were more likely to talk about mortgages or the traffic on the A3.

Maybe he was to blame, though. He hadn't tried that hard to get to know anyone. How did you *try* that, though? At uni making friends had just kind of happened. Talk to people on your course, or in halls in first year, join a few clubs and societies: it was kinda laid on for us. Everyone in the same boat, all new, not knowing anyone. Well, except some of the

ex-public school guys: they already seemed to know each other and had formed their own cliques.

He always thought that was weird. He was glad he hadn't still been hanging out with people from school. Even the ones he'd got on with and would see when he was home. University was meant to be a break, a change, a new start. And it had been. He wished that some of his uni friends were with him now, though. He missed them. The ones who were in London now lived off on the other side of the city. North, West, East; and here he was stuck in the south.

Where was that fucking Uber? It was only nine o'clock, they shouldn't be busy. He wanted to be in bed, asleep. Good thing it's Saturday tomorrow. He'd have a good long lie, and then try to get in touch with Annie again. And if that didn't work, maybe see some of those elusive uni friends tomorrow evening.

His phone pinged: 'Your driver is arriving at the meeting point.' A smart-looking car hummed to a stop beside him. Electric. Or hybrid. Nice. He opened the door and fell into the back seat. 'Tooting, yeah?' the driver said.

'Thass the one,' Stewart said.

'I hope you're not gonna be sick.'

'I'm fine.' But his stomach was beginning to churn. 'Just get some fresh air.' He opened the window as the car pulled away.

A moment later he drowsily heard the driver saying, 'Hey! Wake up. We're here.'

He was just about coherent enough to recognise his street and stagger along to his house. Outside, he stopped to throw up into the gutter. Glad that wasn't in the car. Or in the house, for that matter.

Wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, he sat back against the wall of the narrow

front garden. He thought he could hear music from inside, so some of the others must be in. He didn't want them to see him like this.

Then again, they'd seen him drunk before. He had often been drunk since moving in here. Did he have a drink problem? Of course not, he thought. I always know when I've had enough. I just don't always choose to stop then.

'My god, you're in a state,' came a voice next to him. 'I might have to reconsider my decision.'

'A— Annie?' He seemed to be having trouble focusing. And believing that she was really there, suddenly, out of nowhere.

'Any special reason why you're standing out here? Have they kicked you out?'

'Wha? No. Jus... resting. Before going in.'

'Don't want to face them, eh? You should learn some concealment spells. Course they don't really work if the caster is inebriated, so...'

He had no idea what she was talking about. 'What are you doing here?'

'Well, I came to see you, of course. I was in the area. Stopped by on the off chance.'

In the area? At nine at night? Stewart couldn't concentrate his mind on why, but he knew this seemed unusual. 'You wanna come in, then?' He turned toward the house and started to fumble with his keys.

'No, I wanted you to come somewhere with me and help me. Fairly urgently.' She looked at her watch. 'But I don't think you're in a fit state to be any use.' Her voice turned to a mumble. 'Shit. Have to try tomorrow.'

Stewart had dropped his keys and was scrabbling around for them in the dark of the doorstep. 'Wha—' he stood up and turned round. There was no sign of Annie. 'Annie? What the fuck?' He stepped back onto the pavement and looked up and down the road. The orange

lights and parked cars marched off in both directions, fading into the early-November gloom. Nothing was moving. There was no one there.

#

In the morning, hungover, he stumbled to the shower. Had Annie really been there last night? Had he hallucinated her? Alcohol doesn't cause hallucinations, though, despite what certain elephant-based Disney films would make you think.

As the the hot water sprayed over him he tried to work out what had happened. Dream? No, it didn't feel like that. Had he blacked out, thought she had disappeared when in fact she had just walked away. Annie came and went according to her own needs and desires, of course, and without concerning herself overly with those of anyone else.

He was disappointed to have missed her, either way. Not just because of his needs and desires, but also because he wanted to talk to her about Malorie. That was such a strange story she had told them in the pub a couple of days ago, and yet he believed it completely.

He believed it because of the weird experiences he had had with Annie. Even if he ignored last night's seeming appearance and disappearance. The doorbell rang its annoying electronic tune as he was just about to start up the stairs. He answered, hair still damp, dressing gown, towel over his shoulder.

It was the postman. 'Too big for your letterbox, mate.' Stewart took the package from the man and mumbled thanks. 'Annie Sparks,' the address said, care of him, Stewart. Well at least I know her last name now.

Wait, he thought: did I really not know her last name until now? He couldn't tell whether he had know it and reading the from of the envelope had just popped it back into his head, or if he had really learned it in that moment.

A headache was starting to build behind his eyes, and he felt too queasy to tackle

breakfast. Today was going to be full of meetings, too. It didn't feel like the kind of day he wanted to face, but here he was, pulling on business-casual clothes and getting ready to go out.

The package for Annie — why had she had it sent here? — Was a large envelope, bigger than A4, but not a padded one. It felt like it held a book or stiff magazine. There was no return address.

He left it on his bed and went out. On the bus he texted her to say it had arrived. He almost asked if she had really been there last night, but doing so felt too — needy, maybe?

She probably wouldn't reply — she rarely did, except sometimes to say she was coming to see him. But he expected she would turn up tonight to collect her package. Unless she could manifest inside the house and get it while they were all out.

Now he was being ridiculous. Sure, she was weird — 'witchy', as Leon said, wasn't far wrong, though he'd had no suggestion that she was a practising Wiccan, or anything similar. The 'witchy' slur was more like the older meaning of the word. And yes, he had those strange experiences when he was with her. But he didn't believe in magic. Did he? That Constance had clearly believed in it when she visited him the other day. And what was *that* all about? And of course, Malorie's strange experience with Annie.

Life was getting confusing.

Not as confusing as the question of why he had taken his laptop out of his backpack last night. He peered into his backpack as the bus rolled towards Wimbledon, and had a flash of memory of the silvery rectangle propped against the wall next to his bed.

He got off the bus at the next stop and started walking back. He'd be late now, but he suspected a lot of people would be late, or not in at all, after last night's revels.

Only as he thought this did things fall into place and he realised — it was Saturday!

He looked at his phone again: Saturday 2nd November shone from the lock screen. Jesus fuck! How did I get to be this stupid? I could still be in bed.

At least there was no rush to get back home and out again. He wandered aimlessly along Tooting Broadway, glancing into closed shops that he hadn't really paid attention to before. 'The Black Candle' brought him to a halt. 'South London's finest spellcasting supplies,' it said. The front was decorated with images of five-pointed stars and goat-headed devils, but the window seemed to mainly hold candles. He was surprised it didn't have a shutter down. You'd think it would be vandalised by radical Christians. Though there probably weren't too many of those in Tooting. This is not Alabama, he thought.

The very next shop was a Christian bookshop. Wonder how that stays in business. Also: right next door? He stopped walking, stepped back, and looked at the two. Something made them seem somehow linked. More than just them being adjoining premises in a terrace. Was it possible they had the same proprietor? Peering in, up close to the glass, he thought he could see a door on the inside wall of the Christian shop that could only — surely? — lead into the other.

He stepped back to the first shop and tried to see the other side, but the inside was busy, crowded, with goods, and there seemed to be a veil drawn over the area in question. Stupid choice of word, Stewart: it's just a curtain.

Both shops were closed this early in the morning — it was still before eight. I'll have to come back and check some time. Maybe show Annie the witchy one. Would it be beneath her, full of fakery, while she knows real occult secrets? In the bright light of morning it was hard to believe such things. In the pub with Malorie the other day, though, it had all seemed to make sense. And then Annie appearing out of nowhere like that last night. And disappearing again.

No, he had been shockingly drunk, he had probably blacked out for a bit and not realised it. She had been there, though. He was sure about that. He didn't blame her for not wanting to stay with him. God, what a state.

Leaving the devil/god shop duet behind, he strolled on, feeling sicker, and turned up Vant Road. He could see all the way to the house, where Eswyn Road crossed this one, though there was a couple of hundred metres and a couple of side roads before he reached it. Parked cars, birdsong, not a sign of another person. It was so quiet at this time in the morning. How had he not realised it was the weekend?

Outside the house, Annie was standing.

No, wait, it was a trick of the light: there was no one there.

And then there was again: as he drew closer she shimmered into existence. That was how it seemed to him, the word that popped into his mind. The morning was unseasonably warm, and he wondered if there could be heat haze. But there was nothing like that.

There is only the light. And Annie.

Stewart stopped walking. He took a few steps back, away from the house. Then he thought to glance over his shoulder, in case he was backing into something or someone that had appeared behind him.

His head cleared slightly as he did so. Not from his hangover, but from whatever else had started to happen as he approached the house. He had been about to have one of those visions, hallucinations, psychic experiences — whatever they were, that had been the start of one, and he had managed to back away from it. Literally.

He had never thought of them as being location-based. Linked to Annie, yes: they happened when she was around. And yet... he thought back to the experience on the train in Docklands. Even to his experience in the pub on his first full day in London. Those were

before he even met Annie. At least once in his room without her there. Even a few hints of strangeness at work.

Those were all in different places, so if it was to do with place, it wasn't *just* place. And the most strong, most intense, most powerful experiences had been when Annie was there. Not exactly *with* her, since she seemed to ignore, gloss over, or deny the events. But her presence affected it. Them. Was it one experience repeated in different ways, or several — many — experiences?

How could he tell, and what did the difference even mean? He stood there on Vant Road, frozen, paralysed, scared to walk further towards his house in case he was overwhelmed, swept away. But with nowhere else to go.

Well... there was always the RediSnax.

#

Ten minutes later he was sitting in the greasy-spoon café that his housemates had introduced him to. On the table in front of him sat a bacon sandwich, a cup of weak coffee, and his phone; Annie's number on the screen. His thumb hovered over the green button. She probably wouldn't answer — she rarely did — and if she did, what was he going to say? 'Sorry to call so early on a weekend, but are you really a witch? Are you fucking with my mind? With my world? With *Malorie's* mind and world?'

His phone screen dimmed as he chewed on a mouthful of sandwich, the hot, salty, smoky taste of the bacon a comforting familiarity that he hoped would settle his stomach. Maybe he should tell her he wanted to stop seeing her. He didn't, though. Or he did, but he didn't want to stop having sex with her. The sex was great. Still, the confusion and — he had to acknowledge it, especially after this morning's experience — the fear that she sometimes engendered in him: was the sex worth that? Till now he had thought so.

The screen brightened again, filled with an image and a name: Annie. For a moment he was confused since the icons suggested an active call. Then it began to buzz, and he realised she was calling him.

Maybe you can summon someone's call if you think about them hard enough. Maybe if they're a witch, anyway. He answered.

'Hi, I was just going to call you. I—'

'Where are you?' Annie sounded more intense, worried — scared? — than he had ever heard. 'I came to see you. You're not at your house.' So he *had* seen her at the end of the street? Yet he hadn't really. Or... 'Stewart: I need your help. I need *you*.'

She had never expressed any need for him or anyone before. Had she ever even used his name before?

He hesitated before answering. Even at this strange juncture he was embarrassed to admit his confusion about the day. Why, though? Where was the shame? Or why feel it? 'I got up early. Came out for breakfast. I'm at the café. The RediSnax.'

'I'll be there in five minutes.' She hung up.

20: Wandering the Halls of Memory

‘Thanks folks, you’ve been great.’ Sarah stepped back from her microphone, lifted her guitar over her head, and set it on its stand. The audience were — not quite going wild, but definitely unusually appreciative of an unknown support band. She stepped back to the mikestand. ‘We’re called Tasty. Check out our Bandcamp.’

Ted and Rosie were both grinning broadly. ‘That was amazing,’ Rosie said.

They hugged, and walked off the stage. Sarah wondered if Constance was there. Her cousin wasn’t a big music fan, but she was very supportive. And protective, recently. She had tried to tell Sarah she shouldn’t even be playing this gig, shouldn’t make herself so publicly visible. Constance didn’t understand the near-invisibility of the struggling indie band.

In the insalubrious backstage area the headliners were getting ready to go on. Ted went to talk to their drummer, whose kit he had been sharing, while Sarah and Rosie looked for beer.

‘I think we might have got some new fans there,’ said Rosie.

‘Yeah. I definitely saw some unfamiliar faces.’

‘I think your cousin was there.’

‘Connie? Oh good, I was wondering if she’d come. Didn’t notice her myself.’

‘Hey, Sarah.’ A voice from behind her.

She turned, but it wasn’t Constance, as she had half expected. In the backstage gloom it took her a moment to recognise the woman who had spoken. ‘Unc— I mean, Annie? Hi...’

‘I need to talk to you.’ There was no smile, no request, simply her ‘need’.

‘OK...’ Sarah was wary. She had always found Annie to be odd — she understood the ‘Uncanny’ nickname intrinsically. And she knew there were bad feelings between Constance and the hanger-on, but she wasn’t quite sure why. Most of all she was cautious — scared, even — by the experience Malorie had had with Annie. Even if, as Malorie suspected, Annie had been as much a victim of it as she had. ‘I’m here. Talk.’ They were standing in a corridor. Two rooms that could barely be considered dressing rooms opened off it. More like storerooms that had been stocked with a few bits of furniture and a mirror. A toilet at one end, and the way to the stage at the other. People were coming and going, squeezing past with or without excusing themselves.

Sarah sighed. ‘Come in here.’ She didn’t really want to invite Annie into anything that felt even slightly like her private space, but it would be better than this. She led Annie into the tiny room where the members of Tasty had left their things while they were on stage.

Rosie was already there. ‘There you are. They’ve actually left us some beer. It’s not exactly chilled, though. She held out a can with a colourful picture of a robot on it. Then she saw Annie. ‘Oh. Who’s this?’

‘This is Annie. You’ve probably seen her around. On the scene, as they used to say.’ Sarah rolled her eyes at Rosie as she spoke.

Rosie nodded. ‘Hi. Help yourself to beer.’

‘Well, what can I do for you?’ Sarah asked, opening the can, then cursing as the

overstimulated beer frothed out. She quickly sucked up as much as she could from the top. Don't want to waste any.

'I want to know what you learned at the Church of Fire.'

'The church of — do you mean God's Thunder, or whatever it was called?' How could Annie know about that?

'That's what they're calling themselves this time: God's Thunder on the Mountain.' She scoffed. 'Church of Fire's what we call them generally.'

'We...?'

Annie shook her head. 'Those of us who have to deal with them. You've been there, met them. Tell me what you know.'

'I don't know anything. But how do *you* know I was there? I haven't told anyone except—' There was no way Constance had told Annie. Was there?

'I know things. Word gets around.' Annie suddenly looked and sounded much older. Sarah had always thought of her as a young hanger-on, someone who liked to be with bands, to be seen with them; who tried to get backstage. Possibly what they used to call a groupie, though she didn't think that was fair.

But this Annie was more like an experienced, world-weary traveller, who had gone too far and maybe wasn't ever going to come home. Sarah looked into her eyes and was scared by what she saw.

'Sarah, are you OK?' Rosie touched her on the shoulder, and she jumped.

'I, I, yes, I'm... fine.'

'You went so quiet for a minute.'

'Yeah. Just... thinking about how to answer.'

'No need,' said Annie. 'I can see you don't know anything.' She turned, and was

about to walk out of the dressing room.

‘Wait,’ Sarah said. Annie turned back. ‘Do you... are you working with these fire and thunder people or against them?’

Annie scoffed. ‘Against, of course.’

‘And what about my cousin? Constance?’

Annie rolled her eyes. ‘She’s an amateur. A half-baked Wiccan wannabe who thinks you can combat these types with herbs and incantations.’ Annie paused, perhaps remembering who she was talking to. ‘But she means well. And I’m not against her. Just... tangential to her.’

‘Jesus,’ Sarah said. ‘What’s that old saying about if you can’t say something nice about someone?’

‘I’m just giving you facts.’

‘And you come here asking me for help? And then slag off my cousin, right to my face?’

‘You aren’t able to help me.’

‘That’s not the fuckin point! Jesus, it’s no wonder people don’t like you. I should—’

‘There’s no need, Sarah.’ Constance had just walked in the door. ‘Annie’s just leaving.’

Interrupted mid-flow, Sarah stood with her mouth open. She had never seen her cousin look so fierce. The long black coat swirled around her as she stepped into the room. Annie also seemed to have lost the ability to speak, because she didn’t come back with a sarcastic remark. She just turned and left. The door swung shut behind her on its automatic closing device.

Constance turned to Sarah with a smile, her whole demeanour changing. ‘Great gig.

The crowd really loved it.'

'Thanks. I — I know. But — what was that?' Her eyes flicked toward the door.

'That was Annie. I know we don't like her, but she's still a "who", not a "what".'

Rosie's laugh broke the tension, and Sarah found herself laughing too. Constance looked pleased.

'She said she's on your side,' Sarah said, eventually. 'Or at least... not against you.'

'I know. She may be my enemy's enemy, but that doesn't mean we *have* to be friends.'

'Um... what is all this talk of enemies?' Rosie was leaning against the table, opening another beer. 'It sounds like you're in a movie or something. People don't really have enemies, do they?' She paused, then leaned forward, pretend-excited. 'Or is it gangs? Are you in a girl-gang? We always heard about them at school, but no one was really in one.'

Sarah rolled her eyes, but wondered what she could tell Rosie. 'It's not that, it's—'

'I am in a girl-gang,' Constance said at the same time. 'Kind of. It's just that my gang is tiny. And huge at the same time.'

'Uh...?' Rosie hadn't expected this answer. Neither had Sarah.

'It's a gang of one. *I'm* a gang of one, you could say. But my bigger gang — my allegiance, if you like — is all of humanity.'

Rosie started to laugh, then seemed to realise that Constance was serious. 'Uh, and, so... who's your enemy?'

'That's a complex question, and the answer isn't obvious, won't explain anything, will definitely terrify you, and may not even be right.'

'Connie,' Sarah said. Her cousin was being even weirder than usual, *and*, she feared, might be about to reveal things she normally wouldn't.

‘It’s OK, Sarah. Rosie’s one of us, I can tell that. You’ve known her since school.’

‘Sixth form, sure, but...’

‘I think we need to tell more people about this stuff. It’s been hidden for too long.

Occult for too long.’

‘Wait, the occult?’ said Rosie. ‘Black magic and shit?’

‘It’s a lot more colourful than that, generally. Monochrome magic is so Victorian.’

‘Connie knows some beings who’re very green,’ said Sarah. ‘In every sense, I’m guessing.’

‘Well not *know*, exactly, but — and anyway, you saw him too. I’ve *only* seen him with you. And why are we calling it “him”?’

‘You said it was the Green Man.’

‘I know, but that’s just a masculine manifestation. A patriarchal interpretation. We could also call it the Earth Mother. But I don’t think that kind of entity really has a sex.’

‘OK, before I start thinking about pagan goddesses having sex, interesting though that would be, would one of you tell me what the hell is going on? Because I thought you were joking at first, but now it doesn’t sound like it, and I’ve just realised that your new song is all about this, isn’t it?’ Rosie’s gaze was fierce.

‘Uh, yeah, kinda. I always put stuff that’s happening into my songs, you know? And this stuff has been happening...’ She suddenly felt ashamed. She shouldn’t hide her experiences from her friends. Especially when some of her friends were caught up in the same kind of events. She thought of Malorie, and how much she was hurting. I should have been more open with her, sooner, she thought. It might have helped.

‘OK,’ she went on. ‘Some weird shit has been happening to me. Or around me. Constance knows more about it, or understands more. She’s a —’ Sarah glanced at

Constance, who gave a slight nod. ‘— Magical investigator. She looks into weird shit. Occult stuff.’

‘But that’s not real! None of that stuff happens. It’s just films. Stories. And, like, people conning the vulnerable. Spiritualism and all that.’ Rosie’s head was swivelling between Sarah and Constance, seeking affirmation.

‘Yeah. I know. That’s what I always thought, too. Raised an atheist, learned the “truth” about magic early on, all that. Turns out maybe some of it is true. Or something is, anyway. I thought my weird witchy aunt was just... weird. Weird but lovely.’ She smiled at Constance.

‘That’s your mum?’ said Rosie. Constance nodded. ‘So it runs in the family?’

‘You could say that,’ Constance said. ‘My mum didn’t exactly teach me everything I know — she didn’t teach me anything about the darker stuff. But we have some ideas in common.’

‘Aunt Clarissa would be horrified if she knew how deep you’re into the dark stuff.’

‘Actually, I don’t think she would.’ Said Constance. ‘She’d be worried, but not horrified. Or even that surprised. I think she had to deal with some of this stuff when she was younger.’

‘She’s told you about this?’

‘No. But I’ve heard her referred to by... others.’ Constance looked away, into the distance. There was laughter outside the door of the dressing room as some people walked past. Sarah became aware of the distant rumble of the headliners starting a song.

‘We should go out and see Fireriver.’

‘Hang on,’ said Rosie, ‘you can’t stop there. I need to know more about this stuff.’

‘It might be better if you don’t know any more,’ said Constance. She pulled her coat

around her as if she was cold, though it was hot in the tiny room.

‘That’s not fair, Connie,’ said Sarah. ‘We’ve told her this much, we can’t leave her there. Though to be fair, I’m not sure *I* know much more.’

‘Annie seemed to think you know a lot. Something about a cult or a church or something.’

Sarah and Constance exchanged a glance. ‘Connie knows more about them. I was — briefly kidnapped by them.’

‘*What!*’ Rosie’s word was a shriek. ‘Sarah, are you OK? Have you been to the police?’

‘I’m fine. And no, I thought about going to the police, but... it would have been too difficult to explain.’

‘But what did they do? Did they hurt you? How did you get away?’

‘They were just looking for information.’ Sarah gave Rosie a quick outline of her experience at God’s Thunder on the Mountain and afterwards. Rosie looked increasingly horrified as she went on.

‘So they *hypnotised* you? *Mind-controlled* you? You’ve got to go to the police!’

‘The police wouldn’t’—‘

‘It’s not exactly like that—‘ Constance and Sarah both spoke at once. ‘It isn’t so much control,’ Constance went on, ‘as suggestion. Sarah ended up at home, going for a run on her usual route. They couldn’t have made her jump into the river, say.’

‘Being able to make her do anything is horrible! It’s such a violation.’

Sarah realised she hadn’t thought about it in those terms. Hadn’t even seriously thought about going to the police. These kinds of experience — the ones she’d been having since Constance came back into her life — weren’t normal things. It wasn’t like she had been

mugged, or assaulted. Well, it was an assault, Rosie was right. But how could she report it to the police?

‘I know, but do you think the police would believe me? Would be able to do anything about it if they did?’

‘I don’t know what to think. I don’t know what to think about anything any more. This isn’t a joke, is it? You’re not setting me up for a punchline?’

‘God, no, I wouldn’t do something like that.’

‘Who’s being set up for a punchline? The door opened and Ted walked in. He immediately stopped. ‘Bit crowded in here. Oh, hi.’ This to Constance.

‘Yeah, we should get our things and go out. See a bit of Fireriver.’ Sarah caught Constance’s eye and made for the door.

‘Wait!’ said Rosie. Sarah stopped and looked at her. ‘I’m coming too. Sorry, Ted, we’re not leaving just because you arrived.’

‘I’m not offended in the least,’ said Ted, reaching for a can of beer.

Sarah and the others walked down the corridor. The loud music became less and less muffled as they approached the stage. As they reached it the headliners’ guitarist went into a squealing solo. Sarah plowed on, past the stage, onto the dance floor and over towards the bar. She stopped, and the others stopped around her. ‘God, I hate music like that,’ she shouted over the sound. ‘Let’s go outside.’

‘I thought you liked them,’ Rosie said when they were out in the early-evening cool.

‘So did I, but I can’t stand that kind of soloing.’

Constance was scanning the street and surrounding buildings, alert.

‘Are you expecting someone?’ Sarah said with a raised eyebrow.

Constance caught her eye, serious, even worried. ‘No. It’s... a feeling. A sensation.

Something in the air.'

'It's just ganja,' said Rosie, nodding at the small group of people smoking near the venue's entrance.

'I don't think that's it.' Constance, unsmiling. 'But it might be the music.' Her gaze jumped between the two of them, back to the road, all around. 'I hadn't made the connection before — stupid of me. It's drawn to music. And it has a connection to you. And your friends in Tooting. You're all musicians. But there are lots of musicians. Why you?'

'What is?' said Rosie. 'What's drawn to Sarah? And... the Raiders?'

'I wish I knew. Then I might have a chance of stopping it. Or helping it. Whatever is needed. I can't even get a handle on that.'

'You said it was the Green Man,' said Sarah. 'You said that was good.'

'The Green Man appeared. Or manifested. But it's not what is causing this. I'm fairly sure. It might be working against it. Or maybe it's just been woken by it.'

'Will someone please tell me what "it" is? Is it this cult you were talking about?'

Rosie shook her head in confusion.

'No, the cult are trying to help it, or communicate with it. A dangerous game. But the thing itself is something much older, much vaster, and — oh.' Constance was looking up at the night sky. 'It can do things like that.'

Overhead, the grey of the clouds, orange-tinted by the city's sodium lights, was being parted by a crack. It looked to Sarah like a crack in the sky. Maybe a crack in reality itself. A song lyric popped into her mind, about that being how the light gets in. But this crack opened on darkness that was darker than the night sky, darker than any sky she had ever seen.

And the darkness was shining down on them. *At* them.

At her.

#

She is floating in space. In no-space, in no-place. Nothing is around her while everything is.

The darkness is upon her.

Inside her.

Why me?

Why. Me.

And an answer comes. Or she thinks it does.

You are one of the chiming ones.

But her thoughts turn — are turned, she has no volition — and she is in her own past.

Bad memories flood through her. Mum and dad fighting. Her dad leaving. A school playground, her classmates around her, pointing and laughing, while tears stream down her face. Her lunch, spilled out of its box, scattered on the ground.

Rejection by the first girl she had a crush on. Trying to kiss her, being pushed away. She badly misread the signals.

The chatter around the school after that.

Wandering the halls of memory, opening doors, gazing into rooms. Only those that contain unpleasantness. That hold the cringe factor.

Memories flood in. Some she didn't know she still had. She didn't remember remembering them.

None is so very traumatic on its own — she has had an easy life compared to many, she knows — but the accumulation is overwhelming. She struggles. Fights the compulsion.

Tries to remember pleasant things instead. Birthdays. Friends who didn't taunt her. The kiss of her first girlfriend.

She knows she had these memories, but she can't find them, can't reach them. They

are in a different corridor of the memory building, and she doesn't know the way there.

Still, the memory of happy memories is enough. The pressure of the cringe-bringing ones decreases.

A recent happy memory floats into view: playing music, playing on stage, and the approval of the crowd. She tries to reach it, but the cringe-bringer jumps, forces her back to the fire thunder church. Her paralysis, spewing everything out to the woman, and the knowledge that she is letting Constance down.

She fights back with happy memories of her cousin, playing together when they were young, and her recent return. Running by the river. The Green Man's appearance.

The Cringemaker pulls back, and Constance is there with her. Her voice, at least.

'Sarah. Sarah. Come back, Sarah.'

'Where are you? I can't see you.'

'Come towards me. Follow my voice.'

She tries to. She tries so hard. But Constance fades, denying her name.

'Connie! Where are you?'

And now the darkness is back. A relief from the memories, but a plunge into fear after the tantalising glimpse of escape through her cousin's voice.

21: Coming to a Show With Her

She had struggled back to work. Her first few days at Sarah's were sick leave. Mental health issues, she had told her boss. Harriet's words had been sympathetic, but there was a hardness in her tone that sounded callous to Malorie. It wasn't as if she had been lying: she did have mental health issues, and her recent experience had been deeply traumatic. It was just that she couldn't explain it to anyone, and she thought Harriet had known she was hiding something.

But weren't you allowed to keep details like that private from your employer? Not that details like that were mentioned in any staff handbook. She smiled at the thought: *Staff are required to make known to management any and all mystic experiences, psychic intrusions, and ghostly assaults. Any staff who do not report such events may be subject to disciplinary proceedings.*

'Is there something funny about my credit card?' The man in front of her sounded American and looked angry.

'Oh! No. Sorry. I was just... thinking about something else.' She took the man's payment and returned his memorabilia in a paper bag with the gallery's logo on it. 'Have a nice day sir!' she called after his retreating back.

There was a lull in the flow of customers, and Malorie took a break. Outside, she looked out over the Thames. The beach down there where she had heard Annie in her mind. What had she said? *Just hang on, it'll be OK*. Something like that, anyway. She hadn't seemed malicious at all, more concerned. And then the thing back in Tooting. Had the one caused the other? Or made the two of them more susceptible to it at least? Now that she knew things like that were possible, she could think about them. But doing so still freaked her out. She wanted to run screaming, get away to a world where things like that didn't happen.

But that was not the world she lived in.

The one good thing about it all was that Sarah had convinced her that it wasn't all in her mind. There really was some weird shit happening. That was terrifying and comforting at the same time. If something's *out there*, then at least it isn't *in here*. Or at least, not *only* in here. The out there thing — or things — were a different kind of scary. Was she under attack, or just a bystander, just collateral damage in some psychic war? Which of the two would be worse?

In the end they'd both be just as bad, but not as bad — maybe not, anyway, Malorie thought — as her own brain turning against her.

A boat slushed past on the river, and hooted. Uber River Taxis? Do they deliver food by boat as well? The waves from its wake washed over the ancient stones on the beach. A figure down there bent, picked something up, moved on. Malorie sighed and turned away.

Her mum had loved an old punk song with a line about the Soho river. It was drinking you down, supposedly. City of the Dead? Was that really what it was called? The title seemed worryingly relevant to her current train of thought. What was the Soho river, though? Soho was a mile north of the Thames, and there were no other rivers around there, were there?

Metaphor, maybe: the river of humanity, of people flowing through Soho, the singer

losing himself in it as the city died.

Anyway, this thing was drinking her thoughts down, that was for sure. It was time to focus on something else.

A wind blew litter around her ankles as she walked back to the gallery. It held a chill. Autumn was turning with the leaves.

What would winter bring?

#

Three hours later she was back at Sarah's and wondering whether to go out. Tasty were playing locally, in Hackney, and she would normally have tried to go along to see them. But somehow she couldn't face going out, and there was always the possibility that some of her own bandmates and housemates might turn up. She couldn't face meeting any any of them just now. Especially Freddy. What if she went, and he was there?

Sarah was fine about her staying, of course. — *Don't worry about it, babe. You'll see us lots more times* 🤔

Another hour later, though, after she had made herself some pasta and watched half an episode of a terrible reality TV show, she realised that she not only should be at the gig, she wanted to be there. Who cares if anyone else was there? Even Freddy. Fuck em.

She pulled on a jacket and headed out.

Tasty were halfway through playing when she arrived. The room was busy — unusually so for a support band — and she couldn't see if anyone she knew was there. She hung out on her own towards the back, enjoying the unusual sensation of watching her friends as just a punter. They didn't know she was there, so they wouldn't judge her judgement of them. Wouldn't react to her reaction. Not that they did really, but it was always in the back of her mind when she watched friends perform: am I being enthusiastic enough?

Will they think I don't care, if I'm not jumping about and shouting?

Just her anxiety's way of coming to a show with her.

Tasty finished their set to a surprisingly positive response. Not undeserved, though, Malorie thought: they were really on form tonight. She thought about going backstage to say hello, but there was a big security guy on the door and she didn't fancy trying to sweet-talk her way past him. She could text Sarah and get her to come out and let her in, but she didn't want to bother her.

I'll see her soon enough when she comes out front.

She went to the bar and got a drink after a long wait. Only one guy tried to grope her in the crush, which seemed like a plus. She stood near the mixing desk. She always found it interesting to see what the sound people were doing. She knew in principle what they did and how, but she had never worked on that side of the desk, so often wondered how much of it was down to watching the meters, and how much just to listening to how the performers sounded.

How could you mix for a band whose music you didn't like? People like the guy here, employed by the venue, must have to do that all the time.

The headliners were a couple of songs into their set — Malorie didn't think that much of them — when someone came out from backstage. To her shock, she realised it was Annie.

Malorie's world wobbled. I can't be seen by her. Got to hide. She dropped down behind the low wall that surrounded the mixing desk area. Sat on the sticky floor with her back to the wall and closed her eyes. The memory of her mind joining Annie's, bonding with her, horrified her. What if Annie came over this way? What if she sees me?

Malorie put her head between her knees and her arms over her head, the childhood instinct to hide overwhelming her.

She didn't know how long she sat that way, her thoughts swirling, anxiety swelling, the music thundering from the stage. Then someone said, 'Hey. You OK?'

She uncovered her head and looked up. A young woman was squatting down next to her, face concerned. Studs glinted in her nose and lip. Beyond her stood other figures, drinks in hands.

'I'm — yes. Yes, I'm OK. Thanks. I was just — hiding from someone.'

The other woman rolled her eyes. 'I get that. Has he gone now?' Malorie was scrambling to her feet, looking round, and the woman rose with her.

'He? Oh...' there was no sign of Annie. 'Yes, the coast's clear.' Looking toward the exit she realised Sarah was on her way out, along with Rosie and, to her surprise, Constance. 'I see my friends. Got to go. Thanks!' she said to the concerned woman, and made her way after them.

Outside she pushed through the crowd of smokers. 'Hey, join us in a spliff, sister,' someone said as she passed. She shook her head and cast about for Sarah and the others. They hadn't been carrying their equipment so she doubted that they had left already.

Later, it would always seem like she noticed three things at once.

Across the road Sarah was staring up at the sky; something was strange about the way she was standing. Constance and Rosie stood close, looking at her.

On a traffic island not far away, Annie stood watching the group.

The sky over Hackney was the colour of a vinyl record, and there was a crack running across it that would ruin any record ever made. The crack watched over everything.

She crossed the road looking up at the sky, oblivious to traffic. A car hooted at her.

'Come towards my voice,' Constance was saying as she reached the group around Sarah.

‘What’s happening?’ Malorie asked. None of the others responded. Sarah’s face was turned toward the sky and her eyes were closed. Malorie grabbed Rosie’s arm. ‘What’s going on? What’s wrong with Sarah?’

Rosie jumped, pulled her arm away, and turned as if to defend herself. Then she recognised Malorie. ‘Malorie! I didn’t know you were here. I don’t know what’s wrong. It’s something to do with that.’ She indicated the sky, where the crack was changing its shape, yet stayed the same.

‘What is that? And how can it be affecting Sarah?’ Rosie just shook her head. Malorie turned to the others. ‘Constance! What’s going on? What’s wrong with Sarah?’

Constance’s eyes flicked towards Malorie then returned to Sarah. ‘Good,’ she said. ‘You can help. She can use a friendly voice. Help me call her.’

‘Hey,’ Rosie said, ‘I’m a friendly voice too. I could help you.’ Constance ignored her, reached out for Malorie and grabbed her lapel. She pulled her close to Sarah.

‘Speak to her. Tell her to come towards your voice.’

Feeling stupid, as if she was acting in a bad horror movie, Malorie spoke. Her throat closed up and she cleared it. ‘Sar — Sarah! It’s me, Malorie. What’s happening? Can you come back. Come towards my voice.’

A speeding car slowed down on the road and a drunk-sounding man shouted something sexist at them.

Sarah’s head swivelled toward Malorie. The crack in the sky widened, though how Malorie knew that, she couldn’t have said. Sarah’s eyes opened, and she spoke.

But her eyes were glowing yellow and squirming as if there were bugs behind them. And the voice she spoke with wasn’t hers.

‘Malorie. My darling. I’ve been waiting for you.’ The yellow light flowed out of

Sarah's eyes and Malorie was swept away.

22: That Counts for a Lot

‘If you hadn’t been so drunk you could have been there. You could have helped me. We might have been able to save your housemate.’

‘Save who from what? I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ The sick feeling in Stewart’s stomach wasn’t just because of the hangover, or the bacon sandwich he had put on top of it. Annie had arrived at the greasy spoon even more quickly than she had said, and had immediately started berating him about how drunk he had been last night. But somehow she had segued into something about someone being in danger.

She sighed and started again. Stewart thought that he had never seen her this intense, this concerned, this — scared? Was she scared? ‘Your housemate, Malorie. Last night she got into some difficulty with — an entity that I’m not sure about. In fact she saved Sarah from it, but only by diverting it to herself. That Constance was there, but she wasn’t able to do anything. And I would have been able to intervene...

‘But I needed *you*. And you weren’t available.’

‘I—’ Stewart stopped. Uppermost in his mind was the thought that she had said she needed him. She had never said anything like that before. Never expressed any kind of need

or vulnerability. And here she was baring herself in front of him.

But wait. His hangover-befuddled brain tried to bring Annie's angry story into focus. This wasn't about him. Or about her needs. It wasn't that kind of need anyway.

'What's happened to Malorie? And what do you mean, "an entity"?''

Annie stared at him with something that he thought might be pity, but she was as hard to read as ever. After a long pause she said, 'You must be aware that some weird shit has been happening over the last few months. And I don't just mean me getting with you.' Stewart opened his mouth to reply, but Annie steamrolled on. 'Of course you are. It's not your imagination, or just normal for London and somehow no one had heard about it up north.'

'I didn't—'

'Shit's real, and *getting* real. There's forces afoot in the world — magic, if you want to call it that — and it means us harm. Humans generally, but especially you and your little band of music-making friends. That's why I wanted to get close to you — to them. One of the reasons anyway.'

'I know there's been some weird stuff, but what about—'

'Last night it — woke up? Came to a head? Revealed itself? Even I don't know what to call it, but it attacked your friends, up in Hackney. It went after Sarah first, nearly consumed her, and when Malorie stepped in it turned its attention on her.'

'So is she—'

'I don't know if she's dead or what. I don't know where she is. The entity had her under its control. I decided to get your help. You were incoherent. Before I could get back I felt — a change. Malorie is gone.'

'She disappeared? Have you called the police, or...'

Even saying this, Stewart realised it sounded pathetic. His mind swirled with questions, but he struggled to express any of them

in ways that Annie would be likely to answer. He squeezed them all down for now and tried to turn to the practical. 'What can we do to help her? What can *I* do?'

Annie nodded and almost smiled. 'Good. That's a more useful reaction. Time for questions later. Let's go.' She stood up and made for the door. Stewart followed.

'Hey! You haven't paid.' The old Turkish man who ran the cafe was waving a tea towel at him from behind the counter.

'Shit, I'm sorry.' Stewart aimed the apology both at the cafe owner and at Annie.

Annie stood tapping her foot on the pavement outside while he paid. 'Would it help if I said "Time is of the essence"?' she said as he joined her.

'Sorry. Don't want to get us banned from the RediSnax, though. It's Malorie's favourite.'

#

Moments later they were walking up the road towards Tooting Broadway station. Annie set a quick pace and Stewart, burdened with his laptop bag and hangover, struggled to keep up.

'Where are we going? And what are we going to do when we get there?' he panted.

'Just stay close. We have to get to Hackney.'

'Isn't that in East London? Going to be a long Tube journey.' The concrete blocks forming the wall of the Tube station loomed over them.

'We're not taking the Tube.' She led him past the station and across the main road.

'Have you got a car?' She had never mentioned one. They turned into a side street, walked for a few minutes, then turned again. The sounds of the main road died behind them. He thought they were getting close to his house. There was no one around.

Annie stopped suddenly outside a house with large palms in its front garden. The garden was only a couple of metres deep, and the palms towered above the window. Must be

dark in there. Stewart thought.

‘This’ll do,’ said Annie. ‘Take my hand. And stay close. I’m going to try something I’ve never been very comfortable with. Not on my own, and especially not with two.’ She looked him up and down, as if measuring him, or judging him. ‘But I need you. And you’ll do.’

‘Wh— why do you need me?’ It felt like the wrong question, but he had to ask.

She looked him over again. ‘Male energy. I’ve got plenty of the other kind, but this fight will need both. And you... well, you’re the guy I fucked most recently. That counts for a lot in this kind of magic. Now: get close.’ She pulled him alongside her. ‘We just need to take a step. This is going to be a bit disorientating for you.’

With her free hand she gestured, describing curves in the air. At the same time she mumbled something that Stewart couldn’t catch. It didn’t sound like English, yet at the same time it seemed weirdly familiar.

‘OK, now, step forward.’

They both took a step, and night fell.

#

Stewart felt as if every cell in his body had been twisted through ninety degrees. Nausea flooded him. His head throbbed with pain, and so did all his joints.

He doubled over and threw up his breakfast, without a chance to even think about where his vomit would land.

Beside him Annie was going through a similar level of discomfort, though without the ejecta. As he became aware of his surroundings he realised some people were passing, looking disgusted. They were standing on a London street, but not the one they had been on a moment before. And it was night time.

‘What...’ his voice caught in his throat and he couldn’t speak for coughing for a minute. ‘What have you done to me? Where the fuck are we?’

‘Hackney,’ said Annie, recovering herself slightly better than Stewart. ‘And I’ve brought you here.’ She looked around,. In the orangey glow of the streetlights Stewart thought she looked worried. Or maybe scared. ‘More importantly, I’ve brought you *now*. That’s what made the transition so painful. Moving through space is easy. Relatively, at least. Through time is much, much harder. Some say it’s because the ley lines don’t connect that way, but I think that’s nonsense.’

Stewart’s mind was jumping ahead, or maybe behind. Had she really brought them through time? It was obviously night now, when it had been the morning a few minutes ago to him. He tried to imagine how she might have done it. Drug him, somehow move him here, keep him unconscious, and then have him wake up now? But he felt he had continuously experienced everything. Surely he would remember having blacked out, fallen over? And when he became aware of here, he had been standing up.

Plus he still had the hangover. Eight or ten hours of sleep — even drugged sleep — would surely have changed that. He felt slightly better, but that was mainly because of emptying his stomach. He also felt weak and in pain. The joint pain, the sense of everything twisting, had receded, but the headache had intensified. That felt mostly like his hangover, for sure.

He decided to believe the evidence of his senses: they had travelled in time. ‘So when have we travelled to?’ Though he had a suspicion he knew the answer.

‘Last night, of course. Before Malorie was taken.’ She hesitated. ‘If I’ve got it right, of course.’

‘OK. I see. Well, I think I do. Are we going to try to save her? Won’t that mess up the

timeline? Space/time vortex, all that?’

‘Not if it works. If it works, it worked. You’ve been watching too much *Doctor Who*.’

‘And if it doesn’t work?’

‘Then I don’t think we’ll care about fixed points in time.’ She smiled. ‘Because *we* won’t be fixed in time anymore, you know?’

‘Yes, I get the implied threat. So where’s Malorie, and what do we have to do?’

Annie became serious again. ‘First and foremost, we need to avoid being seen by me. I don’t remember seeing myself, or you, so we need to make sure I don’t. I think that really *would* cause a paradox, and I have no idea what the effects might be. What time is it?’

Stewart pulled his phone out of his pocket, to see the familiar white Apple logo on a black screen. ‘Looks like it’s restarting. Probably as messed up by time travel as me.’

Annie was looking at her phone too, which also showed a logo in the centre of the screen, but not one that Stewart recognised.

Eventually his phone reached the familiar lock screen with the time: 22:17.

‘Excellent, got us exactly when I wanted,’ said Annie. ‘More or less, anyway. Now, we head for the venue, but get ready to duck out of sight.’

They were on a bus route, not too busy with cars. ‘We could have got here the conventional way, then.’

‘Well yes, but not *when*. The venue’s just round the corner, so watch out for them coming out.’

‘Them being...?’

‘I thought I said. Sarah and her band. And then Malorie after that.’

‘So are we going to try to stop Malorie, or what?’

‘Can’t do that. We’ve got to wait till I leave, and then take over from me. And I’ll

need you to be sharp, so don't start asking dumb questions about that.'

Stewart bit down on the questions he was about to ask, thought about what Annie had said, and realised what she meant. 'So we've got to avoid being seen by you. And is there something, a moment, an action, so we'll know when you're about to leave?'

'I'll know, don't worry about that. And it's not like we have to slip into that exact instant, or anything. The hardest thing will be avoiding me seeing us, because I'm going to be facing down the road in this direction.'

'Can we go round a different way?'

She looked at her phone again. 'There isn't time.'

23: Her Face on Them

‘Malorie! Malorie! No, don’t! Stay away...’

Somewhere in the depths of her cringe-inducing nightmare, after Connie’s voice had got lost, she realises Malorie is with her. Or not quite with her, but nearby, and getting closer.

Getting too close. Malorie was going to be pulled in with her, and Sarah knows it will be too much for her. She, Sarah, can barely cope, and Malorie isn’t strong.

But then she is there. Somehow in the darkness she knows her friend is there.

‘Malorie...’

‘Sarah? Where are you? Where are *we*?’ Malorie sounds so much more positive, definite, than Sarah expects. Stronger than Sarah feels.

‘I don’t know. I can’t see you.’ Sarah feels bodiless, yet at the same time bodily exhausted. How long has she been in here? ‘How long... what time was it when you... where were you, anyway?’

‘Outside the venue. I came to the gig. Caught the last few songs. You were really good.’

Yes, they had been good, Sarah remembers. Happy memories, that was the thing. ‘Try

to hang on to that,' she says. 'It might not let you.' The darkness has cleared a little, but still not enough to see anything.

'What might not?'

'The — whatever it is. The Cringemaker.' Sarah was embarrassed even to express the name she had come up with. 'It goes for your most embarrassing, painful memories, but you can hold it off with good ones. If you can remember them.' Sarah tries to move towards where Malorie's voice seems to be coming from, but she's not sure there are directions here.

'I don't understand, I haven't—' but Malorie is interrupted by another voice, one that feels like it belongs here; like it *is* here, is made of the same non-stuff as this non-place. Hearing it gives Sarah a bodiless shudder.

'Malorie hasn't yet felt the full force of my... investigations,' it says in a voice like silk falling into an industrial shredder. 'But she soon will. If luck goes that way.'

'Who are you?' Malorie sounds defiant. Sarah feels worn down, too weak to defy.

'What are you?'

The voice laughs, or gives the sense that it is laughing. Maybe the fabric of the place changes to suggest laughter. 'Next, "Where are you?"? I am all around you. I am everything. I am all that there is. You will stay with me now. Forever.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Malorie says. 'Of course you're not all that there is. You're just some kind of... intruder, an interloper.' What is this strong Malorie, Sarah wonders, feeling as if she was crumpled on the floor. Malorie was mentally weak; she had come to Sarah for help. Run away from her problems with Freddie.

No.

What are these thoughts? That's not what she feels about Malorie at all. It must be this place, the being that had them trapped. It was making her think like that. Was it even safe

to think at all? Were her thoughts no longer private?

The thought that something else might be privy to her thoughts terrifies her, but more, it horrifies her. It makes her more desperate to escape.

More determined. She pulls herself to her feet. Or that's how she thinks of it. She doesn't seem to have any feet, and there isn't any ground to stand on. Yet she can feel herself pull herself up.

'She's... right,' Sarah manages to say, and feels the entity's attention turn to her again as she does, which makes her want to cringe again. But feels Malorie's attention turn to her too, and that feels good. 'You're not everything. You're hardly anything. There are lots of things in the world' With a bravado she doesn't feel, she starts to list them. 'Like music. Playing gigs. And friends. Friendship.'

'Love. London. Lager.' Malorie joins in. 'And that's just a few Ls for you. Laughter. Comedy. Jokes.'

Sarah feels stronger with every word. 'Movies. Books. Family.' She thinks of Constance, wonders if she's still trying to reach them.

The voice makes the feeling of laughter again, though it seems weaker now. 'Your cousin cannot help you,' it says, like glaciers moving over lava. 'And soon I'll have her.' The voice seems to increase in enthusiasm as it says this, Sarah thinks. Is Constance its real target? But it goes on. 'And the other one that tries to thwart me.' Sarah thinks she knows who it means, but doesn't want to give it any information by asking. 'You witches have resisted me since time began. But no longer. After this night, all the witches will be gone, and I shall be triumphant.'

'Oh my god,' says Malorie, 'I get it now: you're the personification of all B-movie villains. Next you'll tell us your plan to take over the world.'

But Sarah thinks, witches? Is that what this is all about? The ancient struggle between male power and female, with women always being done down, always treated as second-class, if that. Wise women with their healing knowledge, hanged or burned because men were scared of them. If this cringe-inducing creature were some sort of male principle, a force of masculinity, then they might just be the ones to stop it. Maybe the whole world could be improved if they defeated this thing.

She and Malorie — and Constance, on the outside, who must still be trying to reach them, and Annie, if she was still around — they represented the female principle. Was that a thing in magic? She remembers hearing the expression, but she doesn't know, and she wishes she had paid more attention to Constance talking about it over the last couple of months. The main thing she remembers Connie telling her is that most of the ideas people have about magic are wrong. Connie didn't even really like calling it magic, but she didn't have a better word for it. Or not one she could settle on.

Sarah tries to bring her thoughts back to the problem at hand: that she doesn't seem to have any body, even though she still feels as if she does. And she can't see Malorie, or really anything else, just a slightly-lightened darkness that somehow tells her she isn't blind.

The voice returns, redoubled in strength, Sarah thinks. 'I have no need to tell you my plans or even to have them. All I need is to have you.'

The darkness starts to clear, like the lights coming up in a cinema. Something is appearing in front of her. And beyond it, she sees—

'Malorie!'

'Sarah!' They speak at the same time.

She can see Malorie struggling, trying to move towards her, and she realises she is doing the same. But neither of them can do more than twist in place, or writhe piteously. At

least they have bodies again. Or do they? Are these their real bodies, or is this all an illusion happening somehow inside the being, the entity, the... force of nature? that has them trapped here.

Malorie seems to be about ten metres away, and in-between them, under the increasing light, something that fills the space is fading into being. Something round. Red and black dot its circumference, and a golden cross lies above it.

She recognises it, with a sinking heart.

‘Oh shit,’ she hears Malorie say.

‘And so we reach our endgame.’ Still the voice feels more like words formed out of the stuff of the place around them, rather than like sound. ‘One spin. One soul. One free, one stays.’

‘You cannot be serious,’ Sarah says.

‘Why?’ Malorie says. ‘Why are you doing this?’ And Sarah thinks she hears a note of pleading coming into her friend’s voice; a note the wasn’t there before, when she had sounded so strong. Maybe displaying that strength had taken everything she had had.

‘And what do you plan to do with the one that stays?’ Now Sarah is trying to sound strong, stronger than she feels.

‘You’ll find out. Or you’ll never know.’

Sarah tries to recreate the feeling she had when Constance managed to speak to her. A few minutes ago, or was it hours? Could be days. There was no time here. Or all the time happening at once. Something was strange about duration, anyway.

If she can capture that feeling, maybe she’ll be able to contact Connie. If time is the same here as there, and Connie is still trying to reach her. Maybe years have passed and everyone has given up on finding her, bringing her back.

‘The spin begins.’ The roulette wheel begins to rotate, its colours blurring together into a muddy brown. Suddenly a silver ball sweeps into the space around the numbers, projected in the opposite direction to the spin by an unseen hand.

‘This is an illusion,’ Malorie says. ‘A hallucination.’

‘Maybe so,’ says the Cringemaker, with mirth in its voice, ‘but saying so won’t stop it. And maybe not. And even if it’s all in your mind, it won’t be once the ball stops.’

What could it mean, Sarah wonders, even as the ball loses its own momentum and drops into the spinning numbers.

It skitters about among them for a time, clattering, jumping, and gradually, slowly, the whole affair begins to slow. The ball clatters over a few last sockets, then stops in one. How is it — the creature, the entity that is holding them here — how is going to play this, she wonders.

The ball is in a black socket, and as the wheel comes to a halt she realises: all the red sockets have her face on them. All the black ones, Malorie’s. ‘No...’ she breathes.

‘What does that mean...?’ Malorie’s hesitant voice. Sarah realises it could mean Malorie is to be freed. But she doubts it. And a confused, twisted, questioning part of her wonders what would have happened if the ball had ended up in the lone green socket, the number zero on a conventional wheel. But she also knows this wheel isn’t fair. The entity wanted Malorie, and that’s the way it was always going to end up.

‘It’s your lucky day, Ms Albuquerque.’ The voice is like tearing silk again, and she feels herself start to fall, feels the space around her start to collapse, to fade.

‘No! Take me. Let Malorie go!’ But she has gone, into darkness again.

24: Nowhere

The roulette wheel fades. Malorie is nowhere.

25: All Too Clearly

Stewart had had the weird experience of seeing Annie further up the road, while being intensely aware of Annie walking next to him. They paused and Annie pulled him into a shop doorway. He peeked out, trying to see what was happening. Sarah and some others were standing on the far pavement, and he caught sight of Malorie crossing the road towards them. The earlier Annie was standing on a traffic island watching them. A car hooted and somebody shouted.

‘Stay back,’ said Annie, tugging at his sleeve. ‘I’ll know when it’s safe.’

‘How?’

‘I’ll feel her go.’

‘Won’t she feel you, then?’

‘Her attention is elsewhere. Mine is all on this. And no, I didn’t notice anything. Because of that.’ She pointed upward. Stewart looked up. The ceiling of the shop doorway was grubby above them. He raised an eyebrow at Annie, and she changed the angle of her pointing finger. ‘Out there.’

Bending down slightly to look up past the overhang of the doorway, Stewart could see

the night sky above the city. ‘What... the... *fuck* is that?’

‘That, my dear, is what this is all about. It’s why I’m here, why... now.’ Stewart heard the slight hesitation before the last word, and sensed that Annie meant something more than ‘here, in Hackney, tonight.’ But before he had time to ask about it, she went on. ‘I suppose you’d call it a manifestation. Of what, I’m not quite sure, but it’s the thing that’s been causing all these weird dreams and hallucinations for the last few months. I think it’s been gathering strength, until now it’s able to appear more physically. See if she’s still there.’

‘Huh? Oh,’ Stewart was momentarily thrown by this peremptory command but then he eased his head round the corner of the doorway. Along the road the little group of people still stood looking up at the sky or at each other. Beyond them he could see the figure of the other Annie, the one earlier in time — and the strangeness of that struck him again, as he watched her turn away from the group. ‘Looks like you’re leaving — oh!’ The other Annie had appeared to wink out of existence. ‘She’s gone. But...’

‘Yeah, I felt that. Those shifts are distinctive if you’ve got your senses out. Come on.’ She pushed past him, stepped out of the doorway, and strode up the the road toward the group.

‘What’s happening?’ said Stewart, as they arrived at the cluster of figures. Sarah and Malorie stood facing each other, blank-eyed, unmoving. The others — Stewart recognised the bassist from Sarah’s band, but didn’t know her name, and Constance, who had visited him in Tooting. Her eyes flicked towards him as he spoke, and back to the two frozen women. Then she glanced around more definitely, and her expression changed. Annoyance, on top of the worry she was already showing. Not directed at Stewart, he realised, but at his companion.

‘Well since you’re here,’ said Constance, you’d better do what you can to help. I’m trying to—‘

‘I intend to do more than help,’ said Annie. ‘You’re obviously achieving nothing.’

Constance looked about to reply, but Stewart could almost hear her thoughts: now’s not the time to get into this fight. There are more important things.

‘What’s happened to them?’ he said, turning to Sarah and Malorie’s still figures. People walked past the small group, some making comments about them blocking the pavement. None glanced up to see the boiling crack in the sky overhead.

‘I’m trying to reach them,’ Constance said. ‘Well, Sarah. I’ve got a connection with her, and she was taken first. Has anyone here got a special connection with Malorie?’

‘He does,’ Annie said, nodding at Stewart.

‘We’re just housemates,’ he said. He looked around. ‘Maybe I know her better than anyone else here, but...’ He glances at the bassist, raises his eyebrows: maybe you know her better? But the woman shakes her head, looking terrified.

Constance turned from the two women to look at him. ‘Male magic?’ She looked at Annie. ‘It could work, I suppose. If the connection’s strong enough. Are you planning to—’

‘If that’s what it takes,’ Annie said. ‘We’re on the same side in this.’

Constance sighed. ‘I know. We’ll have to work together. And use whatever tools we have.’ She looked at Stewart in a way that suggested the tools were not encouraging.

Stewart was about to protest being referred to as a tool, when he realised something was changing. ‘Look!’

The air around Sarah and Malorie crackled with forces he couldn’t name. There was a smell that he thought might be brimstone, though he had no idea what that really was. Sarah’s eyes opened, and they were filled with sickly, writhing yellow light.

‘Jesus fuck,’ he heard himself say.

He glanced up. The crack in the sky was changing. Tendrils of something dark yet

incandescent reached down from it.

Sarah gave a great gasp, and slumped like a puppet with its strings cut. Constance and Annie caught her so she didn't fall. But Stewart's attention was on Malorie, and the tendrils from the sky that were now closing on her.

'Malorie, no!' He stepped towards her, unsure about what he could do. But the tendrils wrapped around her, and she was gone.

'Shit, we were supposed to stop that happening!' Annie had turned from Sarah. 'It fucking distracted me. Fuck, fuck, fuck. All that time-travel for nothing.'

At this, Constance turned her head from where she was helping Sarah to sit up. 'You time-travelled?' She looked at Annie, at Stewart, back to Annie, and realisation dawned. 'That explains it. I knew I felt something going on that was distracting me. You were messing with time. Not helpful, Annie. You know how dangerous—'

'You don't have to tell me that! I know better than anyone—'

'Malorie...' Sarah's voice was weak, but cut through the argument.

'It took her.' Stewart stared up at the crack. 'That thing. It swept her up.' Though even as he spoke he realised he wasn't sure that was what had happened. There was no sign of Malorie, true, and the tendrils were gone. But had he really seen her pulled up into the sky, or had his baffled mind made that up to explain her disappearance?

Not that it explained anything.

'He wasn't here the last time.' Constance's voice was sepulchral.

'Neither was I.' Sarah, still sitting on the pavement, was becoming more alert, more understanding of her surroundings. 'It was Malorie it wanted. I think I was just bait. Or... maybe it would have done with me...'

'The question is what's it going to do with her,' said Constance.

‘No,’ said Stewart, ‘the question is, how do we get her back?’

Another sexist yell from a passing car made everyone jump. ‘Yes!’ said Annie. ‘The boy’s right.’ She squatted down next to Sarah and Constance. ‘Do you remember anything from when it had you? Anything at all?’

‘Dark... and then... but it wants *you*, Connie. It’s after the witches.’ Constance and Annie locked eyes, then turned back to Sarah. ‘And then... roulette.’ Sarah closed her eyes and gave a great shudder.

Annie locked gazes with Constance again as Stewart joined her in a squat. Something seemed to flow between the two women. Constance gave a half nod, and Annie sighed as she looked back at Sarah.

‘Did she say roulette? Like the gambling game?’ said Stewart. ‘And that means something to you two.’

‘Gambling,’ said Annie.

‘Casinos,’ Constance added.

‘That’s bad,’ Annie went on.

‘It is, but it could be worse. I’ve dealt with this type before.’

‘This powerful, though?’ Annie nodded her head upwards, indicating the shattered sky.

‘No. But I didn’t have help then.’ Constance’s glance took in all of them.

‘Could someone please tell me what’s going on?’ Stewart jumped to hear the plaintive voice coming from behind him. He had forgotten Sarah’s bandmate was there.

‘What did *you* see?’ said Annie to Rosie.

‘There was that weird storm cloud. And Sarah like, froze, or something. I thought she was going to faint, or have a fit, but she just stood there. Then Malorie arrived, and the same

thing happened to her. Then these two arrived.’ She indicated Stewart and Annie. ‘And Malorie’s gone and Sarah’s conscious again and you’re all talking about casinos and somebody having Malorie.’

‘Storm cloud?’ said Stewart. ‘That was no—’ Annie stopped him with a hand on his arm and a tiny shake of her head..

‘And that was all you saw? You didn’t see where Malorie went?’

‘No,’ said Rosie. ‘Did she wander off? And what’s wrong with Sarah?’

‘I’m OK,’ said Sarah, pulling herself to her feet with help from Constance. ‘We’ve got to find Malorie. Rosie, can you go back in to the venue and get my things? Help Ted to load the van.’

‘Don’t you want me to help look for Malorie?’

‘Somebody’s got to move the gear. I’m sorry to ask you to do this, but it’d be a huge help.’

Rosie looked dubious, but she said, ‘OK. As long as you’re all right.’

They watched her cross the road and go back into the venue, ignoring the comments of the smokers.

‘Does everyone else see that as a storm cloud?’ asked Stewart. ‘Because to me it’s like...’ He hesitated, not having put it into words before. ‘It’s like a crack in reality. More like something from a movie than anything real. But it’s right there, it’s real.’

‘Yup,’ said Annie, ‘and it’s starting to move.’

‘We see it like you do,’ said Constance quietly. ‘Or more like you do, anyway. Human perception is weird. People sometimes see what they want to see, or what they expect. Their minds deny things they don’t understand. Something like that just doesn’t register for them.’

‘Yeah, and some of us see that shit all too clearly,’ said Annie. ‘And we’re the ones

who have to deal with it.'

'So how come I can see it?'

'You're sensitive. Open-minded.' Annie sounded almost complimentary.

'It's one of the many things we don't understand,' said Constance. 'But I knew when I visited you that you'd be the type. For what it's worth.'

Stewart saw Annie's mouth turn up what was almost a snarl when Constance mentioned visiting him, but she didn't say anything.

'It *is* moving,' Sarah said. 'Are we going to follow it, or what? How are we going to get Malorie back?'

Constance spun on the spot, looking up at the crack, her arms out as if she was feeling the night air, filtering it for information. Stewart remembered her talking about psychometry in his back garden. She closed her eyes. 'It's heading toward the Lea. Hackney Marshes.'

Sarah turned to face that direction. 'That's good, isn't it? We saw the Green Man there. Could we, I don't know: *summon* him? Rope him in to help us?'

Annie snorted. 'You don't summon a being like that. If it's even a being.'

Constance looked thoughtful. 'No, but that entity — it would be opposed to *that*.' She indicated the rip in the sky. 'If we can attract it — him, her — it might act against it.'

'Let's get moving, then.' Now that she was back on her feet, Stewart could see, Sarah was itching to do something to help her friend.

'Doesn't mean it would free Malorie,' said Annie, 'but I'm out of other ideas. Let's go.'

#

They meandered through a maze of back streets. If you can meander at panicky top speed, Stewart thought at one point as they waited to cross a road, suddenly busy with buses, taxis,

Ubers. They didn't know where they were going, and it was hard to keep the sky-rip in view. Buildings frequently hid the sky, but they always managed to see it again.

It was hard to look at, he thought, as he followed Sarah between buildings thick with graffiti. The eye didn't want to focus on it, or couldn't bring it into focus properly. It hurt the mind.

'This way,' said Sarah. We should be near a bridge here. Shit!' She stopped dead, and the others stopped behind her. 'This is where that church is.'

Stewart had no idea what church she was talking about, but Constance put her arm round Sarah, and said, 'It's all right. We're with you. They can't get you this time.'

They moved on, Sarah hesitatingly. It's a good thing that thing isn't moving fast, Stewart thought. Then: if it's going to be more vulnerable over this park or whatever, why is it heading that way? Why is it moving around as if it were flying over London anyway? Why doesn't it just... disappear? Like it just appeared. He hadn't seen it appear, though, so maybe it had moved in over the city as it was moving away now. Who knew how magical entities travelled?

Who knew, he thought, still following Sarah and Constance through graffitied streets, slower now, that magical entities were even real? A few months ago he'd have thought the whole idea of this was nonsense.

'It's just here, I think,' Sarah was saying. 'Look, behind that fence.'

The buildings here were a mixture of new blocks of flats and old, rundown, formerly industrial things that had been decorated with many visits by spray-paint-wielding youths. The cluttered streets seemed to follow no obvious plan, curving randomly or suddenly stopping. They were at what Stewart at first thought was a vacant site, the victim of recent demolition, or a long-ago remnant of the Luftwaffe's bombs. But he realised that behind the

chain-link fence, set back from the road by ten or so metres, there was a low, single-storey building.

Light streamed from the few windows, and he saw a sign: Church of God's Thunder on the Mountain.

'Oh, they're busy in there,' said Annie. 'You can smell the thaumaturgy.'

'Smell— what—?' said Stewart.

'Yeah, you're probably not *that* sensitive,' said Annie. 'Not yet.'

But Stewart gradually realised he *could* smell something unusual. Right at the fringes of his sensibility, there was a hint. Like a far off meadow on a summer day, just drifting in on the breeze. As they stepped closer to the strange church, he took a breath, and the faint smell changed key and volume: from distant meadow-hint to blast of something like rot, something like incense. 'Jesus, what *is* that?'

'Oh, are you getting it? The human sensorium doesn't have a place for everything in the universe, but the brain detects some things — somehow.' She seemed puzzled for a moment. 'It translates them into senses we *do* know about. Some people explain it that way, anyway.'

'Should we go in there? Try to stop them?'

'I am *not* going in there again,' Sarah said. 'I don't even like being this near to it.'

'Sarah's already had an experience with them,' said Constance. 'Not good. And anyway,' she went on, 'the thing's moving past.' She waved towards the sky, where the mysterious crack had shortened and widened. It did look more like a storm cloud now, Stewart thought, though not like any he'd ever seen.

'Yeah,' said Annie, 'whatever they're up to in there, it's not affecting that thing.'

'Or if it is, they're missing their show,' said Stewart. 'They should be out here to see

it.'

'I'm happier that they're not,' said Sarah. 'Let's keep following.'

They carried on along the street, where Stewart could see a footbridge ahead of them.

None of them saw the dark figure stare after them from the shadows in the grounds of the Thunder on the Mountain church, and then turn away and go into the lighted building.

26: Childish Things

As she stepped on to the bridge over the canal-like Lea Navigation, Sarah's immediate fear of the culty church people — specifically, of the woman who had made her spill her guts and lose hours of time — faded slightly, and her intense worry for Malorie grew stronger than ever. If Constance and Annie could sense something magical going on at the church, then it was hard to imagine it not having something to do with what had happened to Malorie.

Could they be the cause of it? Had they somehow summoned or created the entity she still thought of as the Cringemaker? Constance and Annie had pooh-poohed the idea of summoning occult beings, but she knew there was a history of people at least trying to do that kind of thing.

And what were they going to do here? She could see trees up ahead, and knew that beyond that was the wide open space of Hackney Marshes. More trees then the flowing River Lea proper after that. But she had no idea what they would do about the crack in the sky that had taken their friend. Hopefully Constance and Annie had something up their sleeves.

And maybe — just maybe — the entity she had seen investing the trees with its presence those months ago: maybe it would appear, would help them. She remembered it

with an infusing sense of calm. It had been real, and not just something happening inside her own head. Of that she had always been sure. It had been the start of her introduction into this new — but maybe much older — world in which she now lived, where supernatural entities existed and strode or drifted across London.

Where they could snatch up her friends. Was no one safe from them? People should know about these things, should be studying them, learning to protect themselves.

‘If all this is real,’ said Stewart, panting, and almost echoing her thoughts, ‘we ought to have academics writing papers on it. A government department responsible for magical protection. Why don’t people know about it?’

“Occult” means “hidden”,’ said Annie.

‘Yeah but—’

‘What do you mean “if”?’ said Constance. ‘You’ve seen plenty of evidence of it yourself.’

‘Yeah, I wasn’t — I just meant, since it’s real. Why does it have to be hidden? It’s something real, out there in the world, the universe. There should be scientists studying it...’

‘Hello,’ said Constance. ‘That’s what my mum used to say. We are scientists of the hidden world.’

‘Did she?’ said Sarah. ‘Yeah. Yeah, I can just imagine aunt Clarissa saying that.’ Her mother’s sister’s oblique statements were well known in her family.

‘Try going to a university and asking for funding to study the occult,’ said Annie. ‘See how far you get.’ They were crossing a towpath and passing into a band of trees now, the orange of the city lights fading behind them.

‘Where the hell *are* we? It’s like the countryside.’ Stewart’s voice was punctuated by gasps now, and they slowed their pace. Sarah, a regular runner, had no trouble keeping going,

and both Constance and Annie seemed fitter than they looked. Maybe it was the magic, Sarah thought. But Stewart was out of condition.

‘Welcome to the River Lea or Lee,’ said Annie. ‘And Hackney Marshes just up ahead. A little bit of countryside in the heart of London. Well, not the heart, exactly. Maybe the pancreas.’

As they cleared the trees and the expanse of the marshes opened before them, Sarah said, ‘Lungs would be more appropriate, seeing as it’s so green.’

‘Yeah, but lungs is a cliché. Anyway, they did used to study this stuff officially. The Queen had her court magician.’

‘The *Queen*? Queen Elizabeth?’

‘Yep,’ said Annie. ‘Official wizard to Her Majesty.’

‘Not the current Queen Elizabeth,’ said Constance. ‘She means Elizabeth the First. Dr John Dee.’

‘Oh. Yeah. I think I’ve heard of him,’ said Stewart.

‘He knew his stuff.’ Sarah thought Annie sounded wistful. ‘But it drove him mad in the end.’

‘Come to think of it,’ said Stewart, ‘my uni *does* study weird stuff. Edinburgh. It’s got a department of parapsychology, or something.’

Annie scoffed. ‘Yeah, those types haven’t found much. I doubt they ever will. Wrong kind of approach.’

Sarah knew the marshes well from her runs around them, but she had never been here at night before. Looking up, she marvelled at how big the sky seemed. City born and bred, she had always marvelled at the vast dark skies when her family had holidayed in the countryside. This was similar, but different, because it wasn’t really dark. The city glow

suffused everything above her.

And the vast expanse was polluted with the darker crack of the Cringemaker.

‘Is it still moving?’ panted Stewart, also looking up.

‘Hard to tell,’ said Constance, ‘with nothing to measure it against.’

‘It’s moving,’ said Annie. ‘But slower than it was.’

‘What now?’ Stewart was getting his breath back, and he asked what Sarah had been thinking. Constance and Annie looked at each other. Sarah could see the wariness that still existed between them, but thought they had agreed, even without speaking, that they had to work together.

‘We need to try to reach it,’ said Constance.

‘Reach out to it, at least,’ said Annie. ‘It’s not like we can get to it physically.’

‘And you know that’s not what I meant,’ said Constance. She sighed. ‘Look, we’re going to have to work together on this. I know our approaches are... different. But maybe together they’ll be enough to deal with this thing. Whatever it is.’ She paused for a moment, then went on. ‘Unless... you know what it is?’

Annie sighed too. ‘OK, we work together. I... don’t know what it is, not exactly. But I’ve heard about something like it. Long ago. And I’ve been around a long time, as you know.’

Sarah was surprised to see Constance nodding vigorously at this. She felt like Annie had been on the scene, hanging out around gigs and generally making a nuisance of herself, at least as long as she, Sarah, had been playing in bands. But Annie had always looked like she was young. Too young, almost, to be hanging out in pubs and dodgy venues. She had even heard one male bandmate describe her as ‘jailbait’. Sarah had told him off for being gross, and that band had split up soon after.

But here Annie was saying she had been around for, what years? Or did she really mean *much* longer? And Sarah realised that, though she looked young, she had an old vibe about her. Her mother would have said ‘an old soul’. But what did that mean? What *was* Annie?

‘We could try an invocation,’ said Constance. ‘There’s only four of us, but I’ve never thought numbers mattered that much.’

‘Numbers matter hugely,’ said Annie, ‘but not the number of people in a coven. That thirteen business is bullshit.’

Nodding again, Constance turned to the others and said, ‘Hold hands.’ She took Stewart’s hand and Sarah’s. Sarah felt Annie’s hand grip her other one. Annie’s felt warm and dry, Connie’s damp with nerves. Or was it just because she had bent down and rubbed them on the dewy grass?

She glanced from her cousin’s face to Annie’s. Annie always looked like she was about to laugh, or at least break into a grin. Now she began to chant. It was in a language Sarah had never heard. Or she thought she hadn’t. It might have been a kind of Latin, but how often do you hear that?

To her surprise, Constance began to respond in the same tongue. The two of them built into a rhythmic, call-and-response thing, that Sarah thought sounded like it could become a song. But she thought that about most things these days.

The chanting took on a darker tone. She looked across the circle at Stewart. He looked as mystified and confused as she felt. They began to move. It felt spontaneous, as if they had all just decided to start turning in a circle, anti-clockwise. Sarah thought of childhood games, ring-a-ring-a-roses, and almost started to laugh. She caught Stewart’s eye, saw his hint of a smile, and knew he was thinking the same thing. And she knew Constance knew they were

thinking that, and that it didn't matter, even though she had started to worry about spoiling the ritual by thinking about childish things.

All rituals start in childish things. It was a voice in her head, as if it were her own. But it was not her own. She thought it sounded like Annie's; but also like Constance's. And maybe even like Stewart's.

The gestalt has formed. This time it felt like she thought it herself, but she didn't know why she would think that. At the same time, she fully realised why she would think something like that. After her experience with the woman at the thunder church and the terror of being inside the cringemaker, alone and then with Malorie, she understood that human minds could connect, could open up to each other in some ways. All the stories of telepathy, of mindreading, even of possession: they had their origins here, in experiences like this, where two minds, or three, or four, joined together and... did *something*.

*You were/I was **inside it**.* The gestalt knew this, and used its knowledge. Sarah didn't know what knowledge she had, but the gestalt did. *Invoke or attack?* What were we going to invoke? Sarah's own thoughts stood clear of the meld for a moment.

Gambling, came the group mind's thought now. *You were/I was gambled for...* It wasn't a fair wheel, Sarah tried to explain to the others. But the gestalt knew that, and had made a decision anyway.

The meld collected its thoughts and threw them upward. A jet of pure, invisible information shot up through the night sky toward the crack that still polluted the darkness.

And in that instant Sarah felt something slam into her side.

Her hand was pulled from Annie's, and her other from Constance's as she crashed to the ground.

27: It Wants Her Words

Malorie tries to understand where she is, what is happening to her, but all is confusion.

Her memories of Sarah being with her, of her own attempt to reach Sarah, to rescue her, are faint, and fading.

She is unsure even of who she is. She knows she is suffering. One memory that comes back is the thought of films and books where a character, stressed beyond all human understanding, ‘escapes into madness.’ The implication being that, now that their mind has ‘snapped’, they are no longer suffering.

But of course, the truth is that the owner of such a broken mind is suffering even more than someone whose mind is whole. The stories just try to give comfort to the reader, the viewer, that the poor character is beyond suffering now.

The game called ‘go insane’, she remembers once hearing in a song.

It is no game.

And yet the one who holds her? It thinks it is a game. It only thinks about games.

‘Here we are then, Malorie my dear. Time for another round of our lovely game.’

Malorie! Her name. She will hold on to that. She knows that she has to hang on to her

name, above all else. Names mean things. Words mean things, are powerful. And she doesn't know the name of the one who keeps her here. But she knows her own name. And she knows Sarah. Sarah will be trying to help her.

But how long has it been? She could have been here for hours, for days. Sarah might have given up on her. It's not like she'll be able to reach her here, and who could help her?

No, there is hope. She, Malorie, was able to reach Sarah when their positions were reversed. And there were people who had helped her. Who were they? Names, names were important.

'This time,' the voice of the one who keeps her goes on, 'there will be no interruptions. Your friend has gone, has left you here with me.' Something about the voice makes Malorie think of oil. Not bright green olive oil, drizzled over a salad. Thick, black, crude, polluting beaches and smothering seabirds. This voice, this being, this creature, is pollution, contamination. The world will be better if it goes away.

She is about to speak, to shout words of resistance at it, but she catches her breath, takes hold of herself, and remains silent. Words have power, and it wants her words. Wants her to hurl them at it, to tire herself out by railing against her captivity. It will thrive on her resistance, her defiance.

So she will give it nothing.

'Nothing to say, little one?' Was that supposed to sound affectionate? Malorie's skin crawls with revulsion, and she realises that she *has* skin. She hadn't been sure she still had a body before this. Now she wraps her arms around herself, takes joy — or not that strong, but at least relief — in the feeling of embodiment, the sense that she is solid, whole...

Is she whole? Or just stuck in a hole? She tries to understand what she can sense, see feel smell touch, sure she's alive.

When the entity is not speaking there is a background hum, like a poorly-earthed amplifier, but deeper. She can't see anything, but it doesn't feel like she is blind, somehow, or even that it is dark. Just that her sight is turned off for the moment. She doesn't understand how that can be.

She can feel her arms clasped around her, and is aware that her chest is rising and falling normally. As she feels that, she also realises that she can feel air coming in and out of her nose and mouth, into her lungs. Experimentally she swings an arm. Air swooshes against it. Her hand ends up on her head where she can feel the tight curls of her hair.

If she breathes through her nose, there is no particular smell. Maybe a hint of her deodorant from that morning. If it is even the same day. The taste in her mouth is no taste at all, and she realises she is quoting a song, so she summons the memory of music into her head. Anything to focus on, anything that brings her pleasure, will help her to silently resist.

Or so she hopes. She could be giving the thing power. It all depends on how much it knows of her thoughts. If this place isn't real, is entirely constructed as an illusion to mislead her, then her very thoughts might be giving it information to use against her. But she only has herself, only has her deepest, secret power — not fear, not that song — her self-knowledge, her hidden depths, that last centimetre of self that no abuser can reach. Not without killing me.

A zip on her jacket jangles as she moves. Under her feet: a solid surface. She is standing, and can feel the strain in her legs. She is tired from standing so long (how long has it been?) and she drops into a squat. Her clothes move around her as she would expect.

So she is *somewhere*, somewhere physical, a place with a solidity, a reality. She had feared that she had died, or at least had been disembodied somehow. If that's even something that's possible. Brains in jars. Uploaded personalities. The Matrix.

But if this is that, it didn't feel like it. It feels real, physical. When she had found Sarah in the street with the others, she had been just standing there. Whatever was happening to her must have been inside her head. Or inside the entity. And when Malorie was swept up and was there with Sarah for while: that had felt different from this, she realises. It was after Sarah had been released (oh, she hopes she had been freed, and not killed) that Malorie had been plunged into darkness. And after some time (how long?) she had come back to herself here. Things are becoming clearer, more focused all the time.

Has the creature transported her to somewhere else? She stands up again and rotates in place, trying to see anything there was to see, to hear anything other than that infernal background hum. A purple light and a low hum: wasn't that how someone had described what death was like? Well, there is no purple light here, at least. No light at all, that she could see.

The entity speaks again: 'Ring-a-ring-a-roses, now, is it? Don't be trying to play games without me. Not when we've got so many games we can play together.'

Humans have more senses than five, though we might not have named them all. One is the sense of another person or thing being close. Malorie knows something is approaching, getting closer. Then it is upon her, bearing her down.

'Sarah!' she cries.

28: Various Unbelievable Things

It was hard to see how this was going to work. How it was going to help anything. Specifically, how it was going to help Malorie. Stewart worried what they were going to tell Freddy, which he realised was stupid because Malorie had broken up with Freddy, but he didn't know anything about Malorie's parents or other family, or, really, about anyone who knew her outside of the people he was with and his housemates. So if — and he hoped this wouldn't be the way it went — they didn't get Malorie back: who would they tell? How would they let her family know? They could hardly tell the police.

Yet they'd have to tell the police. Someone had gone missing: that's what you do, isn't it? But he could imagine the conversations, the interview rooms, the suspicion.

That was selfish, though. Maybe it would be hard for him. But it would be so much worse for Malorie's family, for Malorie herself, whatever was happening to her. He'd have to do his best, give as much information as he could, without being carted off to prison or a secure mental hospital. As he grasped Annie's and Constance's hands and the little group began to circle slowly in the middle of the huge open space that he found hard to believe existed so close to London's houses and pubs and stations and busy streets, he realised that he

had already given up. He didn't expect this — this, whatever-it-was — to do anything to bring Malorie back.

And he wondered if, by that giving up, and that realisation that he had given up, he was somehow harming whatever it was they were trying to do. Did it depend on the belief of the participants? If so, it was only going to have 75% of its maximum power at best. He assumed that Constance and Annie were fully on board with it, but he had no idea what Sarah believed. From all he'd seen of her, she seemed fairly down-to-Earth, not given to belief in unbelievable things. But he didn't know.

And then, he realised that he had experienced various unbelievable things himself over the last few months. Some of the experiences he had had with Annie were undeniably magic, and he didn't just mean in bed.

So maybe there was something to this covenant or invocation or whatever they had hoped it would be. Could he try to convince himself of it? Make himself believe? He thought back to his childhood, to being dragged along to mass every Sunday — and sometimes other days as well — when, in his heart of hearts, he knew there was nothing there. At a young age he had tried to convince himself he believed in it all. Tried to *make* himself believe that Jesus died for his sins (he, who was hardly old enough to sin yet). That God made us because He (even in his head, the capital letter made itself known) loved us. Stewart had always recognised the circle logic of that phrase, and never understood why, if God loved people, He made so many of them suffer so much.

But he had tried. For years, he had convinced himself, as he said his prayers at night, that someone was listening to them.

He used those long-quiescent skills of self-deceit now, telling himself he believed this circling band could somehow influence or attack the impossible crack in the sky.

And just when he felt — or had convinced himself that he felt — that they might be starting to achieve something, he was tackled and knocked to the ground.

‘What the fuck—!’ He rolled over on the wet grass, his eyes opening (he didn’t remember closing them, but that could have been part of trying to convince himself to believe). Kicked out at his assailant, and heard a satisfying gasp in response.

He hauled himself to his feet. The group of four, alone in the centre of the Marshes, had turned into a squabbling mob of eight or more. It was hard to count them. The man who had tackled him was lying holding his stomach. It looked like Stewart had winded him, by sheer luck.

Sarah was on the ground, a larger woman on top of her, trying to pin her arms down. Annie had two people attacking her, a man and a woman from what Stewart could see. But it looked like she might already be coming out ahead, The man’s face was awash with blood, and the woman was whimpering as Annie twisted her arm far up her back.

Two men had attacked Constance. They were both on the ground as Constance stood, stepping back from them, her coat swirling around her. The men were pulling themselves to their feet. The first one up lunged at Constance, who made a complex gesture. There was a flash and a loud bang.

When Stewart’s vision cleared the two men were on the ground, apparently unconscious. The two who had attacked Annie were down, moving, but clearly out of action. And Annie and Constance were pulling the other woman off Sarah.

The man who had attacked him was running away, though slowly, and with obvious difficulty. Annie looked that way, made a much simpler gesture, and the running man fell and lay still.

‘What the *actual* fuck,’ said Sarah, as Constance helped her to her feet. The woman

who had attacked her was standing where Annie and Constance had left her. She looked like a wax dummy, unable to move. ‘Fuck! That’s the bitch who hypnotised me.’ Sarah stepped back from her, then realising she was out of danger, stepped up to the woman and looked closely at her. ‘What have you done to her?’

‘Just a little holding spell,’ said Annie. ‘She’s going nowhere till we’ve asked her a few questions.’

‘What about the others?’ said Stewart.

Annie, Constance, and Sarah all gazed around at their defeated assailants. ‘We can’t hold them all,’ said Constance. ‘Or not easily. The unconscious ones will wake up in time. Those two —’ she indicated the ones that Annie had beaten; ‘— I don’t know? What do you think?’

Stewart was surprised that she addressed this to him, not to Annie. From the expression he caught on Annie’s face, so was she. ‘I — I don’t know. I guess... they’re not going to try and attack us again. If we can get the answers you want from her —’ indicating Sarah’s attacker — ‘then we can let them go. Unless they’re likely to get reinforcements’ The last words rushed out.

‘Hmm!,’ said Constance, sounding surprised. ‘That’s exactly what I thought.’ She waved her hand at the two who were trying to get up. ‘But best if they go to sleep.’ The two lay down again, and appeared to do exactly that. ‘It takes less out of us that way.’

Now that he looked closely at Constance, she did look exhausted. And he glanced over at Annie and saw that she looked similarly drawn, tired. ‘Yeah, magic fighting takes it out of you,’ said Annie. ‘That’s why we don’t do it often. Why I fought them off old-school. Nice work on your one, by the way.’

‘Thanks. I think I just got lucky, though.’

‘No such thing,’ Annie said. ‘Not when there’s this much magic slewing around. Your “luck” was part of all of our defence.’

‘OK... but I guess we were all lucky they didn’t have weapons.’

‘Yeah, about that,’ said Annie. Something glittered on the ground at her feet. ‘Not an enchanted blade, which *is* fortunate. But sharp enough. I wouldn’t have minded if you’d knocked him out a bit harder.’ This last to Constance; and now Stewart realised that Annie was holding her side, and her shirt was darkened under her hand.

‘Shit, you’ve been stabbed? We’ve got to get you to a hospital.’ He fumbled in his pocket for his phone, dropped it in the grass.

‘No,’ said Annie. ‘We don’t have time, and I’ll be OK. There’s more than one use for a holding spell. Look.’ She held up her jacket and shirt in a bloodied hand. Stewart looked and saw the wound in her side, just below her ribs, seemingly clotted already.

‘Right, but what about internally—’

‘Honestly, I’ll be fine,’ Annie said over him.

Then why did you even show us, Stewart thought, but said nothing.

‘We really *don’t* have time,’ Annie went on. ‘Have any of you looked up?’

Who’s had time to do that, Stewart thought, doing so. The crack was dramatically smaller. From having spread across most of the sky, it was now smaller than a full moon. And it was shrinking visibly.

‘Re-form the circle,’ said Constance. ‘I don’t think we’ve got time to stop it, but we’ve got to try.’

In seconds they had joined hands again, and Annie and Constance were chanting. Stewart’s belief was entirely genuine: he had no need to convince himself at all.

The gestalt formed quickly this time. *Hey! it sent, it said: we’ve got a bet for you!*

And looking up, as they all were, Stewart saw the crack shrink to a point, and close.

29: Head for the Trees

‘No...’ Sarah tried to release the hands that held hers, but they both tightened on her.

‘Don’t let go,’ said Constance. ‘Not yet.’

Sarah gripped back. ‘The gestalt is still sound,’ said Annie, in a faraway voice. ‘The link is open.’

‘We can track it,’ said Constance.

But the voice in Sarah’s head, neither hers nor not-hers, said *It’s gone. We’ve lost it.*

Their hands dropped to their sides as they broke the circle. ‘*Shit!*’ said Annie.

‘What happens now?’ said Stewart. He sounded scared. ‘How can we help Malorie?’

The same thought was echoing in Sarah’s head, which felt empty compared to how it had a moment ago.

‘I don’t know,’ said Constance, and it was the saddest thing Sarah had ever heard.

In the distance, across the expanse of football fields that made up the Marshes, a flashing blue light came to a halt. Figures moved beside the car, then more lights, the distinctive movements of people carrying torches.

‘Police,’ said Sarah, nodding in that direction. ‘Coming this way.’

‘Shit, we don’t want to get caught with all this around us,’ said Stewart, gesturing at the fallen cultists.

‘Head for the trees, get out of sight,’ said Constance.

‘They’ve already seen us. They’ll follow. There’s not that much cover.’

Constance was already moving toward the trees. ‘Once we’re under there we can stay hidden. Trust me.’

‘What about her?’ Stewart pointed at the woman who had hypnotised Sarah. She had stood all this time as Annie and Constance had left her. ‘You wanted to interrogate her. Can you make her come with us?’

Constance stopped, turned back, met Annie’s eyes. They both gave tiny shakes of their heads. ‘We could,’ Annie said, ‘but we don’t like to. And she’d slow us down.’

‘More than don’t like to. It’s unethical to compel people. We’ll release the hold when we’re in the trees. We’ll have to do without questioning her. Come on!’ The police torches were getting closer.

Annie looked at the cult woman. ‘We’ll be back for you,’ she said, before setting off for the trees at a stumbling run. Sarah and Stewart followed.

In a few seconds they were under the trees, the shouts of the police following them. Beyond the trees was the path where Sarah often ran, and after that, the riverbank and the river itself. ‘Down here,’ said Constance. They all scrambled down the bank, tangling with roots and getting covered in mud.

‘They’ll find us here no problem, said Stewart. There’s hardly any cover.’ There was undergrowth, but it was sparse.

‘Crouch down here,’ said Constance. ‘Everyone get close. They won’t see us.’ She gestured in the air over her head, and Sarah felt, more than saw, a shimmer surrounding them.

‘Keep quiet, though.’

They crouched in silence for several minutes before they heard voices approaching on the path above them. Sarah realised the police must have got delayed by investigating their fallen foes, and the cult woman who was now, she assumed, released from the hold Constance and Annie had placed on her. She’d have liked to hear how the woman had tried to explain what had happened there.

Footsteps crunched above them. Gruff voices called out. ‘Anything down there?’ ‘Not sure.’ Torch beams swept the undergrowth around them, and passed right over them. Sarah saw a beam reflected in Constance’s eyes. Constance gave her a half wink. The beams, and voices and footsteps, passed on.

They waited for another five minutes, maybe longer. Sarah’s calves were screaming in protest at holding the squat by the time Annie said, ‘OK, they’ve gone.’

‘Really? How can you be sure?’ said Stewart, shifting his position and wincing. Sarah stretched her legs out, easing her cramps.

‘You should know by now I’ve got some abilities that are out of the ordinary.’

‘Yes, but... well, won’t they have left someone watching the place? Have crime scene officers out there?’

Constance closed her eyes for a moment. ‘No, she’s right. The whole place is deserted.’

‘One thing though,’ Sarah had a sudden realisation. ‘We’ll have to avoid CCTV as we get back on to streets. They might go over the records for like, the last couple of hours and the next couple, for everything near the Marshes.’

‘Shit, yeah,’ said Stewart. ‘Unless... you’ve got another way?’ Sarah thought the way he looked at Annie was meaningful.

Annie shook her head. 'Nope. Nothing left in the tank. Not enough for that kind of thing, anyway.'

'Well, if we stay together I can do the visual obfuscation thing again when we get back to streets,' said Constance. 'It's not always as effective with cameras as with people, but I should be able to keep us from being too obvious.'

Several minutes later they were back at the bridge they had crossed to join the Marshes. 'Stay close, now,' Constance said, and the sense of shimmering surrounded them again. 'Take it slowly. It's harder to hold while we're moving.' None of them felt much like moving quickly anyway. Sarah was exhausted. Stewart was panting again and still encumbered by his backpack. Annie seemed to be in pain from the wound in her side.

'We shouldn't have come this way,' Sarah whispered. 'It's too near that church.'

They stopped dead. 'There's got to be a way that doesn't go past it,' said Stewart. 'There's all these wee streets.' He pulled out his phone. 'Do you remember the name of the street it's on?'

Sarah leaned in to look at his phone. 'That one: Rothbury Road.'

'OK, then if we go *this* way, we should give it a decent berth.' They set off the way Stewart indicated, Sarah keeping a watchful eye out for anyone who looked like they might be cultists.

Twenty minutes later they were back outside the venue where Tasty had played earlier. Was it really that same evening? Just a few hours ago? Everyone was long gone, though. It was almost one in the morning.

'What now? What do we do next? How do we rescue Malorie?'

Constance and Annie looked at each other. Neither had what Sarah would have called a confident expression. 'I don't think we can do anything else tonight,' Constance said. 'We

have to rest. We can't help Malorie if we're exhausted. And,' she went on holding up a hand, seeing Sarah was about to speak, 'Annie and I literally can't do anything more without resting first.'

Sarah let out the breath she had drawn to protest and nodded, seeing the wisdom of this.

'We'll regroup in the morning and work out what to do. Don't worry, we're not giving up.'

'As well as all that,' Stewart put in, 'Annie needs to get to a hospital.'

'I told you, I'll be OK. Magic and rest. Don't worry.'

Sarah didn't think she looked OK, but there seemed to be nothing else to do.

'OK, well, you should all come back to mine. Malorie's been using the sofa bed, so maybe Stewart and Annie could sleep there? And Connie, if you don't mind sharing with me?'

They all agreed that this made more sense than struggling back to their respective houses, and within an hour they were at Sarah's drinking tea and hot chocolate and preparing for bed.

None of them wondered why they had stopped searching for Malorie.

30: What Mazes She Has Run

When you're in the clutches of a game-playing, crazed, supernatural entity obsessed with gambling, it's like you're a rat in a maze, Malorie thinks. You're made to run through impossible, confusing sequences of events, for no reason you can understand, purely for the entertainment of the ones in control.

Of course, rats in mazes are usually in labs, where the scientists, even if their techniques are cruel, usually have some rational purpose, some desire to learn something. So she wonders if the Cringemaker, as she too has taken to calling it, is experimenting on her in the same way. Is it trying to learn things about human behaviour, about responses to stimulus?

In the hope, probably vain, that if it is she can confuse or spoil its experiments, she tries to react in unpredictable ways when she can. But of course, if it's only doing it for entertainment, maybe her unpredictability only encourages it. So sometimes she does exactly what she thinks it expects.

She can't remember what it does to her, what mazes she has run, what tests it has put her through. She has no sense of how many they are, or how long she has been here.

Sometimes, she is sure, she collapses, exhausted. Yet she does not seem to need to eat or drink. She would *like* to eat and drink, but she doesn't seem to have the normal needs. And she wonders if she is really wired up in a hospital-type bed, being fed through a tube. But that doesn't seem like the technique of an apparently supernatural entity.

When it speaks to her, she tries to learn what she can about it, in the hope that something might help her to find a way to escape. But it's so hard to retain anything. And her desire not to feed it information means she keeps her responses, and her questions, to a minimum.

Is this torture? She wonders sometimes. She is not in pain, or mostly not. Though when she is forced to relive her worst memories, it definitely feels like it.

The entity seems most interested in the terrible day when she ran out of the house in Tooting. She doesn't know whether it's because that is the most recent bad experience, or if it's because of the magical event that partly triggered it. And she wonders if this creature that holds her was responsible for the psychic collision she had with Annie.

It seems possible. Maybe it's reliving its own victory in some way. But — and she tries not to dwell on this, or make it too obvious, in case the Cringemaker knows her thoughts — every time she relives an event, it becomes slightly less bad. She guesses that might not be true for everyone, or for every event. For some, the opposite could be true. But here she wonders if she'll come out of this as if she's had an intensive dose of therapy, with many of her fears and anxieties reduced.

If she ever gets out. If there even is an 'out'. In her darkest times she nearly stops believing the world she came from exists. Perhaps Sarah and Freddy and Leon and Robin and music, and Stewart and Nat and her family are all just a dream, an illusion, imaginary.

But she knows, when she is stronger, that they are real, and she clings to their

memory, trying to pull the happy ones from the bad and hold them up triumphal to the light.

It doesn't always work.

She knows that, if she ever does escape, if she's rescued: she will never be able to explain what happened to her in here. Whatever and wherever 'here' is.

One day — if there are days here — the Cringemaker is trying to get her to indulge in a game that she doesn't understand, though it terrifies her. She is running through a forest, trying to hide in undergrowth, looking (she thinks) for a cave that holds a secret (why, what secret?) when a voice echoes through her world. Not the Cringemaker. It can speak at any time and its voice rarely feels like speaking, but like the fabric of the very world is changing to present meaning.

No, this is clearly a voice, rising above the rustling of the forest and the calls of the strange night-creatures that hide in it.

'... got a bet for you...'

And then it fades again, and is gone.

It sounds like Sarah. And yet not. She stops running, replays the voice again and again in her head. Sarah, and yet not. Sarah, and something other, something *more*?

Is this a new game that the Cringemaker is playing with her? But it has made people from her life appear before, both in sight and sound. She has known them to be false.

This, though... this feels real.

A bet. What bet could Sarah (and, maybe, others, who are helping her?) make with her? Why would she? And then she knows. Not a bet with me. A bet with *it*. The message was for the Cringemaker, not me.

But I heard it, and that's a reason for hope. They haven't given up on me. They're still trying to help, no matter how many weeks — months? *Years*? — it has been.

Why would they be trying to bet, though? It was a bet, if a fake one, controlled by the Cringemaker, that had made her end up here.

But maybe that was just the best way to attract its attention.

31: Weak and Feeble

Annie winced as she turned over on Sarah's fold-out sofa bed. Stewart quietly winced with her. She had told him so firmly to stop going on about her injury that he felt he couldn't even offer sympathy.

He was exhausted, but couldn't sleep. A combination of not wanting to move in case he hurt Annie, and worry about Malorie churned through his head. Along with those, images from the night they had just gone through filled his thoughts. Malorie's blank face as she was pulled into the crack in the sky. Was she really pulled up, or in some *other* direction? Their fearful hunt through backstreets and across that dark river, out onto the open space, and what happened there. The fight with their attackers. His own inability to do much to help, throughout.

Eventually Annie's breathing told him she was asleep. He slipped out from under the covers without disturbing her and went to the toilet. Then he sat at the kitchen table and looked at his phone. He realised why he didn't feel like sleeping, even though he was physically tired. It wasn't just because of his restless mind, but because he was displaced in time. It might be three in the morning, but he had skipped from the previous morning to this

evening. From his point of view it was only about seven hours since he got up.

He realised that there was another version of himself, lying drunkenly asleep in another part of London. OK, that's too weird to imagine. But he was out of sync with the others. And would he be this way forever? Had Annie planned to take him back to Saturday morning? Or had she not thought it through that far?

Could he somehow feel that his personal timeline had looped back around itself? Was that a thing people could perceive? Until this morning — or, looked at another way, until tomorrow morning — he wouldn't have believed that travelling in time was really possible.

He wondered how tangled Annie's timeline was. From what she had said, skipping through time wasn't something she did often, but then she also hinted at being far older than she appeared, and he wondered if that was all related to this ability.

Maybe she really had met the the young David Bowie.

Feeling agitated, wanting to do something, wanting to be moving, Stewart thought about going out. But he wouldn't be able to get back in, not having keys. He paced up and down in the little kitchen. Annie stirred in the sofa bed on the other side of the living area.

He stopped, stood still, till she settled again. He was filled with restless energy. There had to be something he could do with it. Something more than just scroll through his phone all night. Something to help Malorie.

Coming to a decision, he grabbed his jacket, scribbled a quick note for Annie, and quietly let himself out of the flat.

#

There was no one around as he walked through the Hackney night. It was cold, and he watched his breath puff out in front of him then quickly get swept behind as he strode on. He pulled his jacket tighter around him. His phone led him back the way they had come, back

toward the River Lea, and the Thunder on the Mountain church, as he thought of it.

As he turned into the street of the strange church, he stopped, and huddled into a doorway. A car was coming towards him slowly. He turned his face away and pretended to be engrossed in his phone. He didn't expect that anyone from the church would recognise him, but better not to take chances.

The car passed, and he looked back up the street to where the rundown industrial unit housed the church. He could see the chainlink fence and the top of the low building. He thought there was a light on on the outside, but it was hard to be sure, what with streetlights and a few lights from other buildings. It's no wonder we never see the stars, he thought.

Pocketing his phone, he made his way slowly toward the building.

He walked past it first, looking for CCTV cameras. True, they could be small and hidden, but he expected that if a building like this had them they would be clearly mounted on poles or on the walls. He saw none. Nor was there any sign of life in the place. Just a light on over the doorway. He turned back and stood looking through the chainlink fence. Would he even be able to get in to the enclosure? And what would he do once he did?

It was probably a mistake to have come here, but even though Constance and Annie had denied the idea that this place, the people there, had somehow caused the crack in the sky, or summoned the entity that made it, he couldn't help but believe there was some connection between this place and Malorie's disappearance.

And it was people from here who had attacked them on the Marshes, stopped them doing — whatever it was they had been trying to do there. And Annie's comment about the stench of thaumaturgy when they had passed before. Now that he was standing still he still got a hint of the obscure smell. Distant, yet close, sweet but rotten. Of course it could be that they made scented candles in there. Or a leaky drain.

But he knew it was more than that. Something had almost compelled him to come here. Something more than his restlessness. He had to move forward, find out whatever he could, and report back to the others.

The fence had a gate. Double gates, that could be swung wide to let cars in. They were held closed with a simple bolt, which in turn had a hole where a padlock could be inserted. But there was no padlock. Stewart tried to slide the bolt gently, expecting a screech of metal on metal.

Which is exactly what happened. It seemed incredibly loud in the silent pre-dawn street. He stopped, tried again while lifting the gate slightly. The bolt moved more easily and silently that way. Should have worked that out first, really.

Swinging it open just wide enough, he slipped through and pushed it to behind him. He didn't slide the bolt back for fear of noise, and also in case he had to get out quickly.

A few metres of cracked, crumbling concrete led him to the building. He avoided the front door with its light at first, instead going round the building. He ducked down as he came to each window. He had no sense that there was anyone inside, but he didn't want to take the chance that some insomniac cultist might be looking out of a darkened room.

Chancing a peek in at the first, he could make out almost nothing through the dirty glass. He thought it might be an office. Moving on he found himself at the back of the building, where a series of larger windows broke up the metal surface of the wall.

All three of these windows showed a darkened hall. Rows of chairs faced them, and Stewart could see a table and the tools for giving presentations: the back of a screen, a laptop on the table, cabling. If the thunder church had worship, had services, this was probably where they happened. But from what he could see in the dark, the space looked more like somewhere you'd be shown the latest corporate reports. Maybe that's what it had been,

and the church had repurposed it.

Either way, there was no one there at the moment.

Round the next corner he found the bins. Even churches need somewhere to put their rubbish, he supposed. It was even darker here than before, furthest from the light over the door and the streetlights. The fence was close here, and a tree on the other side of it had deposited most of its leaves under his feet. Recent rain had made the surface unpleasantly squishy and slippery. The tree's overhanging branches, even though mostly bald as the year moved towards its end, still added to the shadowed feeling of this corner of the grounds.

All of which led Stewart to approach the final corner, leading back to the front of the building, with less caution than might have been sensible.

Unsure, as he had been throughout, of what he had hoped to achieve here, he turned the corner, planning to approach the door and see what happened.

The light over the door silhouetted a figure standing next to a car. Neither the person nor the car had been there before, and he had heard no sound to indicate their arrival. Yet the fumes rising from the car's exhaust into the cold night air told him its engine was running. He could hear nothing.

The silhouetted figure turning towards him looked disturbingly familiar. He had last seen her standing similarly erect, but unmoving, out on Hackney Marshes, a scant few hours ago.

'Don't skulk over there, Mr Galbraith.' As she spoke, sounds came back to him: he could hear the car's engine, and the distant hum of the city, which he hadn't missed, but hadn't heard for some time. 'We have things to discuss,' she went on.

How did she know his name? And how had she silenced everything?

He felt like 'magic' was too simplistic an explanation — it didn't really explain

anything at all, just gave a label to a set of phenomena or events that we have no way of explaining. They must *be* explicable, though, even if science didn't yet have the tools it needed to do so.

All of which flashed through his mind in the second the woman spoke, and none of which helped him. The woman, and the car, were between him and the gate, which now lay open. The car's rear door nearest him was open, and the space within looked strangely inviting. Shit, they're fucking with my mind as well as my ears, he thought.

And he'd fucked up, big time. Whatever happened now, he'd gone out hoping to do something to move their cause forward, to learn something or do something that would help to free Malorie. And instead he'd walked right into the clutches of the people who were holding her. Or who were responsible for her being taken, at least, he felt sure.

Still, it was just this woman. Surely he could evade her, and get away. Or, hell, fight her. The idea of hitting a woman appalled him, but this was a war — or at least some kind of conflict — and she was his enemy.

'Right about now you're probably thinking of ways to get away. Probably supposing that you can easily overpower a weak and feeble woman like me. Maybe even remembering your recent lucky escape on the Marshes.' She turned to face him fully as she spoke, standing with legs astride, and opened the top of her coat slightly. 'Well maybe you could overpower me, if it just came to physical strength. Though you seem pretty weak and feeble yourself, if you don't mind me saying so.'

Stewart was struck by the weirdness of this fake politeness combined with her attempt to undermine him with insults. There was room to get past the car to the right. She was standing on the passenger's side. The car was facing the gate, poised to leave — indeed, to follow him if he did get past it, and her, and out. But he'd rather that than feel trapped here,

behind it.

‘But out on the Marshes you had powerful friends — powerful *female* friends, I might note. Here, you’re on your own, and I have this. She pulled something out from under her clothes, in the gap where she had opened her coat. He got a slight sense of it glittering — some kind of necklace? But he couldn’t see it properly. The light over the door was not that bright, but it was shining in his eyes enough that he couldn’t make out the woman’s face, Maybe he didn’t have to see whatever it was she was warning him about, but he looked away anyway, past the car and toward the gate. ‘Now, get into the car,’ said the woman, in a tone that suggested she expected to be obeyed.

Stewart darted to his right, past the back of the car through the cloud of exhaust fumes, and past the driver’s side toward the gate. He heard the woman shout something, and the sound of a car door opening. Shit! There was someone in the driver’s seat! How had he not noticed that?

The edge of the opening door caught his shin as he passed and nearly tripped him. Pain shot through his leg, but he managed to stay on his feet and keep moving.

‘Stop him!’ he heard the woman shout.

As he passed the open gate he tried to grab at it and swing it into the path of his followers. He couldn’t tell if it had been any use, and chanced a glance back. The driver seemed to have taken longer than he’d have thought to get out of the car — had he had his seatbelt on? — and was only just leaving the grounds of the church, while he, Stewart, was across the road and heading for a side street.

At any moment expecting to be struck down the way Constance and Annie had toppled their attackers earlier, he pounded along the street between graffiti-covered buildings, the morning mist mixing with his desperate breath.

He couldn't hear footsteps coming after him. Another glance back: no one following? Then he heard the sound of an engine revving. They had decided to use the car.

He ducked down another side street, this one, he hoped, too narrow for a car. Or if not, then at least narrow enough that they wouldn't think to turn down it unless they saw him. He tried to make that less likely by keeping to the shadows. Which were nearly everywhere, because the lighting was so poor here.

Would it be best to hide? Find a doorway up ahead and squat down in it, keep as far back as he possibly could? But what if they could track him? Somehow, by magic or... she'd known his name, that woman. How could she have known it? Sarah had outlined the interrogation she had gone through; how she'd been compelled to tell all she knew. But she would have had no reason to mention him. And she almost certainly didn't know his last name anyway.

Or maybe she did. She might have heard it in passing, might have asked Malorie... though why? But then, hadn't she sent Constance to him? Or that's what Constance had implied. But she didn't need his last name for that. Could the creepy woman from the thunder church have lifted his name out of his mind? And if she could do that, she could probably tell exactly where he was.

Best to keep moving, then. If she could know where he was, it was best not to be in one place too long. Unpredictability, that was the thing. He got to the end of this narrow street and turned back the way he had come. Partly because of his idea of being unpredictable, and partly because he could hear a car approaching on the road he would have had to turn onto or cross.

But they were able to approach in a car without it apparently making a sound. Unless they could only do that at their headquarters, or in some fixed place. There was so much he

didn't know about all this, about what they could do.

What if the idea of keeping moving was one she had planted in his head? Maybe his decision to turn this way or that was not his own, but some kind of psychic siren's call, leading him right to her and her goon. If the driver was actually a goon. It was probably one of the ones who had attacked them.

He stopped and leaned against a wall in the darkest patch of shadow around, breathing heavily. His heart was pounding and his leg ached where the car door had hit it.

This had been a mistake. Clearly. They had been way ahead of him, and what had he hoped to achieve anyway? And now — even if he got away from them just now, he could never be sure that they weren't tracking him, that he wasn't going to lead them right to Annie and the others.

A car rumbled past the end of the alley he was cowering in. Was that them? It had looked like their car. But cars all look more or less alike. He couldn't remember what colour it had been. Silver, or white maybe? The one that just passed had been light coloured. But you couldn't really tell what colour things were under streetlights at night.

He had thought he might be able to get into the thunder church building. Maybe find something out, learn something that could help Malorie. Mostly he had just wanted to be doing something. He had felt so useless ever since Annie had found him in the greasy spoon. That seemed both a long way away and a long time ago, and it was impossibly weird and confusing to realise that, from where he was standing now, it was a few hours in the future.

But where he was standing now, he was still in serious danger. He had to find a way to get away from this area, without letting those churchy types find him. But he was paralysed: standing in his shadowy spot by an alley wall, he couldn't decide which way to go. Pulling out his phone, he wondered about summoning an Uber. But there would be no one

around at this time of night, in this obscure a location. And if there were, the mere act of summoning it might draw attention to where he was.

And how odd that he was thinking of it in terms of *summoning*. The night's events must be affecting him in more ways than he had realised.

He pulled up the maps app on his phone. The way back to Sarah's, where the others were sleeping soundly, was straightforward. He could be there in twenty minutes. But if that woman and her driver were cruising around looking for him — or worse, if they knew where Sarah's flat was, and were waiting there for him to arrive — then that would be no help.

Forcing himself to start moving, he crept along the alley, making for the end that felt less like a main road. At the corner he stopped and edged his head around, listening intently. No sign of any cars. He stepped out into the street.

'Jesus fuck almighty!' Someone slammed into his side. Stewart turned and started to run back along the alley.

'Fuck! Fuck. You fuckin idiot!' The voice behind him didn't sound like his pursuers. He stopped, turned.

'Annie? What the hell? How — did you find me by magic?' Annie was bent over at the corner, clearly hurt more than he had been by their collision.

'No!' she gasped. 'Fuckin phone!' Stewart looked at the device in his hand, then remembered allowing it to share his location with Annie a while back. He wasn't sure why. She hadn't reciprocated.

'But how did you —' He was back at her side now, and reached out tentatively towards. Hesitant, because she looked furious as well as winded. She was holding her side where she had been stabbed. 'Shit, your wound, is it bleeding?'

'No, all healed up, look.' She lifted the bloodied shirt she had been wearing earlier.

Below her ribs there was a scar. Fresh, new-looking, but a scar, not a wound.

‘But that’s —‘

‘Impossible? Yeah, so much is. Localised time acceleration. Still hurts, though. I couldn’t sleep. Saw your stupid note. “Gone to church”! Fuck!’ With a last gasp she pulled her shirt down and straightened up. ‘So, have you been there yet? What did you find?’

‘What? No. Yes, I mean. They, err, that woman. She turned up. Tried to get me into a car. I ran.’

Annie stared at him with an expression that he couldn’t quite interpret. He thought that on somebody less fierce it might mainly be disappointment. She shook her head. ‘Well at least you didn’t get taken as well as Malorie.’

‘I thought you said they weren’t responsible for Malorie?’

‘They’re not. Not exactly. But I think they have some influence. I don’t know.’ She looked around, up and down the alley and the street. ‘No sign of them anyway. Let’s get out of here.’

32: Messing With Our Heads

Sarah rolled over in bed and sat up. Her curtains were parted slightly, so she could see that it was starting to be daylight. 7:30 by her bedside clock. Constance's sleeping body was an unfamiliar shape next to her. She stirred, and seemed to be waking up.

In the kitchen/living room, Sarah tried to fill the kettle quietly so as not to disturb Stewart and Annie. As she switched it on she turned towards the sofa and saw that they weren't there.

She flicked lights on, opened curtains. No sign of them. No one in the bathroom. They would hardly be in Ronnie's room. They must have gone out. But when? And why? No messages on her phone. Was that a note on the coffee table?

It looked like a man's handwriting, she thought, though how could you really tell. 'Gone to church.' What the fuck?

'Is there any coffee?'

'Jesus!' Sarah turned to Constance. 'I nearly jumped out my skin! How can you move so quietly?'

Constance looked down. 'Bare feet? Where are the others?'

Sarah handed her the note and went to attend to the kettle.

‘This is bad,’ said Constance, following her. ‘If Stewart went off to investigate God’s Thunder on the Mountain, and Annie followed him, anything could have happened. Have you tried calling them?’

‘Is that what you think happened?’

‘It’s obvious. This note was written by Stewart, and handled by Annie some time afterwards. Funny he didn’t sign it, though.’

‘I can’t call them, I don’t have their numbers. Have you got them?’

Constance looked surprised. ‘Well... no. But I should be able to get them.’ She took out her phone and started to tap on it. While Sarah made coffee and put bread in the toaster, Constance mumbled something and waved her hand over her phone. Eventually she spoke again. ‘Hers is protected, obviously, but his is normal. Here we go.’ She held it facing Sarah, showing ‘Stewart’ and a number. ‘I’ll call.’

She put the phone on speaker and laid it down on the table. After a few moments the ringing tone stopped and Stewart’s voice came out of the device, crackly and somehow far away. ‘Hello?’ He sounded like he was panting.

‘Hi Stewart, it’s Constance and Sarah. Where are you? Is Annie with you?’

‘Yes, we’re — shit.’ His voice faded as he moved the phone. There was a sound like a sudden sizzle, then silence. Sarah caught Constance’s eye and saw the worry she was feeling reflected back at her.

‘Stewart?’ Constance sounded unusually tentative.

‘Sorry about that,’ Stewart said, his voice coming back into focus. ‘Annie’s just taken down the churchy types that were trying to catch us.’ Annie’s voice said something in the background. ‘OK, not so much taken them down, as hidden us,’ Stewart went on. ‘We should

be back at yours soon, we'll explain then.' The call dropped.

'What the hell are they playing at?' said Sarah. 'I don't want them bringing that lot here.'

'That lot already know where you live,' said Constance. 'But I agree that there doesn't seem to be much point in going there.'

'Yeah, how does it help us get Malorie back?'

Constance sighed, and looked as sad as Sarah had ever seen her. 'I think we have to be aware...' She paused, took a breath. '... That we might not be able to get Malorie back.'

#

Showering, dressing, getting down what breakfast she could manage, Sarah could only think of Malorie. What happened last night? They had abandoned her. Sure, they had had to fight the thunder church people on the Marshes, and then hide from the police. But it was as if they had forgotten about Malorie after that. They just came back here and went to sleep.

Even this morning, she hadn't woken up thinking about Malorie. Hadn't thought about her at all until the call with Stewart.

'Something's fucking with our minds,' she said to Constance, as they sat in the kitchen waiting for the others to turn up.

Constance had done something else with her phone and was tracking their location. 'They're two minutes away,' she said. 'What do you mean?'

'We forgot about Malorie! We just... went to bed.'

Constance looked startled. 'I... see what you mean,' she said. 'We all needed to rest, but...'

'And now you say we might not be able to get her back.' Sarah felt tears prickling her

eyes, a lump in her throat. 'I don't even have her mum's number. How will I let her know?'

Constance put her phone away and stood silent, her eyes unfocused, for what felt to Sarah for minutes. She was about to speak, but thought her cousin might come out of her trance with a solution to their problem, and didn't want to interrupt her.

Just as she had decided it was too long to wait, and was about to speak, the buzzer on her door went. She grabbed the handset and barked, 'Hello?'

'It's us,' came Stewart's voice, sounding like he had been laughing. 'Annie and Stewart.'

Sarah didn't say anything, just pressed the button that opened the downstairs door, and unlocked the flat door. She returned to the kitchen, where Constance was still standing as she had left her.

'Connie, are you... OK?'

Constance's eyes snapped to hers and she shook herself as if waking up. 'Yes. Sorry. I went away for a minute there, didn't I?'

'More than a minute. Did you come up with an answer?'

Constance paced across the room, to where the folded-down sofa held the disarrayed bedclothes Stewart and Annie had barely slept in. 'It's all a matter,' she said, turning back to face Sarah, 'of finding the right angles to move through. You see, we were trying to reach her as if she was up in the sky, where the crack appeared. But—'

Stewart and Annie burst in, giggling. At least, thought Sarah, Stewart was giggling. Annie gave the impression of being part of a shared joke with him, without actually giving out much more than a half smile. That woman is *guarded*.

'What are you two so happy about? Did you find Malorie?' Stewart stopped laughing at once, and looked crestfallen. Annie merely looked thoughtful. 'See, that's what I mean. We

all forgot about her. Something's messing with our heads.' Sarah turned to Constance. 'What were you saying about angles?'

'We thought she'd been pulled up into the sky,' Constance began.

'I *saw* her pulled up,' Stewart interrupted.

'And some of us even thought that's what we saw,' Constance went on. 'But that was our brains tricking us. Our eyes deceiving us.' She turned, squeezed past the expanded sofabed, and looked out the window. 'It's daylight out there.'

'I know,' said Stewart. 'It was like, suddenly it's dawn. Where did the rest of the night go?'

Sarah was looking at Annie as Stewart spoke, and saw her face fall. She had rarely seen an expression change so dramatically, so quickly. There was someone who has just realised something.

'Oh shit. Something *is* fucking with our heads. And they've just fucked us over.'

Annie was staring at Stewart.

'Wh— what do you mean?' he said, sitting down suddenly on the sofabed.

'You're right,' Annie went on. She ran her hands through her hair, clutched it. 'Fuck! I can't believe I let them do that. And I missed it.'

'What?' said Stewart. 'What is it? What did they do to us?'

'Oh, I see,' said Constance. She and Annie stared at each other, meeting gazes in a way that Sarah didn't think she had ever seen them do before. These two had always seemed to be antagonists and now, in this gaze, this moment of shared recognition, it felt like they had joined forces.

Or were about to. Finally. Fully.

'It's a confusion hex,' Annie finally said, turning to Stewart. 'A confounding charm.'

Sometimes called a maze mage, but...

‘It distracts its target, baffles them about time and space. But it’s being cast so wide, so broad-brush. Usually it’s aimed at an individual.

‘I know we said that bloody church wasn’t involved. And I still don’t think it is. Not in bringing that entity into this plane. But they are messing around with some heavy wizardry. I didn’t think they were capable of anything serious, but it looks like they are.’

‘I still don’t—’ Stewart started as Annie paused.

‘I don’t know if they mean to do it,’ Constance said over him. ‘Sorry, or if they think that they’ve somehow summoned the entity with it. But they haven’t. It’s just a broad-spectrum mind bender. You and Annie probably thought you just walked back here from there, but you were actually wandering around for hours.’

‘I should have sensed it,’ Annie said, visibly furious now. ‘I’ve been dealing with this shit for long enough. But...’

‘It’s not something you see very often,’ Constance said in a conciliatory tone. ‘And... I think it might have been going since last night. Maybe since before the entity appeared.’

‘Hmm. That would explain why I didn’t feel it start.’

‘Yes, you were busy messing with time.’ Constance sounded cross about this, Sarah thought.

‘Wait, though,’ she said, ‘if they started it before the thing, this... entity appeared: *could* they have something to do with it? I mean, could the entity have been, I don’t know, attracted to this spell, or whatever?’

Annie and Constance met each other’s eyes again. Constance’s widened. Annie shook her head. ‘I mean...’ Constance paused, her brow wrinkling in thought. ‘... It’s possible, I guess. Anything is possible. But...’

‘An entity like that, though. It’s not going to pay attention to some piss-arse confusion spell. Unless...’ Now Annie’s brow wrinkled in thought, and she consulted her phone.

‘Does any of this help us?’ asked Sarah. ‘Are we any closer to helping Malorie?’

‘No,’ said Constance, ‘but now that we know what’s happening, we can counter it. We won’t be distracted by it anymore. Just knowing about it makes it affect us less, till we forget again. And we should be able to screen against it a bit...’ She and Annie each raised the hand that wasn’t holding a phone and said a word in that maybe-Latin language. Sarah felt something: maybe a clearing of her head, a slightly sharper edge to her thoughts. ‘And now we can keep our focus where it needs to be,’ Constance finished.

‘Which is where?’ asked Stewart, slumping back onto the sofa-bed. ‘God, my feet hurt.’

‘On rescuing Malorie,’ said Sarah. ‘Obviously.’

‘It’s not as simple as that,’ said Constance. ‘I’m sorry. But the entity disappeared, remember? We can’t follow it, if we ever really could. We need to take a more... esoteric approach.’

‘Why do I *really* not like the sound of that?’ Sarah started pouring coffee for everyone. ‘I don’t know how any of you take it, so help yourselves to milk and stuff.’

‘I just want to sleep,’ said Stewart. ‘What day is it?’

‘Saturday.’

‘Saturday? But I already did Saturday. Or part of it, anyway.’

‘I’ve never heard anyone complain about having an extra weekend day before,’ said Sarah.

‘Yeah, no, but I had a hangover.’

‘Do you have one now?’

Stewart sat up, looking thoughtful. 'No.'

'So you're well ahead of the game, I'd say. Sore feet, brain fuddled by magic, but no hangover and an extra Saturday. Sounds like a win.'

'Well when you put it like that...' He accepted a mug of coffee. 'Thanks. OK, so how are we going to find Malorie, then?'

33: What an Echo Should Sound Like

When your whole life — all that you can remember of it, anyway — has been running and hiding from something that wants to harm you; or at least that wants you to think it wants to harm you; then you get used to finding hiding places where there shouldn't be any.

Malorie runs through a landscape like nothing that ever existed on Earth; though not like one that no one on Earth had ever imagined. She thinks she recognises this one. An older cousin used to have a poster on his wall, one that had come from a still older brother (and also Malorie's cousin, but not one that she remembered ever meeting, as he had emigrated to Canada when she was young). A fantasy artist's vision of floating rocks and impossible colours, of cliffs that could never have stood up under their own weight, populated by beasts that could never have moved under the weight of their own bodies.

The cliffs stay up and the beasts move, though at least they don't bother her. They seem as scared as she is, perhaps running from the same entity she is.

But you can't stay scared for ever. Eventually you just become tired, exhausted, but you keep going because you have to.

She knows all this is not real, in some sense. But in another, she knows, it is

completely real, and if — or, she fears, when — the Cringemaker catches her, it really will be the end.

Though she fears, too, that the end will not be quick.

A cave in one of those impossible cliffs: a traffic cone made out of purple rock, balanced on its blunt point, and in that snubbed end, an opening. Nothing good can come of going in there, she knows, yet the desire to hide is too strong, the desire to remove herself from the view of the mauve and ochre sky and the prehistoric, sharp-taloned creatures that flit across it, overwhelms her.

She ducks into the cave.

The darkness is welcoming. How long has she been out in brightly-lit environments, running from approaching predators? How long since she has slept?

Years. She has been here for years. Maybe centuries, she sometimes thinks. Yet she knows, even as she sinks down onto a rocky ledge within the sheltering purple bluff, that that is not true. It can't be true. None of this can be real. She is still alive and has eaten nothing. She drank some water once, from a waterfall running down the side of another cliff. She remembers standing by it for a long time, thinking of the warnings to travellers in faerie and other fantastic realms: do not eat or drink anything, or you will never leave. Something about pomegranate seeds had popped into her mind.

But she had been so thirsty, and the water had tinkled so appealingly and looked so refreshing.

First she had splashed it on her face, enjoying the bracing chill — enjoying the feeling, even here. Then she had moistened her lips, just slightly, not letting any in. But that had been too much: she could not hold back; had drunk greedily. The water had tasted fresh and sweet, and did not make her ill.

That was two days ago, she thinks, and she has not felt thirsty again since. Nor does she feel hungry, and sitting in the cave she tries to remember when she last ate. She remembers going to see Sarah's band, hiding from Annie. Before that. She made some pasta before going out. That, then, was her last meal. Maybe in the sense of final, as well as most recent.

In her times of greatest terror she has only experienced this place viscerally, conscious thought erased, replaced by flight, panic, the urge to escape, hide, protect herself.

But there have been calmer times too, when she has felt less threatened, or not at all, and she has tried to think rationally about her situation. If she is to escape, she has first to understand her predicament.

First, why are there these interludes of calm? Perhaps they are intended to make the ones of terror all the more intense. But could the entity that holds her here have other matters to attend to? Perhaps other victims, trapped like her, and it splits its time between them. In which case her moments of respite are someone else's times of torment. She doesn't like that idea. It tinges her relief with guilt, even though she well knows none of this is her fault.

But maybe she is the only one, and the entity itself needs respite, calm, rest. If so, these are the times when she has the best chance to escape. In either case, they are surely that.

Though she wonders what escape would even mean? Where is she, where could she escape to? Things changed when the thing released Sarah. Malorie had felt something new: something like a lifting, something like an awakening. She knew then that she was more fully *here*, and surmised that her body, as well as her mind, had been brought to wherever this was.

She certainly feels fully embodied.

Except for the lack of hunger. So she concludes that, even if she is here in body, the entity is still messing with her mind: so little time has passed that she hasn't got hungry yet.

Everything else is distortion.

She clings to this conclusion because it is logical, but not least because it means her friends won't have given up on her yet. They will be doing all the can to free her. And if she can do something — anything — to free herself from within, to escape; then there is hope.

Though there is a third possible reason for the calmer interludes, she realises. The entity might be using them to observe her. She could be its only victim, all its attention keenly focused on her. It just changing what it does to see how she reacts.

But it doesn't feel like that. When the terror descends she is somehow aware of the attention of the creature — for creature, living being of some kind, it must be. She senses it watching her, waiting, observing her reactions. Enjoying her terror.

But during these times, the respites, she feels no such surveillance. Which doesn't mean it's not there, of course. The thing can put images in her mind, as she well knows. But she chooses to believe the deep part of her perception, her sensibility that — she believes, she hopes — the Cringemaker cannot reach.

She believes she is unobserved at the moment, sitting in her purple cave. But the cave stops a little way beyond where she sits. She dreams of it being a tunnel, a way out. But there is nothing but darkness beyond.

No: not only darkness. Deep in the back of the cave there is something, she senses. Below hearing, beyond sight, at some almost prehuman level of awareness, she knows — gradually, gradually, knowledge dawns — something is there.

Maybe this is the start of the next cycle of terror. Perhaps something will loom at her out of the darkness, or drag her in. But again, she trusts her deepest feelings, stands up from the ledge she has been sitting on, and moves deeper in, toward the back of the cave.

Does she sense a movement? She thinks so. She edges forward. 'Hello?' Speaking

may be a mistake, but the instinct to reach out, to communicate, is too strong.

Something moves in the gloom. The cave entrance is far behind her; little light from the seventies-rock-poster sky can reach here. But there is a glimmer, she thinks. A reflection on metal? Something swings, dangles. Something like an earring? Like her own, she thinks, with a twinge of surprise that somehow, after all this, she is still wearing her earrings.

‘Who’s there? Hello?’

Her voice echoes. She hears her words back, almost as clear as inside her own head: ‘... Hello?...’

But that makes no sense. The cave isn’t big enough to make such a delayed echo. And it doesn’t resonate in the way a cave’s echo should. There is a dissonance between the feeling of the rock around her and the sound of her voice bouncing back. Malorie has spent a lot of time adjusting the reverb controls on her guitar amplifier, and playing with the echo settings in music software. She knows what an echo should sound like, even an artificial one.

This is not that.

This is a person, echoing her; repeating her words.

Or coincidentally saying the same thing. She turns her head from side to side, trying to direct her hearing: is there a person there? Are they breathing? As she does she feels her braids and her earrings swing against her neck.

The glint in front of her moves too.

‘Are you—’ But what does she mean to say?

‘... you—’ comes the repeat. Not echo, but repetition.

There *is* reverb, resonance, from the cavern walls. But from two voices, not one.

‘How are you doing that?’ she says, but she knows, even as the other voice says ‘that,’ almost at the same instant she does.

Is this the Cringemaker fucking with her head again? She thinks it probably is, but determines to face it. Let things play out as they may. At least she is not running in terror from some unseen predator. Not yet, anyway.

Malorie inches forward. The other person, hidden in the shadows, does not, which surprises her a little. Under her feet the ground feels like it has become sandy, over the cave's rock floor. Her leg brushes against an outcrop at shin level. She thinks about how painful it would have been if she had been a few centimetres to the left, and wishes she had a torch.

Then she thinks of her phone, forgotten in a jacket pocket. She had tried it in the early hours of her ordeal, hoping a signal might somehow get sent from this impossible place. It had not, of course, but surely the torch function will work? She fishes it out of her pocket and thumbs the torch icon. Dazzling white light fills the cave, sending shadows running away from her. For a moment she feels surrounded by moving things.

Aiming the light low she steps forward more confidently, picking her way between potential shin-bruising or ankle-turning obstacles.

'Right, let's see you,' she says, expecting the replicated response. It does not come. Nor is the other person holding up a light to dazzle her.

A small figure huddles in the dark, half-hidden behind an outcrop. Malorie moves sideways to get a better view, always cautious of what's at her feet. Suddenly she thinks of bats, and wonders if she should also be cautious of what the cave holds above her head. But she is learning to trust her senses here, and there is sense neither of other life, nor of danger.

Soon she can see all of the figure. A strange sensation comes over Malorie as she looks down at it. Has she been here before? Is the entity making her live again through an earlier experience?

No, it's not that. But the sensation is like memory, like familiarity. Yet the figure

crouched on the cave floor is not her, as she had started to think it might be. And she has never crouched on a cave floor like that.

Or...

‘Just get it over with.’ Malorie jumps, startled, as the huddled figure speaks. As her heart and breathing slow she realises it sounds like a little girl. Get what over with? What can she mean? Malorie points her phone’s light more directly at the girl. She is curled into a ball, trying to make herself as small as possible. She is wearing dirty blue pyjamas, and clutching a bunch of keys. And as she looks up into the torchlight and opens her eyes, Malorie realises who she is; and thinks she understands where she is.

34: Anyone Can Do It

Out on the Marshes again, and soon to be out on his feet, Stewart thought. I should be in bed, in Tooting, away from all this shit. But he knew he couldn't give up now, couldn't stop whatever it is he was involved in, and couldn't stop at least trying to help these women he was involved with. For Malorie, of course, but also for himself. He had been confused, confounded, and befuddled over the last couple of days, and he owed it to himself as much as anyone else to find his way through whatever it all was, to make sense of it, and to survive.

There had to be more than that to it, though. Not just survive. They had to come out on top. Had to rescue Malorie, defeat this thing. If it could be defeated. Drive it away, at least. Remove the danger, or lessen it. But he was little more than a hanger-on to these powerful women who understood things, knew what they were doing. He wasn't even useful as muscle. He wasn't very muscular, and Constance and Annie were much more use in a fight than he was. Even Sarah probably was. She was physically fit, at least.

But did they know what they were doing? There were times when Annie, and even the more mysterious Constance, seemed to be winging it. Making it up as they went along.

Fake it till you make it, maybe. He had felt like that at work this last few weeks, like

he was paddling desperately to keep afloat, and not able to ask for help, in case he was revealed as a fake. Is that what his two witch-companions were doing? But no, they obviously had competencies, could do things.

Just as their enemies could. He thought of his futile, foolish, sleepless trip to the thunder church last night. Had even his idea to go there been part of their befuddling spell? Had they reeled him in like a fish? But if so, why? What did they gain by drawing him there, then letting him escape?

Letting him escape? What did he mean by that? They hadn't let him go. He had taken his chance when it came, and then been helped by Annie when she had found him.

Or had his rambling thoughts stumbled on something? Maybe they *had* let him go, made it seem to him like he had escaped; even pretended to follow him but fail to find him. But why? What would they gain by doing that?

The only thing that made sense would be to lead them to the others. But that didn't seem enough. He and his friends weren't hard to find, exactly. Not at the moment, at least. Unless the cult people had done something stronger, deeper, to him. What if they were controlling his mind? Was that even possible?

'Uh, Constance?' he said. She was nearest to him as they made their way across the expanse of open grassland, which, even now, as the autumn afternoon tended toward dusk, seemed impossibly big and open for London.

'Hmm?'

'I think I might be... I mean, could I be...' but his thoughts were distracted, and Constance seemed to be concentrating on what Annie and Sarah were doing up ahead.

He stopped, letting Constance walk on. This was futile. They might as well give up. Malorie was gone and they had no chance of getting her back. And the thing that had taken

her would be coming back for the rest of them. One by one or all at once, it would have them eventually.

Stewart sat down on the damp grass and put his head in his hands. It was all worthless. Darkness was closing in from all directions. He might as well cut his wrists here. Or just jump in the river.

Footsteps nearby disturbed his bleak thoughts. Black-booted feet appeared in front of him. He sensed other figures to his left and right.

‘Sorry Stewart,’ said Constance’s voice. ‘We haven’t been taking proper care of you. This might be a bit disturbing.’

There was a flash that wasn’t light; or not just light. It was like a flash in the very fabric of his soul. He lifted his head. The darkness in his thoughts rolled away.

‘We should have realised the churchies would have left booby-traps. And you’re the most vulnerable of us.’

Annie and Sarah, to his right and left, reached down hands and pulled him to his feet.

‘They tell me boys are less well protected against this shit,’ Said Sarah with a smile. ‘But to be fair, you did go into the heart of the beast.’

‘Isn’t it belly? I felt like I was being eaten, anyway. Like the thing that got Malorie was coming back for all of us. And you’ve been in the belly of that beast, haven’t you?’

Constance almost jumped as he said this. ‘Of course! Why didn’t I think of that? Sarah! You’re our link. You’re how we can get to Malorie.’

‘Oh great,’ Sarah said. ‘I don’t like the sound of that. At all.’

‘No, don’t worry, it’ll be fine,’ said Constance. ‘We just have to... hmm...’

‘Yeah, pretty dangerous,’ said Annie. ‘Surprised I didn’t think of it.’

‘Seems like none of us is thinking straight,’ said Sarah. ‘Can we do anything to stop

that problem?’

‘We could burn that bloody so-called church down,’ said Annie. ‘But they’d just move somewhere else.’

‘Isn’t there a counter spell?’ Stewart’s spirits were rising so dramatically he felt as if he’d taken ecstasy or something. ‘You two did something that improved things back at Sarah’s, just by talking about the spell. And whatever you did for me just now. Thanks for that, by the way.’

‘We can counter the shit they’re throwing at us when we know it’s happening,’ Annie explained. ‘But it takes concentration, and if we’re doing that, we can’t work on helping Malorie or exorcising the demon.’

‘Demon? Is that what we’re calling it now?’ Constance sounded surprised.

‘Just translating for the non-weird folks. It’s not what you probably think of as a demon,’ Annie glanced at Stewart and Sarah in turn. ‘But I think it’s the kind of entity that originated their legends. The ur-demon, if you like. Or ur-angel. Much the same thing.’

Since Annie had never before been as forthcoming about this stuff, Stewart was fascinated, but found it hard to take in. Before he could ask any more questions, Sarah said, ‘We don’t care about all that, unless it helps us to beat it and get Malorie back.’

‘Sarah’s right,’ said Constance, ‘we have to stay focused. And we’re all having a hard time doing that. Us nearly forgetting Stewart. Stewart running off in the night. You babbling on about the origins of demons.’

A moment of anger flashed across Annie’s face, and was quickly replaced by understanding. ‘You’re right.’

‘What’s the solution?’ said Stewart. ‘How do we keep focused, stop this... whatever it is from distracting us.’

‘Setting fire to the church might not be such a bad idea, you know,’ said Constance.

‘I’m not averse to a little arson when it’s needed.’

‘Jesus, Connie, there might be people in there. What would aunt Clarissa say?’

Constance almost jumped again. ‘Mum! See, it’s befuddling us all. I’d forgotten about her. She can help us. And she’d probably pour the petrol herself if she were here. Or start the fire in a more efficient way.’ She turned to Annie. ‘We’ve got to stop this curse. Or at least hold it back for long enough for us to think, make some plans. Like, why the hell are we out on the Marshes again?’

She looked around her, turning on the spot, arms out like a ballet dancer. ‘Does anyone remember why we came here?’

‘Because this is the last place we saw Malorie?’ said Stewart. ‘Or at least, saw the crack in the sky, the entity.’

‘Yes, but that doesn’t mean we’ll find our way back to it from here.’

‘It’s a starting point,’ said Annie. ‘And we decided it back at Sarah’s when we were suppressing the befuddlement. You’re right, we’ve got to stop it. It keeps coming back.’

‘Is there something—’ Sarah stopped in the middle of speaking, hesitant. Stewart thought she looked scared to go on. She took a breath. ‘Look, could you teach us to do something.’ She indicated Stewart. ‘Maybe we could learn how to hold off the befuddlement spell. So you two can focus on Malorie. Oh, I don’t know. It probably takes years to learn. And I guess you need to have skills, right? You have to be born to it? Sorry, it was just a stupid idea.’ Sarah sat down on the grass, visibly losing confidence. Stewart thought it was a good idea, but felt some of her obvious misgivings.

Annie and Constance, though, were staring at each other with a wild intensity. ‘Why did we not think of that?’ said Annie.

‘I mean, we’re not *supposed* to,’ said Constance, ‘but this is an emergency...’

‘And who does the supposing, anyway? It’s definitely worth the risk.’

‘I’ve never liked that rule anyway. We should share the gifts. Be more open. Less occult. Come on.’

It sounded like a decision. She sat down on the grass facing Sarah. Cries from a distant crowd of late football players drifted across the grassland to them. Annie sat down too, so Stewart joined them.

‘Sarah, this is great.’ Sarah had her head in her hands, but lifted it to look quizzically at her cousin. ‘We can do what you said. Or maybe not exactly that, but we can do something. There’s a secret to magic.’ Constance’s eyes flicked to Annie.

Stewart thought Annie gave a half shrug, and she said, ‘They’re this far in. Can’t hurt now.’

‘There’s a secret, Constance went on, her glance taking in Stewart as well as Sarah. And it’s this: anyone can do it.’ She stopped, and let this statement hang in the cold morning air. Cheers and groans came from the distant footballers as someone scored. Stewart watched his breath rise in front of him, and wondered if this was all going to go the way it seemed. The way he half hoped, half feared.

Sarah was sitting up straighter now, and Stewart realised she must have been feeling some of the will to give up that had assailed him earlier. ‘What do you mean, anyone can do it?’

‘Magic. It’s not something restricted to us, to people who’ve learned it, or grown up with it. Witches, or whatever. Anyone can do magic.’

Stewart stood up, gazed at the two women, and said, ‘I don’t believe it. I don’t fucking *believe* it. You’re telling me that all this shit goes on, what, all the time? And that we

could all be doing it? We could be casting spells all over the fucking place? More importantly, we could be *researching* it?' He stopped talking, panting, threw up his hands, turned, and paced away.

A few metres from the others, surprised by his reaction, he began to wonder what he was doing, where he was going. He was annoyed at Constance's revelation, at the lateness of it, both in their quest to rescue Malorie, and in his life. But he didn't doubt it for a second. He had seen things, had *felt* things, that told him not just that magic was real, but that it flowed through him, probably through everyone and everything.

Why, then, was his reaction to turn away from his friends. He stopped walking, trying to understand himself

They're fucking with our heads. Shit. As realisation dawned, he understood, knew instantly that he was right. He turned again and jogged back to the others.

They looked up as he approached. 'Sorry. I overreacted. I think it's because of them. They're trying to break us up now.' He waved his thumb vaguely over his shoulder, in the direction he thought the the Thunder Mountain church building might be. Annie and Constance met eyes again, realisation showing.

'He's right, I think,' said Constance. 'It's even stronger than we thought.'

'Are you for a bit of teaching,' said Annie, with a resigned sigh.

Constance nodded. 'Oh yes. I've been waiting for this day.'

'What do you mean?' Sarah stood up and faced her cousin.

'I've always believed — well, maybe not always, I'm up and down on it. Sometimes it seems like a good idea, others not so much. But I kind of wanted something to come along and force our hands. And here we are.'

'Force *whose* hand? Always believed in *what*?' Stewart thought it was fairly clear

what Constance had meant, but Sarah obviously wanted to make her spell it out.

‘Oh! In de-occultification. As no one else calls it.’ Stewart caught Annie’s eye-roll as Constance said this. ‘And who... well, I’m not going to go into that just now. Just know there are people who want to control things, to hold onto secrets, keep knowledge to themselves. I don’t believe in that on principle. Though sometimes I see their point.’

‘You wouldn’t give everyone the recipe to make an atomic bomb,’ said Annie.

‘You can find that online, or so I hear,’ said Stewart.

‘Hmmp. A virus then. A killer that would spread all around the world and bring a pandemic. If you knew how to make that, you wouldn’t want everyone else to know too, would you?’

‘Is that what this is like, then?’ said Sarah. ‘Is magic that deadly?’

‘No,’ said Constance.

‘It can be,’ said Annie at the same time. ‘If you know what you’re doing. Or worse, if you don’t.’

The two women stared at each other. Or maybe ‘glared’, Stewart thought.

‘What?’ said Annie, after a few moments. ‘They’ve got to know.’

Constance sighed. ‘Yes, you’re right. They should know. Sarah. Stewart,’ she said, turning to each of them in turn. ‘We can teach you enough in a few minutes so that you can help Annie and me. So that we can all work together on this. But it *is* dangerous. Or can be, anyway. Both to you and to others.’

‘I don’t care, I want to do it,’ said Sarah, almost before Constance had finished speaking. ‘I have to do what I can to help Malorie.’

‘Uh, yeah, me too,’ said Stewart, more hesitantly. ‘I’m in.’

Constance’s head was turning back and forth as she looked at them in turn. She

seemed to be weighing up their responses, or maybe judging their capabilities, Stewart thought.

‘It could mean serious physical injury. Or it could destroy your sanity — whatever that means. Or you could die.’ She locked gazes with her cousin.

Before Sarah could answer, Annie said, ‘Or you might end up a mad old witch woman.’

Sarah smiled. ‘I think I could cope with that.’

‘Even me?’ asked Stewart. Everyone turned to him.

‘To be honest I don’t know what you might end up as,’ said Annie.

‘I’ve never really worked with the male principle before,’ said Constance.

‘I have,’ said Annie. ‘It’s not so different. In fact, it can be quite useful. That’s kind of why I roped him in.’

‘You were planning this?’ Constance’s voice started to turn towards anger.

‘Not planning. Just opening up possibilities. When I began to get a sense of what might be going on, I thought maybe combining my sex magic with your chaste magic could be a way to tackle it.’

‘It’s not “chaste magic”, it’s just — oh, never mind. It sounds like a good idea, anyway.’

‘W-wait, what exactly do you mean?’ Stewart had a sudden wash of worry.

Annie and Constance both smiled, and Sarah raised an eyebrow.

‘Classic male fear,’ said Annie. ‘No worries about the danger of death or dismemberment, but if there’s a chance that he has to get naked in public...’

‘It’s not that...’ but if he was honest that *was* it, or at least part of this new fear that he felt.

‘Don’t worry, you won’t have to perform in front of everyone. Hard to see how we’d have time for that, anyway.’ Annie tapped a finger on her head. ‘It’s all up here, though. Masculine. Feminine. Male and female, all that.’

‘I don’t think I entirely agree with that,’ said Stewart, letting his eyes roam over her unmistakably female body.

‘Yeah, that stuff’s obvious, of course,’ Annie said, shaking her upper body so her breasts jiggled. ‘I’m talking about the *principles*, the deep wells of masculinity and femininity in the human psyche. We’ve all got access to both of them to some degree, but it’s about balance, the way the two components merge and combine.’

‘She’s not explaining it very well,’ Constance cut in. ‘Men have a different vibration, a different sense of where their strengths lie. You can sense it if you’re attuned to things.’

‘I don’t think that makes it any clearer,’ said Sarah, ‘but it sounds like having a guy involved is good, because it gives us an extra dimension, right?’

‘Err, yes, something like that.’

Stewart realised that neither Constance nor Annie could really explain this stuff. ‘You just do it instinctively, don’t you?’ he said. ‘It’s not thought through; not researched at all.’

‘There have been plenty of experiments, down the centuries,’ said Annie, turning to gaze around the marshes. ‘Not what you’d call scientific, though.’

‘It’s hard to do double-blind when you’re calling on forces that flow through yourself,’ Constance added.

Stewart nodded, and was about to ask more questions, when Sarah said, ‘What about trans people? If magic is so gendered and all that?’

‘Hard to say, definitively,’ said Annie. ‘It’s still pretty rare.’

‘It mostly goes with biology, if you ask me,’ said Constance. ‘Everyone has some

access to both principles, and they're really both part of the same whole, but the sex you're born into is fundamental.'

'Sexuality and desire affect it too, of course,' said Annie. 'Which is why I wanted him. Although where that leaves you...'

She trailed off, and Constance seemed about to say more, but Sarah said, 'Someone's coming.' She was looking out across the Marshes, in the direction they had walked from.

'Is it them?' Stewart felt his voice tremble.

'I can't tell for sure yet,' said Annie, looking that way. 'Or I could, but then they'd know for sure we're here.'

'They've probably already felt our activity,' said Constance, joining them in standing gazing.

'But we haven't done anything yet,' said Sarah. Stewart glanced over his shoulder and saw that she was pulling herself to her feet. She joined them, putting her hands on Constance's and his shoulders. He felt a frisson from her touch that he knew meant nothing, but he wondered if it was something to do with that male principle and sexual magic that Annie had been talking about. 'Should we hide?' she went on. 'Or fight them again?'

'Neither,' said Constance. 'We need to split up.'

'Is that wise?' said Stewart, thinking of horror films and basements. 'Or is it the befuddlement talking?'

'No, she's right,' said Annie. 'Two of us have to go and deal with that church, and the other two focus on Malorie.'

'Stewart and I'll take the church,' said Constance. This proposed split was almost the most surprising one Stewart could have imagined, but Constance had her reasons. 'Annie and

Sarah have links to Malorie and to the entity, so you two have to focus on that. And I'll be able to teach Stewart enough while we head over there.'

Both Annie and Sarah looked dubious about this, but they could see the logic.

'We'll get into the trees,' said Annie. 'At least get some cover. And you two get back here as soon as you've done something about the church.'

'Yes. If we can.' Constance's comment did not reassure Stewart, but she went on, 'Come on. We'll head off this way, and if those people are from there it should distract them.' She pointed in a direction that would go straight through one of the football games, and not toward the bridge that would take them back to the built-up area where the church was.

'OK... but don't forget that they've seen me. Up close. That woman who's in charge.'

'We'll just have to cope with that. They've seen Sarah too, and they'll recognise either of Annie and me pretty quickly. This is the right way to split our forces.'

She began to jog across the grassland, long coat swirling around her ankles. Stewart dragged his weary body into running alongside. He glanced back once to see Annie and Sarah already disappearing among the trees.

'What are we going to do, then?' he gasped, after a few minutes.

Constance looked towards him as if she was surprised to see him there. 'Oh... I thought about burning the place down like we were talking about. But I'd prefer not to take the chance of killing anyone. So I thought maybe a little property damage, then some general stunning of the people who come out to see what's going on.'

'And by stunning, do you mean...'

'Like you saw us do last night. I can show you how. No need to use your fists.'

This last came as some relief to Stewart, at least, but the idea of striking people down from a distance was also less than edifying. If he hadn't seen it done, he wouldn't have

believed it possible, and he found it hard to grasp the idea that he might be trained — in just a few minutes from now — to be able to do it.

There was no sign of the people they had thought might be from the church. They passed some kind of pavilion and a small car-parking area, crossed a paved path and ducked in among some trees. Constance stopped, and Stewart bumped into her. 'Sorry.'

'The canal's just ahead. We'll need to cut right on the towpath to get to the bridge, but first I've got to show you how to do this.' She looked deep into his eyes. Stewart felt like he could fall into her eyes. But not in any sort of romantic way. Her gaze felt more intimate than any he had shared with a lover, yet at the same time more distant, more alien, than that of a shark. Despite the cold November air, Stewart realised he was sweating.

And something touched him, far below his normal senses, deep within his psyche, his soul, whatever that was, he felt something like a click. But nothing at all like a click. It was as if the remaining leaves on the autumnal trees around them had turned to gold — literal, metallic gold, not just the colour — and then back to their faded brown, through all the colours of their nature.

'That should do it,' said Constance. 'Come on.'

'I feel like I should be saying something about knowing kung fu,' Stewart said, as a new awareness oozed through his body. 'Especially after all that chosen-one talk when you visited me.'

Constance glanced over at him as they jogged along. 'You're not a chosen one. I mean, I guess Annie chose you, in some way. But it's not like there's a special being, a unique one, who's going to save us all. Sorry.'

'I didn't think there was. Or I was. Just making a joke about the way you dumped all that into my head. Or opened up my senses, or whatever. Why *did* you come to see me that

time, anyway?’

‘Oh... well there was some sort of nexus at that house, but I don’t think it’s connected to this. Malorie was relevant, obviously, and I didn’t know she’d moved out. You were of interest, largely because of your connections to Malorie and Annie, I guess. And... well, I hoped I could find out something about what Annie was up to. I didn’t expect I’d end up working with her. But it’s a funny old business, this.’

#

A few minutes later they were back in a built-up area and approaching the graffitied street where the makeshift church building was. Stewart’s sense of trepidation grew as he began to recognise buildings, pieces of artwork, and the general sense of the area.

‘It didn’t go well the last time I came here,’ he said.

‘This time you’ve got me with you. And you know some new things.’

While Stewart knew this was true, he didn’t quite know *what* he knew. Not yet. It was going to take some time for his changed situation to bed in, for him to understand what it was that had changed.

‘What did you do to me? Back there in the trees.’ They stopped their hurried walk. Stewart thought the thunder church would be visible when they turned the corner just ahead.

‘I didn’t really do anything *to* you,’ Constance said. ‘I just helped you see what was always there.’ She paused, looked faraway. ‘Or I redirected your awareness, maybe. Showed you something that had always been close by, but you had learned not to notice it. Everyone learns that. Or nearly everyone.’

‘But, like, could you do that to anyone? Show anyone what they’re missing?’

‘Well... maybe? Some people, anyway. Maybe not most. It was easy with you because of all the things you’ve been through lately. You were primed for revelation, you

might say.'

They stepped out of the way to let a young mother with her buggy pass on the narrow pavement. 'I'm not sure what revelation I've had, though.'

Constance nodded. 'That's the trouble with taking shortcuts. You don't experience the whole journey. And then when you get there you're confused about what to do.'

'If that's a metaphor, I'm not sure it holds up. Though I *am* confused about what we're going to do.'

'Just follow my lead. I don't like rushing things like this, but the confusion field is still being generated, and it's stronger than ever here. Can you feel it?' She raised a quizzical eyebrow at him. 'That's probably why I'm making bad metaphors.'

Stewart could feel the befuddlement they had realised was affecting them, and now he could tell where it was coming from. Whatever he could do now, whatever happened next, he knew they had to stop that.

They turned the corner and saw the thunder on the mountain building, with its chainlink surrounding fence, just up ahead. There were no signs of life. A car was parked inside the fence, as it had been when Stewart had rounded the building in the night. He didn't think it was the same one, but it was hard to be sure.

'You wait here,' said Constance as they reached the fence. 'I'll go to the other side. We just want to give them a shock, right? Distract them so they stop doing what they're doing.'

'Are you sure there are people in there?' The building looked deserted to Stewart.

'Of course. I thought you could feel what's emanating from there?'

'I can, but... well, couldn't it be automated?' Thinking like a programmer, Stewart thought. You don't have to be present when a program is running.

‘I see. No. No, that kind of power, that strength of... I don’t know if “malice” is quite the word. Influence, maybe? Anyway: it needs human minds, human brains, souls, whatever. It needs people to be actively involved concentrating. And luckily for us, it can be stopped if you break their concentration.’ She started walking along the pavement, then came back. ‘I don’t suppose there’s a basement, but it feels like they’re low down. So it might take a good shake to disturb them. Let’s give them hell.’ She raised her hand for a high-five. Stewart reached his to meet hers, and Constance grabbed his and held it for a moment. He felt something flow between them.

Constance dropped his hand and jogged to the other end of the chainlink fence, then round the corner. ‘What are we going to...’ he started to say, far too late. But he knew what they were going to do. He knew what to do.

Constance was in position, the squat blockhouse between them, though he could just see her. Or, no, he couldn’t, she was completely hidden by the building. But he knew exactly where she was, and was somehow aware of what she could see.

‘Three, two, one,’ she said in his head, and they reached out towards the thunder church and brought the lightning.

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Sarah was back on the wooded riverside path she knew well from her runs, and now associated with magic and weird experiences ever since meeting Constance here all those months ago. This time, though, she was there with Annie, who was someone that she had never had negative feelings about, though she had heard the snide comments. But then Malorie had that weird experience which had ended up with her staying with Sarah, and she at least partly blamed Annie for that.

So it was with some suspicion that she was approaching the idea of working with her.

‘You’ve never had sex with her, have you? Malorie, I mean.’

‘What? No! Malorie’s just a friend.’

‘Pity. It would make the connection stronger. Never mind, though.’

‘Is this that sex magic you and Connie were talking about?’

‘She overstates it. Sex is important, but it’s not what drives my abilities. Well... not entirely.’

They gazed back through the thin line of trees. ‘I don’t think they’ve come after us,’ said Sarah.

‘No. It looks like they weren’t from the church at all, because they didn’t follow the others either. Just a coincidence.’

‘So what now?’ Sarah’s thoughts turned to Malorie again, her fears to the torments her friend must be going through.

‘Is there somewhere around here you associate strongly with her?’

Sarah thought for a moment. ‘No, not really. Only out on the marshes, where we were chasing her... last night? Was it last night?’ Her sense of time was very confused. ‘Anyway, I was never here with her. Or, wait, only once. We had a picnic over there in the summer. But that was before all this started happening.’

Annie looked in the direction Sarah had pointed. ‘Hmm. Well, it’s a start. We’ll go there, and try to get as close as you can to the exact spot you were sitting.’

The watery autumn sun was getting low now, and it was hard to remember which tree it was she and her friends had sat under for shade that day in the summer.

‘OK, I think it’s this one,’ she said after they had walked back and forth for ten minutes. ‘It all looks so different with the leaves fallen and all that.’

‘Right, we’ll make a start, then. I’m going to have to educate you about this shit, and

do it quickly. Sorry if it feels a bit intrusive, but...'

Without waiting for agreement, Annie touched Sarah's head and twisted the world around.

She was a gyroscope: pushed in one direction, she leaned in another, straightened up again, and leaned in a new direction. The remaining leaves were gone from the trees and were all back again in vigorous summer growth, all the colours of nature.

She was in space.

On the surface of a spinning ball.

With seven billion other people.

Everything snapped back to normal and Annie snatched her hand away, looking shocked.

'Shit, that was close,' said Annie, looking down at her hand. She looked up, met Sarah's eyes, looked away. 'I'm getting too old for this shit. Too dangerous.'

'What do you mean? I felt... something. It felt huge. But I don't understand it.'

'No, I think you're OK. But I nearly fell into you. Like I did with—'

Sarah couldn't tell whether Annie's expression was one of being appalled, or of revelation. Most likely a mixture of the two, she realised. 'Do you mean what happened with you and Malorie? Was that... did that nearly happen with me?'

Annie nodded. 'It was going to. But I pulled back in time. It would have been much worse, much more intense with you, because I'd just opened your awareness up.'

'I don't know what Malorie told you about that,' she went on, 'but it was pretty dramatic. Profound.'

'Yeah. She said that. Also that she was horrified. Repelled.'

'It must have been a shock, I know. She ran off straight after, before I was really...

but now I understand.’ She stood looking up at the sky, turning on the spot, mouth open, eyes wide. ‘I know — I *think* I know what it is. Maybe even how to beat it.’

‘That’s great. Isn’t it?’ Sarah watched Annie’s expression as she gazed at the sky, and did not feel reassured.

‘Yes,’ said Annie slowly. ‘But... it’s not going to be easy. And... we might not survive it.’ As their gazes met, Sarah thought she had never seen eyes that looked so old.

‘Right. OK. Well.’ Sarah swallowed. ‘I’m...’ She stopped. Sighed. Shivered. ‘Honestly, I’m fucking terrified of being back inside that thing again. But I’m prepared to take the chance. Malorie would do the same for me. In fact she already did, so...’ Annie nodded, and Sarah realised that she, Annie, did not have any such connection to Malorie, and presumably the danger was to both of them. All of them, if the others got back in time to get involved. ‘I guess we can’t ask you to risk your life, but if you can just tell me what to do. Or show me...’

‘What? Don’t be daft. First, you could never manage it on your own. Second, it’ll take more than one of us. It’ll probably need all four, so I hope the others get back soon. And third, obviously I’m going to stay involved. This is what I *do*.

‘Oh, and fourth, that connection I’ve had with Malorie. It might not help, but there’s a good chance it will. So don’t worry, I’m in.’

Sarah was surprised by the how relieved she felt at this news. Annie was peculiar and could be abrasive, but she sometimes seemed like a force of nature, and Sarah wanted her on her side.

‘So now that you’re up and running, dripping with magic,’ Annie said, ‘let’s get started.’

Am I? Sarah thought. She felt weird, but not full of magic. Though she didn’t know

what that should feel like, of course. But they had to move forwards. 'OK, what do we do?'

'I'm sorry to say,' said Annie, still scanning the sky like a hawker waiting for her bird to return, 'we have to summon that thing.'

'I thought you said summoning wasn't—'

'I said you couldn't summon the Green Man, or something like it. This kind of entity is a different kettle of bats. Not that I think trying to summon a thing like it is a good idea, but...' Annie stopped turning, stopped gazing at the sky, and turned to Sarah. 'Look, that cult, they probably think they brought forth a demon or something, hoping to control it. But that's not what it's like. The kind of ritual they probably did, it's not like setting a trap, where you end up with an animal in a net, or trapped in a pit. It's more like... like laying down some bait. You're saying, you're shouting out, "Hey, over here! The walls are thin, come on through!" And maybe something comes through. But you've set out bait without a trap. You don't end up with a tiger in a pit. You've got a tiger in your village. And that's rarely what you want.'

'So we don't want to do that either.'

'No. But the tiger's already in our village.' She gestured up at the light and untorn sky. 'Or it hasn't gone far away yet, anyway. We want to attract it back to us, so we can...'

'Kill it?' said Sarah, hopefully.

'Yeah, well the metaphor breaks down a bit there. I don't think you can kill this kind of thing. But the opposite of summoning is banishing, and that's what we'll have to try to do.'

Sarah looked at the sky that Annie seemed so interested in. The clouds were clearing and some last patches of blue showing through as the sun sank. It had been the kind of bright autumn day that she loved to go for a run on, and she tried to remember when she had last done so. It was probably just the day before yesterday, but so much had happened recently

that she barely knew what day it was, or whether she was meant to be somewhere today.

‘Can you see something up there?’ she said.

‘What?’ said Annie, turning to her? ‘Oh, no, I can’t see anything you can’t. I’m just... hoping to.’ She shook her head. ‘Which is a waste of time.’

‘I don’t think hope is a waste of time,’ said Sarah. ‘But I guess you need to do something along with it. So what do we need to do next?’

‘Can you feel it?’ said Annie, now directing her gaze across the marshes back toward Hackney’s dense housing. ‘There’s a change. In the distraction spell.’

‘I don’t think...’ Sarah began, then realised she *could* feel something. A lightening, a lifting. A growing sense of release. ‘Yes! They’ve done it!’

‘I’m not sure about that,’ said Annie. ‘Not yet. It’s lessened, but it’s still there. They’ve maybe started to do it. But the culty bastards are probably fighting back.’

‘Let’s not waste the opportunity, then,’ said Sarah.

‘OK. We don’t need a ritual, because they’ve already done one and let it in. We just need some new bait, and that should be you. Except... it already let you go. Have you any idea why it did that?’

‘It said it was random, a bet. A gamble; me or Malorie. There was a roulette wheel...’

‘Oh, yes, the gambling thing. You said. Well. Not exactly.’ And Sarah remembered how they had been linked last night, all four of them, how it had seemed that they were about to connect to the entity, maybe attack it, maybe communicate with it.

And then they had themselves been attacked by the cultists. And everything after that had been muddled, confused. ‘Did they only do the confusion spell thing when they attacked us? Last night, when they broke our link?’

‘Broke our link and made us forget about it, you mean? There’s me and Constance

telling you guys anyone can do this shit, when you should've known that all along. You were right in the middle of it last night. Fuck, they've really been fucking with us. In fact...' She stopped talking for several seconds, staring far away, before starting up again. 'I think they're not just communicating with that entity: they're drawing power from it. Or it's feeding them with energy. They couldn't be strong enough to mess us around that much. They *can't* be.'

Sarah felt that the phrase, 'at least I hope not' was missing from the end of Annie's speech but she didn't say anything. She just sat on the grass, feeling it cold and a little damp under her, and thought of how her mother would have told her not to sit on it when it was wet.

All the time, she could feel her thoughts growing sharper, her insights clearer. At least the potential for them. The zone of confusion that had been filling their minds without them realising it for — the last day? Longer? Now it was receding, slowly, like a tide going out.

And at the same time, she felt the magic in her: remembered how it had been last night when the four of their minds had been linked and they had been about to send a challenge to the Cringemaker — or had they sent it? — and their collective power had coursed through her. That same power was in her now: weaker because not reinforced by the others; unfocused because she didn't know how to direct it; but present, sizzling away deep inside her like onions in hot oil.

'Take my hands,' said Annie, pulling her to her feet. 'Two people isn't exactly a circle, but it doesn't really matter. Remember what it was like last night? Try to bring that back.'

'I thought you said it was dangerous for you; you might fall into me...?'

'That was different. We don't go deep this way, just link up our — I don't know, some people say auras, but that always sounds too hippy-dippy for me. Just let it happen.'

They stood together under the wide sky as the watery November sun sank over the houses of Hackney and the City towers beyond. Annie's hands cold in hers, Sarah briefly wondered what any passing people would think they were up to. Then she suppressed the distracting thought and focused on the internal sizzling and her memory of last night's linkup.

Her thoughts felt so clear and crisp now that the occluding field was fading. How long had that being going for? This felt not like a return to how her mind had always worked, but like a new level of thought. Even that thought about thinking itself couldn't distract her from keeping her thoughts focused on Annie and what they were trying to do.

The meld formed. It felt slighter than last night's version, thinner, somehow, but clearer, easy to understand, simpler to join and to influence. She and Annie didn't fall into each other, but mind spoke to mind, the two formed a common purpose.

They reached out into the void, seeking the creature that had their friend.

Almost without trying, they found it.

It was waiting for them. It sucked them in.

35: In the Gloom

The girl huddled in the back of the cave is herself. Her younger self, herself as a girl. And that realisation, that truth, tells Malorie that there is an escape route open to her.

And yet it makes no sense. It can only be the Cringemaker's illusion. She has no memory of being in this cave as a girl.

Unless... what if the Cringemaker exists outside of time? Could it have reached back into her life and sucked in this earlier version of herself? And is that more likely than this all being an illusion, designed to confuse and distract her?

Is there another cave, another version of her, slightly older than the girl? Maybe teenage Malorie? Or what about future versions of herself, ones from later in her life? But that would suggest she *has* a future, which she hasn't really believed since she was pulled into this place, years ago.

Last night.

She knows that less than a day has passed, no matter how many bad experiences she has gone through. In some of them she wasn't herself. Not herself of now, at least.

In some of them she was a girl. *This* girl.

‘It’s using time,’ she says. ‘It’s using our timeline against us.’

The girl gazes up at her, her terror reduced, fading slightly. But she remains wary, conscious that this could be a trick. Another trick.

‘Maybe it didn’t mean to let us meet,’ Malorie goes on. ‘If two of us work together we’ve got more chance of beating it, of escaping.’ She barely knows what she is saying, even what she is thinking, just knows that there is a new hope, here, a possibility. One that wasn’t there before.

‘Who *are* you?’ says the girl.

‘Don’t you recognise me?’ says Malorie. ‘No, I don’t suppose you would. There’s no reason... I’m... a friend. I think we can help each other.’

The girl looks at her with what she remembers her dad calling ‘an old-fashioned look’ — a term she had never really understood, but thought she did now.

‘Yeah, I suppose there’s no reason why you should believe me. I might be another trick that... they’ve sent to torment you. But I promise you I’m not. How long have you been here?’

She can almost read the girl’s thoughts from the expressions that flit across her face. Was I this transparent to other people she wonders, or is it just because she’s me.

‘I don’t know,’ the girl eventually says. ‘A long time. I’m hungry.’ Her voice sounds familiar and yet not, to Malorie. Our voices sound different from outside our head, of course, but she is familiar enough with hearing her recorded voice from making demos with the band. Singing is not speaking, though. And her voice must have changed since she was the age the girl is.

‘I don’t have any food, I’m sorry. And it’s probably best not to eat anything we find here. How old are you?’ Malorie thinks around ten, and she vaguely remembers the pyjamas

from about then.

‘Nine,’ the girl says, after a long pause. ‘What is this place? What’s happened to me?’ Her voice and gaze show more interest, more aliveness, as she starts to think Malorie might not be a threat.

‘What’s the last thing you remember before being here?’ Malorie asks.

‘I was in bed. Asleep. I woke up and there was this sort of roaring sound, and something was in my room. I could see something moving. There was light from outside through the curtains. Streetlights. Then it went black and I was here.’

‘Here in this cave?’

The girl nods. ‘I went and looked out when it got light, but there were all these dinosaur kind of things, and I came back here and hid. Until you found me.’ She looks scared again at this.

‘What are the keys for?’ Malorie nods towards the bunch clamped in the girl’s fist.

She looks down at them, as if they are unfamiliar and a little bit frightening. ‘I don’t know. I found them when I woke up here. I thought they might be important, so I just held on to them.’

Malorie smiles. ‘Good. I think they might be just what we need to help us get out of here.’

‘Where is here? I thought I was still dreaming at first. Is this what it’s like to be stuck in a dream?’

As the girl says this, Malorie has a memory. There was a time as a child, she recalls, when she was troubled by vivid dreams of fearsome events. She would wake up screaming or crying. It got so bad that her parents had taken her to see someone: doctor, therapist, child psychologist, she wasn’t quite sure. The dreams had lessened over time, but she had

sometimes thought that her problems of anxiety and depression had started then.

‘I don’t really know where here is. I think you’re right, though: it is a bit like being stuck in a bad dream. What we have to do is work together to help each other get out. Can you do that for me, do you think?’

The girl manages a nod, and almost returns Malorie’s smile. ‘But I still don’t know who you are,’ she says.

‘Well,’ says Malorie, ‘it’s a bit complicated. My name’s Malorie.’ She sees the girl start at this. ‘And I think that’s your name too, isn’t it?’ Another nod, slowly. ‘So... I think I’m you. You’re me. I’m the older version of you.’

The girl sits back on a rock at this, looking thoughtful. Then she nods. ‘That makes sense,’ she says. ‘I knew there was something familiar about you.’ She meets Malorie’s eyes, gaze steady and no longer frightened. ‘So what do we have to do?’

Impressed with the calm way her younger self is taking this news, Malorie struggles to answer. ‘Well...’ she eventually gets out.

‘Because I have an idea,’ her younger self says.

‘O–OK,’ Malorie says, surprised. ‘What is it?’

‘Something’s trapped us here, right? Captured us. But we’re not tied up, or locked up, or anything. You’ve been out there, walking around?’ At Malorie’s nod, she goes on. ‘And there are monsters out there. But nothing’s come in here till you arrived. I’ve seen some things go right past the opening.’ She indicates the cave mouth, where the bright purple sky is dazzling. ‘I think we’re safe here. It can’t get us while we’re in here.’

‘It does feel safe,’ Malorie muses. There is a distinct difference to the atmosphere in the cave, somehow, from how things were outside. She feels no desire to go back out there. But maybe that feeling of safety is itself a trap. ‘But we can’t stay here forever.’

‘No. But we know I don’t.’ The girl is smiling now. ‘Because I grow up to be you. And look.’ She points towards the back of the cave, away from the bright entrance. ‘It goes further in.’

Malorie, dazzled by looking out of the cave’s mouth, can see nothing in the gloom at the back. As she waits for her vision to adjust she says, ‘Do you think it might be a tunnel?’

‘Could be. Isn’t it worth looking, anyway? I’ve been thinking about it, but I was too scared. But now you’re here.’

‘You’re not scared now?’ Malorie looks her younger self full in the face, thinking how it’s not quite like her memory of herself at that age in a mirror. Not just because this seemingly-real person is not reflecting her, but because her face is the right way round. Or the wrong way, depending on how you think about it. But she has seen photos and a few videos of herself at that age, and it is like looking at them come to life. For a moment she thinks that the girl could be an illusion, a fake, something created by the Cringemaker, conjured to lead her astray, to make her torment that much worse. But everything that has happened until now makes her think the Cringemaker doesn’t work that way. And sometimes you just know things, just understand.

The girl shakes her head. ‘I’m still scared. But it feels safer with company. And we know I survive, right?’

Malorie wonders if this is necessarily true. It depends on where and what this place is, and what the Cringemaker can do, and how time works. But she doesn’t voice these fears, knowing they will do nothing to help. ‘OK. Let’s try going further in.’

The cave narrows towards the back, but Malorie has the sense that it widens again beyond the narrowing. She switches her phone’s torch on again, and shadows dance alarmingly.

‘Do you remember this?’ the girl asks. ‘Do you remember being me? Meeting you?’

‘Mind your head here,’ Malorie says, though the girl’s is lower and less in danger than hers, ‘and your shins on that. Yes. No. Not really. Dreams. I think I dreamed about this. Or thought it was a dream.’

‘I’m going to make sure I remember it. What kind of phone is that?’

‘What? At a time like this you’re worrying about the phone you’ll have when you’re twenty-two?’

‘Well—’ she shrugs, ‘I’m not allowed an expensive phone yet. I bet you remember *that!*’

Malorie does, of course. ‘It’s an iPhone 7. Not that new. Expensive enough, though. And I don’t know how long the battery’s going to last.’

‘Batteries might work differently here.’ To Malorie’s questioning glance, the girl goes on. ‘Well, it’s like, a magical place? That might affect batteries. I dunno.’ She shrugs. Malorie looks at the battery indicator: 72%. That’s about what it was when she came out tonight. If it was still tonight in any sense. Maybe batteries did work differently here. But at least they still worked. Or was it all illusion, after all?

The girl giving her a hard poke in the side reminds her of her physicality. ‘Ouch.’

‘No, look.’ Her younger self is pointing into the blackness deep in the cave. ‘There’s something there.’

Malorie aims the phone light where the girl is pointing, wishing it were a proper torch that cast a narrow, directed beam a long way, ‘What is it?’ Shadows loom and dance all around them as the cave opens into a much wider cavern here.

‘Right at the back. Can you see it? I think it might be a door.’

‘And you’ve got a bunch of keys. Right.’ If it comes together like that, then this really

does feel like an illusion. Or at least a setup. Still, she feels there is nothing to do but move forward. And at this point forward means deep into the cave to explore a mysterious door.

36: A New Feeling

All the windows in the one-storey structure shattered, blowing out as if something had exploded inside. ‘Shit!’ Stewart said, as a shard whistled past his ear. The flying glass tinkled against the chainlink fence and the cars parked in front of the building.

— That was more effective than I expected, said Constance’s voice in his head. —
Get ready. They’ll be running out to see what happened,

— Or huddling inside, spreading their poisonous spell even harder, said Stewart in return. But he could feel the malign influence of the befuddling spell slacking off even as he said it. If you had to concentrate to keep a spell like that going, then they had definitely disturbed some concentration.

Spells, he thought to himself. God, we go through the world in our little bubbles, not aware of what’s possible — of what’s going on — all around us. All those stories of magic, of superpowers, that you just enjoy as fantasy, and sure, you have the conversations about what superpower you’d choose; but it’s all just *there*, going on in the real world.

He briefly wondered if he would be able to fly, or turn invisible, before focusing back on the movements inside the thunder church building.

— Here they come, said Constance. — Stay out of sight if you can. We'll knock them out as soon as they appear.

Staying out of sight was hard, as he had to be able to see the building himself, but he huddled behind a parked car in the street, peeping round it. He thought he caught a glimpse of Constance doing the same off on the far side.

Two men staggered out through the wrecked door. It looked like they had done more damage than just to the windows, he realised. He also realised that one of the men was holding a gun. He felt Constance observe the same thing and target their next move at that man. In his mind, lines of force spread between him and Sarah's mysterious, slightly terrifying cousin.

They reached out for the two men, who were standing scanning their surroundings, trying to work out what had happened.

— Don't take them out yet, he mentally spoke to Constance. — Not if we want the others to come out.

— Good point, she shot straight back. — Your mind is clearing already.

Stewart felt sharper than he had in days, as the befuddlement charm faded.

More people crowded the doorway behind the two men. 'Stay back!' the one without the gun shouted, but three or four more people came out, blinking in the daylight. Stewart wondered how long they had been in there, spreading their toxic spell in shifts.

— Now, said Constance. Stewart threw his mind into the lines of force, unsure what he was really doing. But Constance guided them. The man with the gun dropped first, face down, gun hand out in front of him. His first compatriot, with a baseball bat, fell almost on top of him.

Before the others knew what was happening, they were down too, along with another

two in the doorway behind them.

— The spell hasn't stopped. There must be others inside, still pushing it. Constance's voice in his head sounded like her speaking voice, and he noticed how odd it was to have someone else's voice in his head, not just his own. At the same time he saw movement inside. It looked like some more of the congregation — was that the right word? — had been about to come out, but had realised what had happened to their compatriots were retreating inside.

— Can we deal with them from here? He sent to Constance.

— Maybe. But without being able to see them, it's harder. Better to go in.

This idea did not appeal to Stewart much. What if they were waiting with more guns?

He wasn't sure if he had sent the thought, or if Constance felt his unease, or just guessed. — They'll have sent their heavies out first, she sent. — And feel the mood from there, under the befuddlement.

Somehow she directed his attention to the feelings that were coming from inside the church, the vibe that was coming from the people. It was worry, concern, even fear.

— We've got the advantage for the next few minutes at least. Come on.

Stewart straightened up from where he had been squatting behind a car. Constance was already striding through the gateway of the thunder church, her long black coat swirling around her legs. She glanced back and spoke aloud. 'That was actually fun, wasn't it?'

Stewart had to agree. It had been scary before it all started, but he had enjoyed taking down these people who were their enemies.

'You might want to deal with that,' she said. 'Just chuck it somewhere they won't find it in a hurry.' He realised she was indicating the gun that was still loosely clutch in the unconscious goon's hand.

Stewart didn't want to touch it, but saw the wisdom of disarming the people they were

about to place behind them. 'Will they wake up soon?'

'They shouldn't before we're done in there, and not for a while after. But best not to take chances.'

He pulled the sleeves of his hoodie down over his hands, and bent to tug the gun away from the man's hand. There was no resistance, and in a moment he was holding the metal through the cotton. He looked around for somewhere to put it out of reach, not just of this lot, but of any passerby. After a few seconds, he threw it up onto the flat roof of the building.

'Good move,' said Constance. She gestured with her hand, and Stewart felt forces move in his mind as the baseball the other man had dropped whirled into the air and joined the gun. 'No worry about fingerprints or DNA that way.'

'Now why didn't I think of that?' he said, wondering why she hadn't used her powers to dispose of both weapons.

'Come on,' she said, and made her way into the building, stepping over the stunned bodies of the thunder churchists.

'I doubt this place has a basement' Stewart said, images of torchless detectives from television shows going down stairs into darkness swimming in his mind.

'I agree, it's unlikely,' said Constance, 'considering it's a prefab. Unless it's built over an older structure that had one... she went quiet for a moment, and Stewart realised he could feel her mind changing its focus through the connection they still held. 'No. Just this level. And eight more people, I make it.'

'How...' he paused, unsure of what exactly he wanted to ask.

'How do I do that? How did I learn? Long story. But I've got to say, I haven't often done it in a meld, linked to someone. And never with a man.' She stopped, looked thoughtful, even as her eyes ranged around, conscious of possible enemies. 'It's good. Helpful. Having

you connected.'

'Thanks, I guess?' Stewart realised that he wasn't sure whether this exchange had been entirely by spoken words, or partly mind to mind. 'And we definitely can't stun the others from here?'

'Sadly not,' said Constance. 'Not reliably, anyway. It needs line of sight. Even with your extra strength. From what I can tell, though, they're all clustered together, so we don't have to worry about them getting behind us, at least.'

She stepped over a last body and led the way in. Their feet crunching on broken glass, they walked a short way down a corridor to where double doors, their windows blown out, stood half-off their hinges.

'See what I mean?' said Constance quietly 'We were more powerful than I realised. No wonder this lot are scared.'

Stewart realised he could feel the fear radiating from the room behind the double doors. But as well, the sense of confusion, of befuddlement, that had been blighting his thoughts this last couple of days without him realising it, was also there, and growing stronger again.

'They're doing something,' he said. 'It's building up...'

'Yes.' Constance took his hand, and a new feeling shot through him as their mental link strengthened. 'Let's stop them.'

The space through the doors reminded him of the church halls he had known as a child. But he had never seen one with pentagrams and goat-headed demons drawn on the floor before. Inside the goth dreamhouse, a group of people were huddled, most of them forming a loose circle, holding hands like he had with the others out on the Marshes, like he was with Constance now.

As they stepped into view, someone shouted — or was it a thought, a psychic shout?
— ‘Now!’

The feeling of confusion rose, swelled, turned into something else, something not just distracting, but malevolent.

Several voices were chanting something. Stewart couldn’t make out the words, but he thought it might be Latin. ‘Oh, so that’s your game?’ He heard Constance simultaneously through his ears and inside his head. ‘Well that shouldn’t be any trouble at all.’ Constance sounded confident, but behind it, even under the waves of hate filling the air and the aether between them and the huddled group, Stewart could feel a slight sense of indecision, concern; even fear.

He responded by giving her hand a squeeze, and thinking — Remember how strong we are. Let’s break their circle like they broke ours. He half thought of running at them, breaking their circle physically, but that would lose the direct contact with Constance, and anyway, she had taught him a better way.

He picked a cultist who was near them in the circle, yet somehow looked like a weak link. He was a hulking brute of a man, and Stewart would not want to have attacked him physically, but here in his small meld with Constance he could sense the mental weakness in the man.

He directed a stunning blast at him, as Constance had demonstrated outside. The man twitched and dropped to the floor. The two people holding his hands were pulled off balance, but held on tightly. One of them started to fall on top of him, but was held up by the person grasping her other hand.

Fine, then. Stewart directed another stunning spell at that person.

At the same time he was aware that the cultists who were not in the circle were

moving towards them. Their own stunning spells flashed out, and Stewart felt Constance do a new thing as she blocked them, turned them aside.

The wave of malice that had been building broke and started to fade as the circle fell into chaos.

Then all the remaining still-conscious cultists were running at them across the linoleum floor, pentagrams and diabolical faces scuffed underfoot. Stewart saw at least one knife-blade flashing, which scared him more than all the magic, all the psychic stuff flying. He remembered his friend Bobby, stabbed and bleeding on a Glasgow street.

‘Don’t go there. Give me everything!’ said Constance, aloud and in his mind. He didn’t know how, but turned his thoughts from the memory and offered all his mental strength to the meld anyway.

Constance raised her free hand and said something aloud in what Stewart again thought might be Latin, but that somehow felt even older. He felt something — energy, he supposed — flow out of him, into her, and out into the air in front of him.

For the first time he could see the effects of what they were doing with his eyes, not just mentally. A wall of golden light shimmered in front of them and moved towards the charging cultists. It played over them, almost gently, and five people dropped writhing to the floor. The nearest was only a couple of metres away from Stewart, and the man’s dropped knife skittered across the floor and ended up at his feet.

‘Wait, they’re not out yet, just tripped,’ said Constance, and drew on his strength some more to stun the five who were writhing on the ground. The golden light faded.

‘It takes more energy to do things on the physical plane,’ she went on. Stewart could see beads of sweat standing out on her forehead, and he realised he felt drained and was sweating as if he had been running.

He looked at their fallen foes. 'Didn't you say they're eight of them?'

'Yeah, there were,' said a fierce voice behind them. 'Let go of her hand and turn round. Slowly.'

— He's got a gun, said Constance in his mind. — Sorry, I should have been more aware...

— You can't do everything, Stewart sent back. — But he thinks I'm the one in charge. It wasn't just the unseen man's words that made him realise this. His enhanced perception told him that the gun was pointed more at him than at Constance.

— Don't let go, sent Constance — I'd stun him, but his finger's on the trigger. I don't think I've got enough strength left to stop a bullet.

Stewart marvelled at the idea that she normally might have enough strength to do such a thing. But in the accelerated time of their mental link they had formed a plan before the man's last word had finished echoing round the church-hall like space.

Instead of dropping Constance's hand Stewart tightened his grip on it, and let himself drop to the floor. Simultaneously Constance reached out with her mind and pushed up on the man's arm. Stewart was out of the line of fire when the man's hand twitched on the trigger as they stunned him.

The sound of the gunshot echoed round the hall and left Stewart's ears ringing. 'You OK?' he said, as Constance helped him out from under the man, who had fallen across his legs.

'Yes. Just getting increasingly tired by all this.' She looked around the hall. 'Good, it looks like that shot didn't hit anyone. I was worried that we'd have to give first aid, wait till the ambulance arrived, and then be tied up with the cops. We need to get back to help Sarah and Annie.'

‘What about the gun? Up on the roof like before?’

‘I guess. Though it tells the police someone’s been here.’

‘And all these unconscious bodies don’t?’

‘No, that’ll just be a mystery. Leave it where it is. We want the cops to know there are guns involved.’

‘What’s going to bring them? I don’t think anyone outside will have heard the shot, or realised what it was.’

‘We’re going to call them.’

‘That’ll link us to the scene. We don’t want that.’

‘There’s an office just there. Land line?’

Constance pulled a pair of black leather gloves out of a pocket in her voluminous coat and slipped them on. She opened the office door and in a second was dialling three 9s into an old-fashioned phone on the desk.

‘Police! Police! He’s shooting them all! Oh god...’ She moved the receiver away from her mouth and let it clatter to desk ‘No! Let me go!’ she cried, moving further from the phone and out of the room, sounding terrified but grinning at Stewart as she gesticulated for him to follow. Stewart shook his head in disbelief as he heard the operator’s voice crackle faintly from the fallen phone.

‘That should get them here,’ said Constance, still grinning as she led them out of the church building and back toward the Marshes.

‘You should be on the stage,’ said Stewart.

‘Right now I’ve got to start imagining I’m in a gambling den.’

37: The Thinning Wall

It isn't like before. Sarah knows that at once. They are inside the Cringemaker like she had been before, yet they are also, her and Annie, inside their own protective bubble. The entity contains them, but doesn't control them. Surrounds them, but can't reach them.

She also knows she is still standing on the grassy ground of Hackney Marshes. She is aware of her body there, Annie's hands in hers, even though all she can see is the Cringemaker's void.

And it is different this time too because the entity's voice doesn't fill her head when it speaks. Before, it had been impossible not to listen to it. Now she knows she can turn her attention away from it, even ignore it.

Though that might not be wise, as they have come to speak to it.

It speaks to them. 'So, you're back, little Sarah. And you've brought a friend. How nice. You've brought me one of the wild ones, the ones with fire. Good.'

The satisfaction radiating from it scares her. Has she messed up? Brought Annie into a trap? And through their link, she senses Annie momentarily having the same fear.

Then Annie snorts. 'Yeah, right. Like she'd help you. Like you could do anything to

hurt *me*.'

Sarah likes the sense of strength that Annie is showing, but worries that her confidence might be misplaced.

— You've got to stand up to these things. Don't let them know how scared you are, Annie sends privately.

Sarah tries to clamp down on her growing fear, knowing not just that Annie is right, but that it has the power to overwhelm her even without the Cringemaker's help.

Inside their protective bubble, Sarah can tell, the entity can't hear their thoughts, can't reach her mind. Can't, therefore, influence her the way it had before. But does it have other ways to assault them? Maybe using embarrassment is just the Cringemaker's easiest, most basic weapon.

— Why do you call it that?

— Because it feeds on memories that make you cringe. Embarrassing things, shameful ones. Or, I don't know, summons them up to make you suffer.

— Oh, good. I wish you'd told me that sooner.

— Why is it good?

— I don't embarrass easily. I have no shame. And now I have a better idea what it is.

Sarah realises that she hadn't passed this information on to Annie and Constance, when she probably should have. But then, they hadn't asked her about her experience when the Cringemaker had her, when they obviously should have. It all seems surprising now, but is probably the result of the cultist's confusion spell.

— So what is it? she sends.

— I don't think there's a general term for them, but there is a class of being, creature, entity, that feeds on emotion. Or seeks it, at least. Thrives on emotions; Particular types. They

usually go for the big, visible, powerful ones, like hatred, or even love. And they're drawn to large quantities of it happening at once. They do well when there are wars. There was almost an intrusion right here seven years ago.

Sarah gets a fleeting image from Annie of a stadium full of people, all cheering. The Olympics? She remembers watching the Opening Ceremony on TV with her parents, and the emotions around the success of the nation's athletes, especially on the middle Saturday. The idea that the Cringemaker, or something like it, could have been hovering nearby, feeding — if she wasn't already repelled by this thing, she would be now.

— That's disgusting. That's *loathsome*! The word seems fitting, though she can't recall ever using it before.

Over their link Annie sends something like a 'Hmm' sound — Or it's just part of nature. Maybe even a necessity, a scavenger that cleans up after a slaughter. What's worse, rotting flesh, or the maggots that eat it? All part of the food chain. The cycle of life.

— But this kind, she goes on — this seems different. Not least that it's not interested in mass emotion, and it takes steps to cause or invoke the emotions it's interested in.

— And it's not a mindless scavenger, right? It communicates with us.

— Yes, it seems more sentient than the other kind. You said it was able to direct your memories?

— It felt like that. I guess it could have, I don't know, triggered a certain kind of emotion, and let my own memory do the rest.

— And the big difference: it's able to not just take over a human mind, but actually absorb a whole body, a person, and move it — somewhere?

— That sounds like you don't have any idea where Malorie is. That's been worrying me. Even if we stop this thing, will we be able to get her back?

— Yes. I'm confident that, if we can get through to it, can stop it doing what it's doing, Malorie will be set free. Maybe it's misplaced, but... I usually have a good sense of these things.

Sarah doesn't find this overwhelmingly comforting, but what can she do but go on? Time is compressed in the meld, and she knows all this has taken only a couple of seconds. She feels the entity's attention on them.

— Try not to let it direct your memories, Annie sends. — We need to minimise its influence. Aloud, if that is the right word here, she says, 'We're here for our friend. We want you to let her go. And to leave this plane.'

The entity gives the impression of laughter. 'And what do you offer for such a boon?'

'We're not here to make a deal,' Annie said, and Sarah thought she could hear her take a deep breath before going on. 'We want to make a bet with you.'

'Ah yes, I caught a hint of such a challenge before. That was from you, was it?'

As this goes on Sarah realises that she can feel the entity probing at them, pressing at the bubble of protection that surrounds them. Trying to reach them, to manipulate their emotions again. But the shield holds. Where before she had felt in its power, now, with Annie's confidence and their combined magic, she feels strong, protected.

— It can't reach us, she sends.

— That won't last long, Annie sends right back, and directs Sarah's awareness to where their bubble is weakest, and thinning. — See if you can shore that up, while I talk to it.

Sarah doesn't immediately know how to strengthen their bubble, but she approaches the weak spot ready to use her own energy to support it. If the entity breaks through it she knows they will be lost.

'You think you can best me in games of chance?' Good, Sarah thinks, it sounds like

it's getting ready to do its bad villain talk. That will give them time. Of course, it will also give *it* time to attack their defences.

In the mental space that is the meld with Annie, Sarah sends good thoughts to the bubble's membrane. She understands the feebleness of that idea, yet it is the sense of what she has to do. Thoughts and prayers for our fragile protective wall.

As she tends to the thinning area, she feels it take a mighty blow from outside, enough to make her stagger back. Even physically, she takes a half step backwards and almost loses her grip on Annie's hands. She feels Annie's grip tighten, and she tightens her own grip in return. She doesn't know what will happen if they let go, but she knows it can't be good.

— Try good memories, Annie sends.

'I have gambled my way across dimensions, universes, planes of existence,' the Cringemaker is saying, 'and none has made such a challenge. Least of all defeated me.'

'Yeah? Well you should be glad to get the chance now. All that success without a challenge. This should alleviate the boredom a bit.'

Sarah tries to summon memories of happy times. Beach trips as a child. Cornwall. Fish and chips. Sandcastles. Ice cream. But they feel like other people's memories, generic, pleasant but powerless. The Cringemaker's energy seems to be seeping through the thinning wall, sapping joy from her.

Frantic, she casts her mind back. What helped her to be strong the last time? Helped them to be strong, her and Malorie? And the the thought of Malorie itself is enough to calm her. Friendship. Good times with friends.

Making music together.

And the power wells up in her. Memories of playing on stage with her band, of singing; of writing songs and creative joy that comes with finding the perfect phrasing, or

rhyme, or chord sequence. Helping Malorie complete ‘Sparkle Lake’.

And in that moment, not only does she shore up the bubble’s wall, she feels herself reaching through it, a slender thread, reaching out, seeking her friend.

And finding her.

Just a hint, but the connection is made. The connection was always there, really, just masked by the Cringemaker’s power and the cult’s confusion spell. She could reach Malorie now, if only...

As the thought forms, the entity’s energies slam down around her, assaulting the bubble, breaking the tentative link to Malorie. A hint of impossible purple skies and a mountainside cave appear then are gone. But links like that can never truly be broken.

Their bubble is assailed from all sides, the entity’s strength redoubled by anger. Sarah and Annie are shaken, rocked like a small boat on high seas.

— What did you do? she asks.

— I nearly reached her. Malorie. There was a connection...

The bubble’s walls weaken as the Cringemaker flails at them. Sarah gropes for happy memories and can feel Annie doing the same, and something more, but they can’t last for long in this assault.

— We should pull out, Annie sends.

— Can we? Sarah responds. The forces whip around them, and she is not sure she can find the way back to their bodies. Is this what it felt like for Malorie when she was sucked into the entity?

— I don’t know if— Annie starts, then stops.

Sarah feels a touch. Not in the Cringemaker’s realm, but back in the real world. Back on Earth, something touches her left wrist: a hand.

On her right wrist: another hand.

38: Almost Hear Someone

Up close the door looks like metal, though Malorie is long past trusting anything here. She wouldn't be surprised if it turned to jelly, or proved to be a mirror, or something.

But with a strange feeling of inevitability she sees there is a keyhole, and her younger self — if that is really who this girl is, and not another trick — is holding up her bunch of keys, with one protruding that looks like it should fit.

‘Shall I try it?’

Malorie sighs. ‘I can't see why not. I just have a bad feeling about all this. Well, nothing but bad feelings since I got here.’ Noticing the girl's crestfallen face. ‘Apart from meeting you. You seem all right.’

‘I should hope so. Right now I'm not sure I want to grow up into you. You're rude.’

‘I'm sorry. I'm not rude. Not usually. I'm just exhausted and freaked out by all of this. And this door, it just feels like another trap to me.’

‘It doesn't to me. It feels like...’ she stops talking for a moment, looks thoughtful. ‘... It feels like hope. Like something hopeful is on the other side of it. As if I can almost hear someone calling to me. A friend.’

‘That’s nice,’ says Malorie, wondering whether her friends are still looking for her, and if so how and where they are searching.

The girl brandishes the keys, shaking the ring and making them jangle against each other. ‘Come on, let’s try it. This looks like the right one.’ The large, simple-looking key has a coppery sheen that matches the lock of the ancient door they are standing in front of.

It slips into the lock and turns easily. Far too easily, Malorie thinks, for the seeming age of the door. But nothing is real here, is it? And for a moment she wishes she was in the dreamland that that phrase suggests, or even just back where she had first heard it, in the back seat of her mother’s car, her young mind opening to music and all it can do.

And in that thought of music, her mind jumps tracks and picks up a thin thread — barely enough to be called that, even, no thicker, were it physical, than a hair — of connection with her musical friend, Sarah. As if she can almost hear someone calling to her. A friend.

The door opens, and they step through.

39: Making Visible Light

They had unerringly crossed the Marshes to where their friends were. It wasn't like they had had to look for them, Stewart thought, or hunted about to see them in the gathering gloom of the November evening. He and Constance had just known where Annie and Sarah were and walked, jogged, and run, straight towards them.

From a hundred metres away he could see them with an unusual clarity, as if they were glowing. They *were* glowing, he realised. The two women stood face to face, and the area immediately around them was brighter than the rest of the Marshes.

'Is that...?' He didn't quite know how to ask the question.

'You're seeing magic,' Constance answered, slowing their approach. 'But it's so strong, it's making visible light too.'

'So other people can see them glowing?' Stewart was breathing heavily. It was only a couple of minutes since they had left the cult building, and he could hear sirens from that direction.

'Yes,' said Constance, 'but don't worry. There's no one around, and people won't believe what they're seeing. Humans are great at ignoring the evidence of their senses. Our

senses. Just in case you think I'm not human.'

This idea had never occurred to Stewart, but it did now. He stopped walking, making Constance stop, too, and turned to look at her. 'Wait, *are* you? Or are you and Annie... something else?'

'Fully human, as far as I know. And you'd know a lot more about Annie's humanity.' She smiled, took his hand, — Or maybe we're something else, she sent, — but if so, you must be too.

Distracted by thoughts of Annie naked in his bed, and now this new idea, Stewart walked on, holding Constance's hand, the psychic link between them strong.

'You're human, I'm human,' said Constance aloud, sensing his worry. 'We've just opened our minds to senses, to forces, that not everyone has. Most people get odd hints of all this, but put it down to dreams, hallucinations, madness.'

'OK. Should we speak to them?' He nodded at their friends, who seemed insensate. He could feel the magic fizzing around them, now.

'We should join them. But carefully.' She stepped closer.

Stewart looked all around, to see if anyone was near them. He looked up. 'Oh, wow, have you seen that?'

Constance looked up too. Above them, the grey sky, tinged with city light, was darkening. Immediately above the Marshes, their friends, them, something was forming, or opening, with a familiar queasy anti-glow.

'Good,' said Constance. 'It looks like they've got through to it.'

Stewart wasn't sure that 'good' was the right word, but he supposed that they would have to face the thing that had put the rip in the sky if they were to have any chance of getting Malorie back.

‘Come on, we need to join their meld,’ Constance said, stepping round to the other side of the two women. ‘Try to take hold of both their hands at once and at the same time as me. Ready? Three, two, one.’

Stewart put his left hand round Sarah’s wrist and his right round Annie’s. At his touch they broke their own grip and took his hands. Across from him Constance was doing the same thing, and their linked consciousness flowed into that of Annie and Sarah.

40: Interstices

From the touches on her wrists Sarah feels Constance and Stewart join them, and takes their hands. Knowledge of their success at the cult church flows into her, as she and Annie let the others know what has been happening here. Stewart's presence feels different in the meld from the other two women. It has a different kind of strength. Not more. He is not stronger, not here, not in these ways. But there is a difference in the tone of his vibration — and as she describes it to herself in those terms she smiles to herself, thinking, I'm such a musician. It is masculinity, she concludes, though Stewart is far from the strutting macho type.

It feels complementary to their female energy. They can work together. The four of them, each their own vibratory note, form a chord. Can they play it louder than the Cringemaker? She doesn't know, but as her friends' strength flows into her, she begins to believe.

Their combination strengthens the bubble's walls, and the entity's furious attack drops back for a moment.

— I... almost reached her, Sarah sends to the others — Malorie...

— That's why it got so angry. Annie sounds annoyed herself, but goes on: — That's

good. It means it's not completely in control here. There are gaps, cracks, ways we can work through..

— Interstices, Stewart sends. — Sorry, I don't know why, I've just always wanted to use that word.

— It's a good one, says Constance, and Sarah senses the new closeness that has formed between these two during their battle with the cultists.

— Good work stopping that spell, by the way, she sends. — It helped us a lot.

'You have brought me more juicy nuggets!' The Cringemaker's voice sounds pleased in her mental ears, but Sarah thinks she can sense the rage and frustration that had led to it assaulting their bubble, buried just under the surface. 'Another shining one. And a male. We don't often get those on this side of the veil.'

Sarah senses Stewart's fear swell. — What does he mean? What veil?

— Try to focus on happy memories, Sarah sends. — Those will armour you against it.

— And don't anthropomorphise it, Annie adds. — It's not a 'he'. It doesn't have a sex. But we do.

And Sarah feels Annie do something in the meld that she doesn't understand, but it involves Annie's link with Stewart. It feels deep, and primal, and somehow of the Earth. It makes Stewart gasp in the meld and back on the Marshes, where he also staggers back, and Sarah tightens her grip on his hand.

Their strength increases. She can tell they are invulnerable to the entity now, but for how long? And will they be able to use this new power to reach Malorie?

— Let's try, Constance sends, and they reach out.

41: Shadows On a Cave Wall

Beyond the threshold something lurks. Shapes move in the gloom, and Malorie wants to go back, step back through the mysterious door, protect herself and her younger self from *whatever it is*. But turning she sees the door has gone — of course it has — just grey cave wall arches above them.

Ahead lies fear, but the thread of connection has stayed, and through it she can feel Sarah, reaching out, trying to find her — not knowing she has succeeded. Malorie tries to send a message back down the thread, to let her friend know where she is. But she, Malorie, doesn't know where she is, so it is hard.

'Don't worry,' the girl says. 'It's only shadows.' She waves her hand, and the shapes move with it.

'How did you —' but she can't formulate the question she wants to ask.

'It's obvious, isn't it?' She moves her hands around some more, making the shadows dance. 'Shadows on a cave wall. Someone told me something about that once.'

And Malorie remembers, too, being told about Plato's cave. The message there, though was that humanity is deceived, or deceives itself, and if people could just turn round

and look properly, they would have a greater understanding. Is that what this all means? Is the Cringemaker somehow trying to teach her something?

Or is her own brain trying to tell her something? Because she realises that the Cringemaker has not turned its attention to her now for longer than ever before. Time may move differently in this place, but her own experience of it remains consistent, as far as she can tell. And right now, she feels like the entity has forgotten about her, or lost her, or given up.

And she is connected to Sarah. The two facts have to be connected.

42: Bottled-up

Stewart Galbraith has never thought of himself as particularly strong. There was always someone, other boys, who could throw a ball further, or run faster, or beat him at arm wrestling. But now, in this meld, with these incredible women, he feels that he is able to contribute a kind of strength. It is not about physicality, though, nor is it mental strength — in that he feels he is the weakest in the meld.

No, the strength he can contribute here comes from the male side of the human dyad. It is, in some way, maleness, masculinity itself. True, it is the strength that has brought violence, oppression, war, into the world; but he sees that it doesn't have to be used that way. Used creatively it complements the strength of the women, the strength that can bear and give birth to children, build homes, families, communities.

But the male principle can be creative too, and the female one destructive, when necessary. Stewart feels the two urges in himself and in the women he is joined with, as their meld attains a new form and reaches out for Malorie. Around them he feels the rage of the creature — if it is a creature — they are calling the Cringemaker. He has not felt its attack directly yet, but understands how memories of shame, confusion, upset, might be used

against him, and tries to focus on positive thoughts, happy memories.

— Not so much of that, Annie sends. — We need your rage.

Her comment itself raises a flash of anger in him. He is trying to do the right thing, trying to help, to be the best man he can be, and she corrects him, directs him, puts him down.

— Good, now direct it, send it out. This way.

And he realises that she wasn't putting him down, but did want to provoke him, and that makes him angry too. But at the same time he knows she is doing the right thing, and that his anger, his rage will help them all, give their meld even more strength, more ability to resist the alien entity that has violated their reality, to punch through its defences and reach Malorie.

Thoughts of Malorie add to his anger. He has suppressed this feeling, but Malorie's disappearance from the house has caused them all problems, with bills, with Freddy's brooding presence. He has tried to be sympathetic, to suppress his negative feelings, but now he lets them out.

And digs deeper; goes further back; finds memories, some that might make him cringe, but he raids them for the anger they also engendered.

You want anger? I've got it in spades, he thinks. I've been suppressing it for years, trying not to be that kind of guy, focusing on my sensitive side, because that's what people want, isn't it? What women want from me?

Stewart remembers all the slights, all the hurts, big and little. All the bottled-up feelings, he lets them out.

He explodes in rage.

43: She is There

As she reaches out again, backed by the more powerful meld, Sarah finds the thread, the connection to Malorie, is already there. She made it before, and lost it, but it didn't go away. On the other end of it she can feel Malorie, but also, somehow, someone else. Is it the Cringemaker? Is the entity somehow getting between them, trying to disrupt their link?

But no, she knows they are safe from it for the moment, even though they are still in its realm, and it throbs and rages around them. The second presence on the link feels like an echo, a reflection; like it, too, is somehow Malorie.

As she reaches along the thread of connection, she feels the meld of her friends supporting her, helping her forward; and then the whole meld swells, grows, is boosted as if a fighter jet had engaged its afterburners. She recognises the extra strength as coming from Stewart, feels the anger behind it, but knows both that Annie has encouraged and directed it, and that Stewart remains in control: she does not fear it, as she would a man's anger in the normal world. Here, it is part of the spectrum of human emotions, of humanity itself, and it is going to help them all.

She feels Constance at her side, helping her to shape and guide their combined

strength. They resist the surrounding force of the Cringemaker, expand and open up the link to Malorie. And suddenly, she is there.

44: Something Raging

The link to Sarah stabilises, strengthens, and in a moment opens wide, and she is with them. It is not just Sarah, Malorie realises. The link fizzles with power, she can see it in her mind, feel it tingling in her body. She takes her younger self's hand. 'This is how we get out.'

The meld reaches out for her, and she joins it.

Now they are five.

There is rejoicing in the union. Malorie realises that Stewart is there, That Annie is there, which causes her a twinge of fear, remembering how terrifying she had found their accidental joining. For a moment the realisation makes her start to pull back, but Sarah is there, and Constance, and they reassure her.

Even Annie is welcoming, and she understands that their accidental linking had not been an attack, by Annie.

Outside the meld, though, something is raging, and where she stands, physically, she can feel her hand being tugged, and a voice nagging at her.

— Who's there with you? Sarah sends through their link. — It felt like there were two of you, somehow, but...

— It's me. When I was younger. A younger version of myself, she sends back.

This news brings a sense of wariness to the meld, and Malorie realises it comes from both Annie and Constance. She senses that messages might be passing between the others that she cannot hear. — It's not a trick! she sends. — I'm pretty sure...

The tugging at her hand grows more insistent, and she is about to speak to the girl, but Constance sends — That's not what we're worried about. If the entity can reach into your past and suck other parts of you in, then it's more capable than we thought. She pauses. — Or it could be tricking you.

Malorie opens her eyes and looks at the girl. 'What's up?'

'It's changing. Something's coming! Look!' The cave walls around them are starting to lighten, to fade. At least... Malorie drags more of her awareness out of the meld to understand what's going on.

Behind them, where the door had been, the wall is starting to fade away. She thinks she can nearly see the cave through it, and the purple sky beyond. But in the other direction, the tunnel continues, as it had, and, she gradually realises, another door awaits.

'Have you still got the keys?' The girl jingles them at her, and Malorie nods in the direction of the door. 'Try that.' Her younger self lets go her hand and approaches the door. The right key is less obvious this time, and she has to try several.

In the meld, she sends — I think it knows we've connected. It's been ignoring me for a while, but it's coming now. How do we get out of here?

Her friends have no answers to this question, she realises quickly. She sees their memory of her body disappearing, sucked into the sky, or maybe not. They have found her in spirit. She has to find herself physically. She has felt fully embodied all this time. But the connection to her friends, to their humanity, has shown her that something is missing.

Missing in herself. Is it her body? Is this another illusion, then, her body remaining to be found? Yet she feels the air on her skin, her braids swinging. She feels *herself*.

‘Got it,’ her younger self says, and the tall wooden door starts to swing open.

There is a roar, a scream of rage, from behind them. Malorie looks back, but can’t tell what is there because the purple sky is so bright, the thing that is approaching is a shadow, a silhouette. She runs for the door, grabs the girl’s arm, and they both fall through. She pulls it closed behind them, supposing that it will have no effect against that thing. That thing that she takes to be the Cringemaker itself.

On a platform in front of them, apparently sleeping, or maybe dead: herself.

She approaches the unconscious form. ‘If that’s my body...’ she looks down at herself, touches her face. ‘... Then what’s *this*? Who am I really?’

‘You’re your soul,’ says the girl. ‘Your spirit, mind, whatever. Just out of your body. Like Dr Strange.’

For a moment she can’t understand what the girl is talking about, but then she remembers reading Marvel comics that her Dad had collected as a child, and kept in their attic. Long before the films of recent years, the comic-book sorcerer had been able to leave his body in spirit and travel around the world and visit other realms as a kind of ghost.

Is that what she was now? A kind of ghost, rendered in black and white in a colourful world? But she doesn’t feel ghostly. She feels fully herself, like she remembers always feeling. Although she knows, remembering sessions with her therapist, that she doesn’t always feel the same. Sometimes she feels detached, dissociated. And there was that experience with Annie. And now all this.

‘Or maybe...’ the girl says, ‘maybe *that’s* your soul.’ She indicates the slumbering form. Malorie contemplates it. It does have an ethereal, almost translucent sense about it. But

if that's her soul, what is she feeling, sensing, thinking with? Isn't soul the same as mind, as personality? Though there is the idea of losing or selling your soul. And some cultures believe, some religions, teach, that humans have two souls, maybe more.

'Well if that's my soul, *or* my body,' she says, steeling herself, 'it needs to be joined back with me.' She reaches out to her friends, still connected in the meld. — Look: I've found myself. Or is it a trick?

Through her, she understands, they see what she sees. She senses a hum of communication between them.

— We think it's most likely real, says Constance. — But we don't know what will happen if you try to get back into it. Or it into you. And we don't know where you are relative to us. I'm worried that you'll be trapped in the entity's realm, body and soul.

— The entity is coming, and I'd be happier to have all of me joined up.

— I think you should try it, Sarah says.

— What about the, your other self? Stewart says.

'Shit.' Malorie looks at her younger self. She can't escape from this place and leave the girl on her own. The raging sounds from outside the cave intensify, and the wall and door they came through start to crumble.

'Don't worry,' the girl says, 'You get into your body. Or put yourself back together. I'll hold it off.'

'But I can't —'

'I'm only a dream. Or here in my dreams. You know that really. In fact, I think this is why I'm here, to do this. Go on.'

She realises, with a start of understanding, that her younger self is right. For a moment she also remembers being her age, and waking from a dream of terror, monsters,

chase, and death.

Is it ethical to use her younger self's sacrifice to save her now-self? She could worry about that later. She steps over to her form, prone on the platform, turns, and prepares to let herself fall backwards into it. At the same moment, the wall finally collapses and the Cringemaker is there in the cave with them.

When she thinks back to it, Malorie can never remember what its true shape was like, if that was even what it was.

All she remembers is approaching darkness and fear, and the girl, her younger self — so young, so brave — stepping toward it.

She looks back over her shoulder and says, 'You go on. Find your friends. Don't worry about me. I'm only a dream,' she repeats.

As she strides toward the entity she appears to grow taller, not smaller; and grows brighter as she does, until she is a towering figure of light, holding back the darkness that is trying to reach Malorie.

Malorie falls into herself, and out of consciousness.

45: Dagger of Darkness

His anger fades, there being nothing present to sustain it. He doesn't want to fake it, not least because he knows it would not help. But he feels how strong the combined group has become, and knows that it is partly his doing, and feels some pride. Pride. Anger. Now what else goes with those?

Well, no time to worry about that. He feels Sarah make the connection to Malorie, and the strange other presence that is somehow Malorie's younger self. Yet it doesn't feel like the other humans he is connected with, including Malorie.

The strengthened meld easily joins with her, and now she is part of it. And she has found her body. Stewart can't understand how this can be so, or what that must be like, or above all, where Malorie actually is. But he is happy that they seem to be making progress.

In moments Malorie is about to try rejoining her body. In his head he can hear her younger self say she is only a dream, and he realise that is why she seems so different. But then he wonders if all of this is somehow a shocking, huge dream. He shifts his feet, aware again of his body standing on the grass of Hackney Marshes, his hands in Sarah's and Constance's; all of them getting cold. He opens his eyes a crack. Fireworks are going off over

the houses in the distance. It is a November night.

— Stewart, don't lose focus, Annie sends. He closes his eyes, returns all his attention to the meld. This is most definitely not a dream, he knows, as the creature that has Malorie turns its attention to them with renewed violence.

But their bond is strong, and the meld is strong, fuelled by human connections and bolstered by his rage of a few minutes before. They have a shield all around them, which the intrusive entity cannot penetrate.

— It won't hold forever, though, Constance sends, and Stewart feels Annie's agreement. — We've got to get her out of there.

— Has she managed to get back into her body? he sends. But no one seems to know for sure, not even Malorie, who has become uncommunicative.

And then, impossibly, something is slipping down through the link with her. A sensation fills the meld that feels to Stewart like sliding, like opening, like arrival.

Delivery, he thinks, as Malorie's quiescent form appears on the black ground between them. Though no birth was ever as quiet, as painless as this. Even if this had been preceded by much pain.

Stewart sees the entity's attacks as an amorphous, many-armed, dark creature, raging and flailing at them; and their defence as a wall of light enclosing them all. His eyes still closed in the real world he sees the shadow-forms of his friends in the meld standing on an open plain, their light-wall all around. They turn to strengthen sections where the creature focuses its attack. On the Marshes they stand in a small circle, holding hands, facing inwards. Here the plain is even vaster, they face outwards, and are joined in the mind, maybe the soul, without having to appear to touch. They also seem bigger than they are in real life.

The sky over this virtual plain is darker than any could ever be in life; and starless, of

course. Their wall of light pulses and writhes as the entity's limbs slam into it. He can feel the impacts on some level, but they only bother him because they weaken the wall. He reaches out to strengthen it, with memories of having sex with Annie, and of a bully at school spitting on his lunch. Happiness and anger, in this combination, provide strength.

— Any strong emotion would work, Constance sends, picking up on his questioning this strangeness. — Love is a good one.

Stewart's only experience of being in love is tinged with sadness and heartbreak by the relationship's ending, and he doesn't want to visit those feelings at the moment. Instinctively he knows they would weaken him, undercut the meld, and give the creature an avenue of attack. Instead he thinks of dancing at a friend's 21st birthday party, spinning around in the middle of the dancefloor, and realising that he loved everyone around him, even the ones he didn't know. In that moment, it had been true.

— Oh, nice one, Constance sends, and helps him to direct this burst of emotional memory to a point in the shield where the creature has turned its attacking limbs into a dagger of darkness.

Among them on this fantastic plain. Malorie lies sleeping. Safe within their protective shield for now, but seemingly unconscious. — Can we wake her? Sarah sends.

— Did she black out when she joined her body? Stewart asks. 'Or soul, or whatever.' No one seems to know for sure.

— I'm going to try, Sarah sends, and turns to kneel by Malorie. Stewart crouches by her, too.

The ground beneath their feet is strange. — What is this stuff? He sinks his fingers into the dark, sandy, soil-like surface.

— Never mind that, help me wake her.

Sarah shakes the sleeping form gently. ‘Malorie!’ she says, and Stewart realises he can hear her say it aloud in his ears, as well as in his mind. He wonders whether that will make a difference. Maybe, if Malorie were lying among them on the Marshes. Suddenly distracted by this idea, he opens his eyes to check. The grass between the four of them is undisturbed by a sleeping form, but as well as the lights in the sky from fireworks, sparks of light are glittering from the stationary forms of his friends. And from himself, he realises. Whatever they’re doing on that mysterious plane is causing visual echoes here, in what he still thinks of as the real world.

— Stewart! Annie sends, — Focus! We need you. He realises he is in danger of slipping out of the meld; closes his eyes, and returns to the plain.

— Sorry. We’re glowing out there, shooting off sparks. I’m worried someone’s going to come and investigate. Call the cops, whatever. The others ignore this, busy struggling with the wall and trying to waken Malorie.

— I think she’s stirring. Sarah is still shaking the sleeping form.

Then Malorie’s consciousness is back with them in the meld, and the eyes of her virtual body — or, Stewart realises, her actual body — flicker open.

‘— Where are we?’ she both sends and says, and her voice echoes strangely, different from when Sarah had spoken aloud. This is the first sound uttered in this place, and it does something to the air. Is there even air here, he wonders? There must be, because Malorie is breathing. He and the others are breathing back on Earth, but Malorie is here in body.

— Still in the Cringemaker’s realm, Sarah sends, and the word sounds strange to Stewart. Not one you hear in everyday speech, but it feels right for this place. — But you’re back with your spirit-body, or whatever. How do you feel?

— Odd. Confused. But... complete? ‘It smells weird here. Or is that me? Why do you

all look like ghosts?’ She switches between mind-only and speaking aloud without seeming to notice.

Stewart looks around at the others. They appear solid. — We don’t, to us. But I guess it’s because you’re here in body, and we’re only in spirit. You’re seeing our astral forms.

— I was just thinking about that! That’s exactly what this is like! Malorie gets to her feet. Stewart and Sarah try to help her, offering hands, but Malorie’s pass through theirs. — Oh wow, we really are ghosts.

— Or I am, Malorie sends, her face turning sad.

— No, it’s us, Sarah sends. — You’re a picture of solidity.

Stewart realises she is right, Malorie seems more solid, more real, somehow, than the others, even though they do not appear ethereal to him.

— If you three are finished with the reunion, we could use some help here.

Annie is using her anger, Stewart realises, directing it to the shield wall that still glows around them. As he turns to help again, the shield shudders, as the entity strikes it from all directions. Malorie gives a surprised yelp, and then a longer shriek.

‘Ahh! Something’s got me!’

Turning, they see the new danger. A dark tendril is rising from the ground beneath them, winding itself round Malorie’s ankle. As they watch, another breaks through the ground and reaches for her. In a moment of shock and terror, Stewart feels the residue of that black sand on his fingers.

46: Generates a Boost

— No! Sarah sends, as the tendrils wind up Malorie's legs.

— I thought the field was under us too! Constance sounds more baffled than angry.

— It should have been. Annie's mental tone is of fury. — But we weren't paying attention. And I think something broke it from inside.

— Shit, I think that might have been me. Stewart's tone of shame has the Cringemaker's tendrils twitching toward him.

— Don't think like that, — Sarah sends — You'll give it more power. Think of good things.

— Or use your anger again. Annie slaps Stewart in the face. The sound of their shadow-forms' skin echoes strangely inside their protective bubble, that no longer feels so safe.

No, Sarah realises, it never felt *safe*, but they were at least protected, after a fashion. Now they are not.

‘— Fuck!’ Stewart shouts at Annie's slap, and Sarah can hear him with her ears, out on the Marshes, as well as here, in her mind. She wonders if Annie slapped him in the real

world too, but is aware that Annie would not have broken their circle. She tightens her own hands on Stewart's and Constance's.

Stewart doesn't slap Annie back, which Sarah half expected, but instead starts kicking at the tendrils, stamping on them with the virtual version of Doc Martens boots. His anger at the slap transmuted into energy to assault the entity, to strengthen their protection.

Annie and Constance join Stewart, kicking at the tendrils, pulling them from Malorie's legs with their hands.

Sarah wants to join in, but is revolted by the idea of touching any part of the Cringemaker. She knows these aren't her real hands, but nonetheless. She looks down at her feet. Out in the real world, on Hackney Marshes, she is wearing trainers. She remembers lacing them on before they left her flat. But here in the Cringemaker's shadow realm, she appears to be barefoot. What does that say about them, that Stewart, Annie, and Constance all have boots on, and she has nothing? Is it something to do with her self-image? Or part of the Cringemaker's influence? Malorie is not barefoot, she sees, but then this is Malorie's real body, not just a virtual one. Or is it? Sarah doesn't know any more.

She turns to the rest of their bubble, over their heads, all around them. It has shrunk; they have less room to move their virtual bodies within it. This intrusion, this penetration, has harmed their confidence, and everything here is about emotion. Lowered confidence means a smaller protective bubble. And a weaker one: immediately over her head the wall has thinned. The Cringemaker's assault from below has not stopped its fury raining from above.

They are about to be breached from two directions. Sarah digs deep into her memories.

Childhood. Christmas, aged ten. Her aunt Clarissa and cousin Constance are with them for the day. There were no special presents, or none that she remembers now. But

Constance, four years older, seems impossibly mature, exciting, even glamorous. But rather than spending time with the grownups, Constance wants to hang out with her, Sarah. They have always been friendly, but this cements their relationship in a way that makes the day stand out in Sarah's memory as the best Christmas of her childhood.

She draws now on that memory of happiness of joy, and pushes the emotion — one that the Cringemaker doesn't understand — into the wall. As she does, she feels as if her head is glowing, here in this shadow-world. And as she glances over at this version of Constance, she sees that her cousin's head is glowing too.

Constance looks up from where she is struggling with the tendrils. — Yes, I remember it too. Let's put it all together.

Sarah doesn't understand what happens next, but she thinks that Constance merges both their happy memories of that Christmas, adds *something else*, and generates a boost for their protective field. The bubble expands as if air were being pumped into it; strengthens; stabilises. At the same time the last of the tendrils that are pushing through the ground recede, or are lopped off, to writhe on the dark, gritty surface for a few seconds, before lying still.

— Good work, everyone, Annie sends. — But it won't last forever. We've got to get out of here.

— More importantly, we've got to get Malorie out of here. Constance's head is no longer glowing, but Sarah can feel strength radiating from her. From all them, in fact. It is the relief, the pleasure, of their success, and it helps to keep the bubble inflated. But, as Annie says, it cannot go on forever.

— If we let go, Stewart sends, hesitation clear in his thought, — in the real world, I mean: what will happen here.

— This bubble collapses and we leave Malorie trapped here, Annie replies.

— That's what I thought. So how do we get Malorie out? Body and soul?

As if this word were a trigger, the Cringemaker's voice thunders in their heads, or in their virtual ears.

'Fine! I will take your bet!'

47: A Note Passed Under a Desk

— What bet? What does it mean? Malorie's link to the others is steady, but feels tentative. She can see how they are already used to this communion, but it is still new to her. She is not sure she likes it.

Annie's reply is also tentative, hesitant. — It... I guessed it would be a gambler: all that with the roulette wheel. So I suggested a bet. I... didn't expect it to take it. I was just trying to buy time.

— You didn't say what the bet was, though, Sarah sends.

— Not in words. But it knew. It could tell what I had to offer, and it knew what I wanted.

— So... what did you offer? Stewart sounds scared, and Malorie senses their protective bubble contract a little.

— Cheer up, everyone, don't feed it. I offered what I had. Annie looks round, meeting each of their eyes. — My soul for Malorie.

Silence in the meld. Then clamour, protest. Eventually Stewart's thought cuts through.

— Apart from anything else, that's not a bet, that's a trade.

— Yes, Malorie adds. — And I — I can't let you do that for me. Even though she wants more than anything to get out of here.

— Also... Constance is less surprised than the others by this news — I mean, you know this, but... it'll try to trick you.

Annie smiles. — I do know that, and thank you for acknowledging it. But I'm pretty tricky myself.

Constance nods, silent, thoughtful.

Stewart seems as upset as Malorie feels. — But what do you mean? What's the bet? What's a soul, for that matter? If you lose, will you be a zombie? Or just not be able to enjoy poetry?

— Or damned for all eternity when you die? Sarah joins the questioning.

— I don't know any more about the metaphysics than the rest of you, Annie sends. — I just used 'soul' as... an idea, I guess. Shorthand, whatever. I mean that if we lose the bet I'll take Malorie's place.

— And if we win? Stewart sounds like he is barely holding it together, Malorie thinks.

— Then everyone goes free.

— But what's the bet?

— The simplest one of all: a coin toss. Heads or tails.

There is a new clamour in the meld. — That's ridiculous! — Don't be daft! But one thought overrides them all.

— Not in here, Constance sends. — It can influence things.

— No, I know. It's got to be out there, in the real world. Constance nods at this, and Malorie thinks she sees a half-smile of satisfaction cross her face.

— But we can't let go. How can we toss a coin? Sarah sends.

— Who even *has* a coin? Stewart sends, but Malorie knows she had change in her pocket when she set out last night.

— So it's got to be you, Malorie, Annie sends, turning to face her. — When you're back out there, on The Marshes.

Malorie isn't quite sure what marshes Annie means, but doesn't worry about that. — Why are you doing this for me?

— I'd do it for anyone who needed it. And... you remember that mental thing we had? That weird connection?

— Of course I do. Malorie thinks it is responsible for her being here, for all this, at least to a degree.

— I didn't cause that, I didn't understand it. But I think I do now. You know this environment — she indicates the dark space all around them — is kind of outside time? Like the way your dream self from your past was able to be with you? Well I think that thing that happened to us was part of this. Was linked to this space, to us here, now.

— I don't see how that could be... This feels very different from that, Malorie thinks. — But OK...

Deep beneath the meld, hidden from the thoughts of the others, she feels Annie send her something. Like a note passed under a desk at the back of a classroom, Annie has passed her a message. Before she can explore it, the Cringemaker's voice resounds again.

'Well? Are you ready?'

— Yes. Let Malorie go. Put her back in our world, in the middle of the circle. Release all links to her. She'll toss a coin. The bet is on the coin drop.

The entity does not appear to breathe, so it cannot sigh, but if it could, Malorie thinks, that would be what it did now, before speaking again. 'Very well. But if you try to trick me,

none of you will leave.’ Malorie is not convinced by this threat, as the grouping of her friends have clearly at least equalled the strength of the entity, or it would not be bargaining at all.

The environment around her starts to change, and she feels like she is falling, slipping down through the world, and at that same time rising like a bubble. The ghostly forms of her friends and the dark plain they stand on fade like a darkening light, and everything spins.

#

She became aware of cold, wet grass under her hands, and moistening the knees of her jeans. The night air was chilly, but she was wearing the same clothes she had on when she set out to see Sarah play.

Pulling herself to her feet, she realised she was enclosed in the circle of her friends. They were holding hands, standing with their eyes closed. And light was coming off them. It was among the strangest things she had seen, in a time of extreme strangeness.

Constance, Annie, Stewart, Sarah: all their heads were glowing, and spark-like blobs of light were dripping from various parts of their bodies.

She tried to see beyond their encirclement, and understood they were far out in a vast grassy area, with the lights of a town — she assumed it was part of London — beyond. Then she caught sight of the twisted red metal of the Orbit, and realised they couldn’t be far from Sarah’s place in Hackney, and the Olympic Park. This must be Hackney Marshes, which she had heard of but never visited while staying at Sarah’s.

As her attention spread, she realised that the city sky was sparkling with fireworks. It was early November. At the same time, internally, she remembered Annie’s message — or it almost seemed that Annie’s message opened itself within her.

It was almost as if she could hear Annie speak aloud: ‘Don’t break the circle. Toss the coin. Then join hands.’

Not breaking the circle was easy: Malorie wasn't going anywhere. It was spooky seeing her friends standing around her, silent, eyes closed; and those strange lights! But she felt safer there than she would have outside their circle.

Then they opened their eyes. All of them. Just briefly, then closed them again. Checking on me, she realised.

Toss a coin. She knew she had one. But who was going to call heads or tails? She fished in the pocket of her jeans, suddenly wondering where her bag was, with her wallet, keys, cards. She last remembered having it when she ran out of the gig to find Sarah. She must have had it when the Cringemaker pulled her into its realm. That was going to be a hard one to explain to her bank. Worse, it had been a lovely leather one that her Mum had given her last Christmas.

She usually kept some change in her pocket, and there were a few coins there now. A 10p piece, easier to toss than one of the smaller coins. 'OK, I'm ready to toss the coin. Who's calling?'

She spoke aloud, and was shocked to hear the entity's voice echo in her mind — *Tails*. She cringed internally to realise that it was still able to connect to her.

She balanced the coin on her forefinger and thumb. Willing 'Heads' more strongly than she had ever willed anything before, she flicked it up into the air. It spun smoothly and dropped to the grassy ground.

48: We Always Want the Choice

— Open your eyes, Annie sends. — Everyone. Make sure she's out OK.

Stewart does so, experiencing the disorientation of seeing Hackney Marshes and his friends with his real eyes, and the dark otherworldly plain and his friends' shadow-forms simultaneously. Malorie is crouched in the middle of their coven-like circle, getting to her feet.

Glancing around, catching the others' eyes, he sees Annie wink. Then he closes his eyes and they are back in the entity's world.

— She seems to be OK, Constance sends.

— Can we check a bit more carefully? Sarah asks

— Not without breaking the circle, and that would be bad.

— But if we lose the coin toss — Annie, what's going to happen?

Their protective bubble shimmers around them, protecting them from the creature that holds them.

Annie, here in her shadow form, smiles. It is surprising enough to see her do so, Stewart thinks, and more so her, now, in these odd circumstances. She is more attractive to

him in that moment than ever before, almost without thinking he adds his lust to the deadly sins giving strength to their shield. He doesn't think the others would be much use, though he can never remember what they all are.

— Don't worry. Something'll work out. And despite the lack of context or information, the baldness of this assertion, Stewart does find his concern receding. These people are competent — including, he realises, himself — We'll work something out.

The bubble trembles as the entity thunders again: 'Your little friend is ready. As the challenged party, the call is mine to make, I think?' It phrases it as a question, but Stewart doesn't think it would accept any discussion of the matter. Still, with a fair coin, it's always fifty-fifty, right? So it doesn't matter who calls.

Except psychologically. We always want the choice. The appearance of choice.

— Fine, Annie says.

'Tails,' says the entity, its voice echoing, and Stewart realises he can hear it with his physical ears, as well as his shadow-form's.

Interesting, he thinks. I always go heads, and he thinks most people do. Maybe because the head suggests the brain, so is the symbol of human rationality? But of course, the entity is neither human nor person; people aren't always rational; and a tossed coin certainly isn't.

49: Down on her Hands and Knees

Sarah also thinks she would have called heads. Maybe if enough of us want heads, we'll influence the coin's fall. She is prepared to believe that would be possible after the things she has experienced recently. Could Annie or Malorie do that? It seems improbable, not least because of the constantly-changing state of a spinning coin.

Maybe it's good that the Cringemaker has called, because if it had been up to them, there would have been four voices, or five, not necessarily agreeing. She supposes they would have let Annie decide, as she's the one who is putting herself on the line, more than the rest of them.

Whatever way the coin falls, she can't see this ending well. But she is glad Malorie is out of the Cringemaker's clutches. Rescuing her friend was all she had wanted.

She opens her eyes again, and realises the others have theirs open too. They all want to see how the coin falls.

Malorie fishes in her pocket and pulls out a coin. Balances it on her hand. Spins it high into the air. *Heads*, Sarah thinks, and she can hear, or feel, or sense, the others doing the same.

It lands on the grass, and they all bend forward to try and see it. But the light is too low to see it from her standing position. Malorie gets down on her hands and knees to look up close, and calls it.

‘— It’s heads’

50: Disturbing the November Sky

Malorie pulled herself to her feet, wiping her wet hands on her jeans, feeling the chill on her knees as the damp soaked through. Her friends stood around her, silent, eyes closed. Light spilled from them, falling in sparks like the fireworks periodically disturbing the November sky.

Enclosed in the circle of their joined hands, the four of them close around her, she felt safe for the first time in what for her had been days, though she knew it had only been hours. Maybe she was wrong to feel safe: there was no guarantee the Cringemaker would honour the bet. In fact it felt like almost the opposite would be true: the entity seemed more likely to go against the result of the bet than to accept it.

Yet she felt safe, despite the spookiness of her friends' silence. She could still feel the mental connection to them, thoughts fizzing between them all. She could feel their growing physical exhaustion — how long had they been standing like this? She, on the other hand, felt physically relaxed, well rested. She supposed her real body had been asleep or unconscious while she had struggled in the Cringemaker's dream world.

She thought of her younger self, waking fifteen years ago from a terrifying dream, but

throwing herself in front of the cringemaker only a few minutes ago, maybe.

How brave her younger self had been. And smart, and resourceful. Is she still there? Still here, still part of me? Malorie hoped she was. Hoped she could be as brave as her young dream-self.

Hoped she would never have to be.

Maybe she already had been. She had survived everything the Cringemaker had put her through. Sure, she had been scared, terrified. Had panicked several times. But she had made it through. Would she have helped anyone else along the way, if she had met them? Maybe. She hoped so.

And she wondered if her younger self had really been there, not from a dream in the past, but somehow as an aspect of herself: her bravery, manifested as another version of her. Because the Cringemaker had seemed surprised at that moment: by Malorie's connection to Sarah and the others, certainly; but also by the small presence that stood in front of it. Maybe it wasn't the Cringemaker that had summoned the young Malorie, but she, Malorie, herself. Calling on her, or her bravery, in her hour of need.

Whatever the explanation was, here, now, she was safe. But were her friends? She had to find out what was happening to them. Join hands, Annie had said. She couldn't enter their tight circle without breaking links, she thought, but she could reach across. Reaching out to where Constance's hand held Sarah's on one side, and Annie's and Stewart's were joined on the other, she grasped the two joins, making sure she was touching all four of them. Not knowing if it mattered, but doing what felt right.

Power surged through her as she slipped back fully into the meld.

#

— We're going to disconnect, and we expect you to leave our realm, Annie is saying as

Malorie's thoughts rejoin the shared space. The four still appear to stand on the black, blasted plain, the shield-bubble shimmering around them. And now, invisibly, beneath them, Malorie can feel. She stands among them. Here, they are not touching, but she can still feel the two sets of joined hands under hers.

There is a sense of amusement in the entity's voice, which even now is enough to make her cringe. '— A gamble is a gamble. A gamble lost is worth nothing to anyone. Begone, then. I will bother you no more.'

Malorie finds this hard to believe, and senses the same scepticism from the others. It wasn't going to be that easy, was it? Not that it had been easy for any of them, but she had feared and expected some last hurdle, some betrayal or denying tactic.

— What do we do, then, Stewart sends. — Do we just let go, or...

— Don't let go under any circumstances! Annie sends, and Malorie feels a similar sense of urgency from Constance. She tightens her hands over her friends'.

— We can navigate ourselves out, Constance sends. — Just go with this.

Malorie doesn't understand what exactly is happening, but she feels their shared consciousness start to descend — or is it ascend? The dark plain starts to fade, but the golden bubble stays strong, grows brighter, if anything.

The surface under her changes to grass, and trees fade into view, houses in the distance.

51: Open Your Eyes

‘You can all open your eyes,’ Constance said. ‘But don’t let go yet.’

Stewart was almost surprised to find himself still standing in Hackney Marshes.

‘Across the circle? That’s clever,’ Annie said, and Stewart realised she meant Malorie, whose hand was clamped warmly over his and Annie’s.

The four of them stepped towards the centre of their circle, so Malorie didn’t have to stretch to keep her grip.

‘I think you might have discovered a new coven form,’ Constance said. ‘Or invented it. It’s powerful.’

Stewart had noticed their group’s seeming increase in power after Malorie got out, but hadn’t known it was to do with the way they were all touching. What if everyone joined hands in the middle, he wondered? If everyone touched everyone else? Magical topology could be a whole field of study.

He could still see their protective bubble around them. It looked fainter than it had on the ghostly plain, but felt just as strong. He hadn’t felt this safe since being in his mother’s arms as a small child.

‘What now?’ he said. ‘Is it really gone?’

They all looked up.

‘No, still there,’ said Annie. The now familiar crack in the sky was there, unaffected by fireworks. Stewart thought it was smaller than it had last been, but it was hard to be sure.

‘I think it’s shrinking,’ said Sarah. ‘Is it closing?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Constance. Stewart could feel the scepticism and the hope from the women he was connected to still by a psychic link. If this was really over — if the entity was leaving and they were free of it — he wondered what things were going to be like from now on. Would they keep this link?

To his own view the crack seemed to be receding without shrinking, somehow. But it still looked ominous, threatening, and now strange lightnings sparked across it. Or was that an optical effect of the protective bubble that still glowed around them?

Annie’s hand shifted nervously in his, and Malorie’s grip, covering them both, loosened slightly. To his left, Sarah tightened her grip in response to Malorie’s other hand slackening over hers and Constance’s.

— Don’t let go. We’re strong like this, Annie sent, and Malorie’s grip tightened.

‘Should we do something?’ Stewart said. ‘Send it a warning, or...’

‘Tell it to fuck off?’ said Annie, with a smile. ‘No, I think we should just wait, see if it goes.’

‘What if it doesn’t?’ said Sarah.

‘I need to pee,’ said Malorie. From the assenting noises from all the others, Stewart concluded that they were all in the same state. How long had they been standing out there in the November cold? And poor Malorie had been trapped in the Cringemaker’s world since last night.

‘Well it sounds like we’re all soon going to be too distracted to keep the meld tight,’ said Constance. ‘So we should probably disconnect cleanly, now, for minimum discomfort.’

Stewart felt Annie’s apprehension. ‘What’s the problem with breaking the link now that we’re out?’

‘Right now we’re protected. The entity can’t attack us. Or it could, but it knows we can defend ourselves. As soon as we break, it can come after us again.’ Annie sighed. ‘And I don’t trust it.’

‘There is a certain security in its having made an agreement with another magical entity,’ said Constance. ‘Our meld was powerful enough to bind it, even if it would try to betray us.’

‘Yes,’ said Annie. ‘That means Malorie’s safe from it now. But I’m not so sure about the rest of us.’

‘You mean it could grab one of us? Like it did to Malorie?’

‘Or worse,’ said Annie.

‘Well... what are we going to do?’ said Sarah. ‘Can we — I don’t know, *banish* it?’

Annie and Constance met each other’s eyes again at this. They held the gaze for a long moment, then Constance said, ‘We can. Or we can try, at least. Trouble is, even though this meld is powerful, we’re all tired, and distracted by physical needs. It might not work.’

Their thoughts were distracted by voices in the distance. Across the Marshes, a group of noisy revellers was staggering. ‘Shit, I hope they don’t come to investigate the light we’re throwing off,’ Stewart said.

‘It’s not as bright as you think,’ said Annie. ‘They won’t notice.’

Stewart remembered arriving here with Constance, and seeing how brightly Annie and Sarah had sparkled, and thought Annie’s confidence might be misplaced.

‘What if we take turns?’ said Sarah. ‘We were strong when we were four. Malorie could slip out of the meld, go and pee in the bushes, then come back and rejoin. And we all have a go. Would that work?’

Constance and Annie’s exchange of glances this time looked sceptical, but Annie said, ‘Might work. Malorie should be safe anyway, like I said. Give it a try. Stay linked to us, Malorie.’

‘I hate peeing outside,’ said Malorie, ‘but OK. I’ll let go in three, two, one.’

Stewart felt the meld weaken as Malorie’s hands left his and Annie’s. He tightened his grip in response, and so did Annie and Sarah. He could still feel Malorie’s connection to them as she ducked under clasped hands and ran into the trees.

Something stirred around them, in the sky above them.

‘It’s paying attention, then, Constance said.’

‘Did you think it wouldn’t?’ said Annie. Constance didn’t answer.

52: Human Contact

Sarah went next, after Malorie rejoined the group. As she squatted among the trees, worrying about what might be on the ground in the dark, she could still feel the Cringemaker's malign presence around her. It was probing at their defences. Maybe particularly at hers. She was protected by her link to the others, by the meld. But she felt vulnerable by being on her own, and because it had scooped her mind up first, before it even got Malorie.

In a way she was responsible for all this happening, If she hadn't been so weak as to let the Cringemaker in, then it would never have got Malorie. They would never have had to stage this mission to rescue her. She wouldn't have put her friends in danger.

— Stop thinking like that, Constance sent. — The entity is manipulating your thoughts again, trying to undermine you.

— And hey, Annie sent, — if all this hadn't happened, you and me wouldn't even *be* friends.

Sarah snapped out of it, realising the truth of what Constance and Annie said. God, we're so vulnerable to that thing. It was so easy to have the slightest negative thought directed down a self-destructive path. And she was supposed to be the mentally tough one. It

must have been so much harder for poor Malorie. Poor little Malorie, that vulnerable thing.

— Hey! Malorie sent. — I'm right here!

— I don't think those were even her thoughts, Stewart sent.

Walking out of the trees, back to the group glowing faintly in the night, Sarah said aloud, 'Sorry Malorie. Sorry everyone. It's like it can take the slightest negative half-thought and send you spiralling with it. Mal, you must be *incredibly* tough to have survived in there for a day.'

Sarah rejoined the circle and Constance took her turn, ensuring that it remained unbroken throughout. What's so important about circles, about joining, about skin-to-skin contact, she wondered. But she knew the answer, or the group of them did: human contact, both mental and physical, is what protects us from the entities in the dark. We crawl on this tiny, insignificant planet, all alone in the night, the endless night of the cosmos. All around us are chaotic, screaming nightmare-forces and -beings, and worse, even when we don't know about them, even when we deny their existence.

Beings like the Cringemaker.

Maybe they come from the stars, maybe from some kind of inner space. They are there, they are malevolent, and the only thing that stands against them is humanity's humanity: the fragile bonds that join us together. All are one, really, but we forget that all the time. Touching minds, touching bodies, helps us to remember it. Helps us to be stronger, better together.

Sarah wonders whether their meld, or others like it, would be even stronger if they had more skin-to-skin contact, and a brief image of them all naked, piled together on the grass, forms in her mind.

'It works, too,' said Annie. 'That's why witches have a reputation for orgies and going

“skyclad”.’

— You don’t need the sex part, even, sent Constance. — Just the physicality.

‘The sex part’s good too, though,’ said Annie, with a grin at Stewart.

‘Bit cold for all that here, though,’ said Stewart.

‘You go next,’ said Annie to Stewart, as Constance returned.

‘We won’t talk about you,’ Malorie said, and Sarah was pleased that her sense of humour seemed to be intact after her ordeal.

— I’ll know if you do, Stewart sent as he walked toward the trees.

‘What’s next?’ said Sarah. ‘What do we do now? Even with empty bladders, we can’t stay like this for long.’

‘Yeah, I’m hungry and thirsty,’ said Malorie. ‘You guys have probably had three meals today.’

‘Actually not so much,’ said Sarah. ‘I’m not sure when we last ate.’

‘Breakfast at your place, I think,’ said Stewart as he rejoined them. ‘Here, let me in, and you go, Annie.’ He took hold of Sarah’s and Constance’s hands, which Annie was also holding. The meld’s strength jumped back up as he rejoined, then dropped significantly as Annie let go and turned toward the trees.

She had taken three steps when the Cringemaker struck.

53: Gone

Malorie's relief at being back in her body, back in the real world, and back with her friends, was almost overwhelming. She tried to contribute to the meld, to their protective bubble, using the positive emotion to bolster it. But she was tired as well as hungry, and she just wanted this to all be over.

That it wasn't was made extremely clear as their shield received a huge blast of mental force from the Cringemaker. Enough to make them stagger physically, and almost lose their grips on each others' hands.

'Annie!' Stewart shouted.

'Don't let go!' from Constance.

Malorie looked over her shoulder, where Stewart's alarmed gaze was facing. Annie sprawled on the ground, not moving.

'Get the circle round her,' said Constance. 'Stay joined.'

Malorie started to shuffle backwards as the four of them moved in an unwieldy way toward their fallen friend. But it was too late. The crack in sky widened, writhed, and darkness reached down from it. Another blow struck their meld and Malorie blacked out for a

moment.

When she came to the four were sitting or lying on the ground, dazed, coming back to consciousness. None of them were holding hands. They must have been blasted apart. She could still feel them all in her mind, but the strength of connection was reduced, the protective strength of the meld gone completely.

‘Join hands! Put it back together,’ said Constance. Malorie pulled herself to her feet and grabbed the hands nearest to her, Constance’s and Sarah’s. Stewart seemed barely conscious, but he gripped their other hands and they pulled him to his feet.

‘Annie...’ he mumbled.

They all looked, ready to resume their conjoined shuffle towards her. But forces and dark clouds clustered round her, reaching down from the sky crack. She was on her feet now, and conscious, looking up at her assailant. They could still feel her in their minds, but she seemed more distant, occluded.

Then she looked at them, from out of the clouds of negative light that swirled round her.

‘Stay back. It just wants me.’

The clouds closed round her, a dark sarcophagus, and she sent, — It always did want me. I think that’s what this was all about.

Then the clouds swirled one more time, and the shape enclosing Annie shot up into the air, to the crack.

The crack closed, the clouds disappeared, and the presence of the Cringemaker disappeared from their minds.

— Don’t worry about me, I’ll be OK... a last fading message, sent on the wind. Annie was gone.

54: The Future

London was putting on its Christmas face as Stewart left work and made his way towards Hackney. Lights twinkled in windows, shops were cheerfully decorated, and among the other commuters, jumpers with holly and pictures of reindeer were increasingly common.

He wondered how Annie would have taken all this. With a strong helping of cynicism, he imagined. He had only known her in summer and autumn, but didn't think she would be especially fond of Christmas, somehow.

It was just over a month since that night on the Marshes and on that terrible dark plane in the Cringemaker's realm. He had replayed it in his head so many times, and imagined so many ways that it might have gone, that he sometimes wondered which version had really happened.

Or whether any of it had been real. He knew it had, but sometimes it was hard to believe.

But he just had to summon up his new abilities to remind himself,. Without being linked with any of the others, they were weak, unfocused, untrained. But he was learning more every time they got together with Constance. She said it was dangerous to leave the

three of them out there with a smattering of knowledge and ability, but without knowing what they were doing. So she was insisting on training them.

The occult was becoming less hidden for him, but there was so much to learn about. And all of it reminded him of Annie. If they hadn't lost her, she might be contributing to their training.

Or she might just be off doing her own thing, as before.

Tonight was just social, though.

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More Christmas lights were twinkling in windows as he walked from Hackney Downs station to the Primitive Wallflower. The pub itself was looking cheerful and seasonal.

The three women were gathering at a table, placing drinks in front of them, including his. They exchanged hugs.

'Thanks,' he said, sitting down and taking a gulp from his pint.

'I'm not quite sure whether you told us what you wanted or we just knew,' said Malorie.

'Or it was a good guess,' said Sarah.

'Is there a difference?' said Constance, her long coat swirling as she took it off and sat down.

'Remote ordering of drinks: one of the lesser-considered advantages of our new-found abilities.' Stewart leaned into the table and spoke quietly. The pub was filling up with post-work drinkers but it wasn't noisy yet, and he didn't want to be overheard.

'You don't have to keep your voice down,' said Constance. No one can hear us.' And Stewart sensed the slight distortion in the air around them that would keep their voices from the other patrons of the bar. It reminded him of the bubble of force that had protected them all

from the Cringemaker's assaults. That they hadn't been able to reform quickly enough to throw round Annie.

'I know,' said Constance, putting her hand on his. 'I didn't like her at first, but I came to respect her. Even admire her.'

The others placed their hands-on top of his and Constance's, and they all moved them around till everyone was touching everyone. Stewart felt the strength that they had with their connection, was aware of the greater strength they could have, if they needed it. If they wanted it.

'It's not like I was in love with her,' he said. 'In a way I hardly even knew her. I certainly didn't have a way of contacting any family. But I liked her, you know? I miss her.'

The others murmured agreement, comfort. With the hands that weren't connected in the table, they all picked up their drinks. They laughed at the simultaneity, and then Malorie said, 'Well that looks like we want to toast.' She raised her glass. To Uncanny Annie.'

'Uncanny Annie,' they chorused, and drank.

'Is she — sorry Stewart.' Sarah was hesitant, but determined. 'Is she dead, do you think? Or trapped with that... thing?'

Constance swirled her gin before answering. 'I've looked for her. Looked is the wrong word, but there are certain ways of exploring the psychic space of humanity, for want of a better term. I can't find her, alive or dead. But then, she was always very elusive. Could turn up unexpectedly, surprise me, you know? She had abilities, capabilities, that I didn't understand. I'm not sure anyone did.'

She looked at Stewart. 'She was — is? — a lot older than you probably thought.'

'I know,' said Stewart, remembering seeing her before the Rapture Raiders' gig, and thinking she might be under age for drinking. 'She was deceptive in various ways.'

‘I mean a *lot* older. Did she ever tell you stories about people she couldn’t possibly have known?’

‘She once said she knew David Bowie when he was young.’

Constance nodded. ‘I doubt that’s the farthest back she went. Not by a long shot.’

Stewart had a sudden memory. ‘And there was that talk about Elizabeth the First that night...’

Constance nodded, then sighed. ‘I couldn’t find any evidence of the entity, the Cringemaker, either. If it was still hovering about, still hunting, I’d have seen some evidence of it. I think.’

‘So she’s trapped forever, then?’ said Malorie.

‘Maybe. But if there’s anyone who could give it a run for its money, maybe escape from it, it’s her.’

‘Well at least that fucker isn’t around to bother anyone else,’ said Sarah.

‘No. But... do you feel it? You should be able to get a sense of it. I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something else coming. Something bigger, more diffuse, maybe. A threat to us all.’

‘Climate change,’ said Sarah. ‘Maybe that’s why the Green Man appeared that time.’

‘Yes,’ said Constance, ‘that is something that’s always there, hovering in the background, a constant threat. But this feels like it’s something else. More urgent, more intense. But still hard to get a grip on.’

‘Well,’ said Stewart, ‘If we’re going to have to fight to save the world again, I can’t think of any other meld, or coven, or psychic-bond group I’d rather do it with. I just hope it waits till after Christmas.’

‘Yeah,’ said Malorie. ‘A new decade coming up. I hear the twenties are going to roar.’

They clinked glasses again, and drank to the future.

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