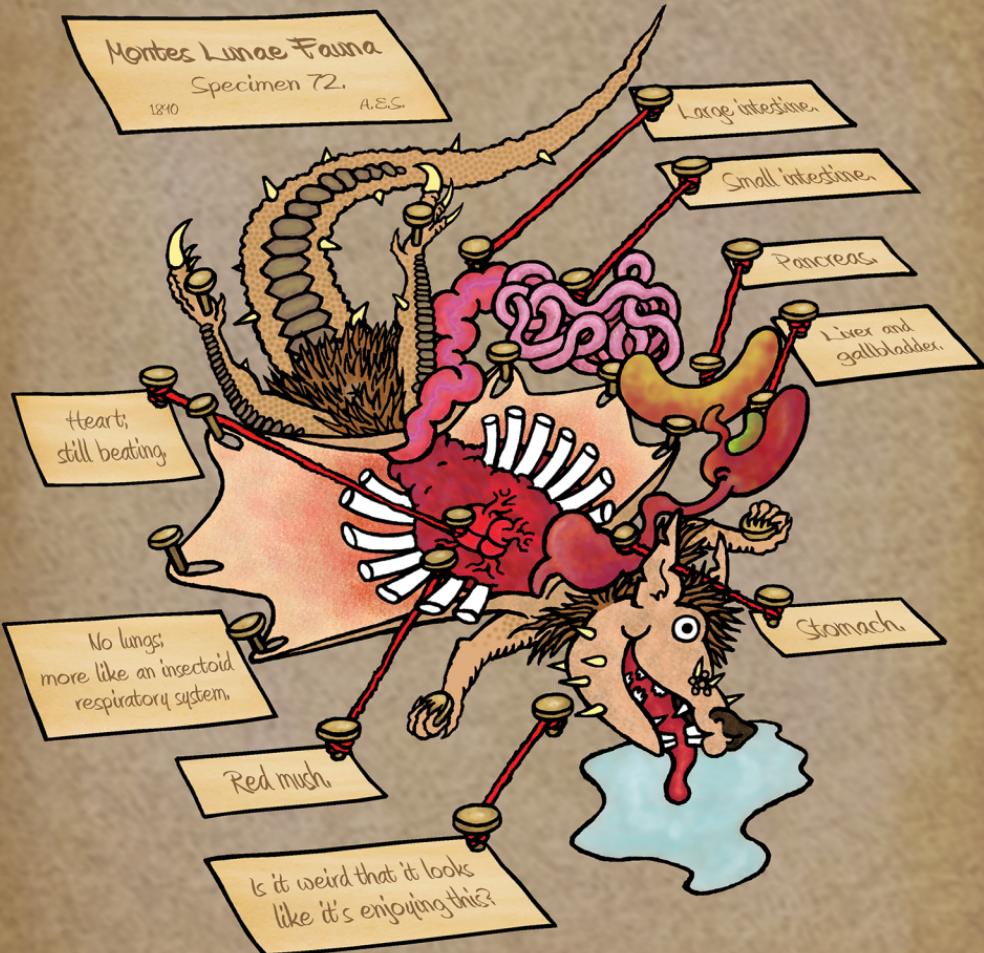


Shanks Family Legacy



L. R. G. Carter

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Prologue

“I want to put a cow on the moon,” said Farmer Giles to Doctor Niles. They sat in the kitchen of Fallow Field Farm eating eggs and pie. At least, Doctor Niles was sitting, Farmer Giles was standing, because of his problem.

“I see,” said Doctor Niles, who did not see at all. “How long have you been wanting to put a cow on the moon?”

“It all started a few years ago,” said Farmer Giles. “I was working in my turnip field when my plough broke on a big white rock; the rock that now sits on this very table!”

At that, Farmer Giles pulled aside the cloth that covered the bulging shape before them.

“Gosh,” said Doctor Niles, who had been hoping his friend was hiding a cake. “How very surprising.”

“Indeed,” said Farmer Giles. “The hieroglyphs on this rock match others found on several islands in the Pacific, which archaeologists believe are over twelve thousand years old. With the help of many interesting books I have translated this ancient language and unlocked the arcane secrets of the Daisy Stone!”

“The Daisy Stone?” Doctor Niles repeated, doing that thing people sometimes do with their eyebrows.

“Yes. I named it after my favourite cow, the one I will send to the moon.”

“And what secrets does this painted rock reveal, that encourage you to throw your livelihood into space?”

“I still have more work to do on the translation, but I’ve managed to work these symbols here into a rhythm I feel is

sympathetic to the original. They read; '*During the reign of King Diddle Diddle, when the fiddles of cats held back the unseen, the cows flew down from the moon and the stars, jumping over the void in between.*' The next bit is a little confusing, but seems to talk about the young nation of wolf-men rejoicing at the cows' coming, while the people of the white ceramics drew plans of war against them. I have no idea what that's about, but I'm sure with a little more study it will all make sense."

"So, assuming these ancient writings tell the truth, how do you intend to achieve your goal? Perhaps with some kind of ... cattle-pult?" The doctor chuckled at his joke, but Farmer Giles frowned and shook his head.

"That would never work, not enough velocity. No, I have been building a rocket in the barn."

"Ah, what a relief," said Doctor Niles. "I have been wondering what you were up to in there and rather feared you were starting a cult. Will I ever be able to see this contraption?"

"Indeed you shall," said Farmer Giles, "for I finished it last night and called you here today to witness its launch. Away now, to fame and glory!"

As they left the house, Doctor Niles could not help noticing that all the farm's cows were lining the way to the barn. They moaned long slow lows as the humans passed, gave two short cries as the doors were thrown open, then rang their bells in perfect union as the doctor gazed at the monolith within.

"Behold!" announced his friend. "The *Bovine 1!*"

"Madness," said the doctor. "Udder madness."

"I built it from old combine harvesters and muck spreaders and the like, and all the ladies have been saving their pats to power it. Come on; let's pull it out to the field!"

The cows gave an impression of cheer as a spluttering tractor

towed the rocket out of the barn. Daisy walked proudly behind it as everyone made their way to the turnip field and the spot where her stone had been discovered. She strode over the flowers thrown at her feet then climbed into the cockpit, where Farmer Giles gave her one last hug.

“You be safe, my dear, and have lots of fun. I’ve put a salt lick in the glove compartment, and the camera and tripod are in the boot. I expect to see lots of pictures when you get back.”

Doctor Niles was almost convinced that Daisy gave a wave as they retreated behind the safety screen two fields over. The humans and cows all fell silent as Farmer Giles pressed a big red button. Doctor Niles flinched, but instead of the expected explosion the farmer’s voice was heard blaring from overhead megaphones.

“TEN … NINE …”

“Why do we need a countdown?” asked Doctor Niles.

“Tis more dramatic,” said Farmer Giles.

“Do you think she’ll be all right?” the doctor whispered, afraid to break the cows’ solemn silence. “What if the Daisy Stone is wrong, and cows can’t survive on the moon?”

“The stone cannot be wrong. Cows must have come from the Moon, why else would they call it the Mooo-n?”

The farmer’s recorded count reached zero. The rocket rose into the sky as a blinding blast flashed across the fields. Doctor Niles turned to shield his eyes. As he did so, he noticed the wind tearing through a nearby heap of cut grass, revealing a secret hidden within. Two frantic cows hurtled past, ripping chunks of greenery from the hedgerow as they went. The Doctor had just enough time to see a pile of paint pots before they were buried under the bushes. These pots were covered in the prints of colourful hooves. Doctor Niles was sure they were the exact same

shades that had decorated the Daisy Stone.

“What are you looking at?” said Farmer Giles, following the Doctor’s gaze to the pair of embarrassed cows.

“They …” the doctor began, but his friend had already turned back to watch the vanishing rocket. “Oh, it was nothing. Come on, let’s go back to the house and finish our eggs and pie.”

“An excellent idea,” agreed the farmer. “And for pudding I have a cake I baked especially for you.”

So Farmer Giles and Doctor Niles headed back to their feast, leaving the cows to sing and dance as they waited for Daisy’s return.

Chapter 1

Three valleys over from Fallow Field Farm lay the little town of Mernanshire, where nothing ever happened. The people there were going about their life as if it were any other day, completely unaware of the historic events unfolding nearby. Betsy the Butcher was busy boning beef, Dylan the Dentist was diligently drilling dentures, and Fearless Fran the Firefighter was fearlessly fighting fires, just as they had every day before and just as they would every day after.

Chief Constable Donnervan was trying to fake a funeral. Though she had done so many times before, on this particular occasion she was meeting with very little success.

The Mernanshire police force faked a funeral whenever one of the Shanks family died. A real funeral would be quite out of the question, as their ancient family curse never left any bodies to bury. This was of no concern to the police, for it was not out of kindness that they performed these rites. The Shanks Family Criminal Record listed many associations with all manner of moral miscreants, so their family funerals were perfect places for the police to spring an ambush. The first time such a trap was set; fifteen fugitive felons had fallen foul of the law. Yet word of this ploy was quick to spread, and with each following death fewer people came to attend the empty coffins.

Chief Constable Donnervan crouched in her secret observation hut, casting a pair of binoculars over the sparse congregation.

“Only five people,” she muttered, “and we can’t arrest any of

them. What a waste of a day.”

“Can we not at least catch the last of the Shanks family?” asked her deputy, squatting beside her. “There’s just four of them left, it would require hardly any brutality at all.”

“No, we had to promise them amnesty to make them turn up, and we needed them to turn up so the funeral would look authentic. What about that old woman? She must surely be wanted for something.”

“That’s the Colonel,” said the deputy, flipping through a sheaf of papers. “Her file says she’s a friend of the family, yet she doesn’t seem to be a criminal at all.”

“Not a criminal,” said Donnervan, shaking her head. “What is the world coming to?”

She watched the priest throw a handful of soil into the grave; then sent a reluctant radio call for her team to stand down. All around the churchyard police crawled from bushes, snipers dropped from trees, and a tank rumbled free from its place of concealment. It had taken Chief Constable Donnervan a long time to requisition that tank, and even longer still to prepare its secret tunnel.

The Shanks family had grown restless at the graveside. They barely even cracked a smile when the tank swerved to avoid the priest and crashed into the church.

“I’m glad that’s over,” said Christopher to his younger cousin, Armitage. “Honouring the dead is all well and good but I hate being used as bait.”

“It’s a small price to pay for the overlooking of certain compelling pieces of evidence,” said his mother, Ariadne. She turned and placed a gentle hand on her husband’s arm. “We need to go now, Arthur. Mr McGregor will be waiting to read the will.”

“Quite right, my love,” said Arthur, wiping away tears and

blowing his nose into his sleeve. “Goodbye, brother Henry. Until next we meet, when the curse strikes again.”

“This isn’t as bad as my parents’ funeral,” said Armitage to Christopher as they left the cemetery. “Uncle Henry was still in hiding and you were all tied up over that mess with the killer robot, so I was the only person there.”

“I resent the term ‘*killer* robot’,” said Christopher. “It implies somebody actually died.”

“What about that boy in the coma?”

“He doesn’t count until they pull the plug.”

“I would have expected you two to show more consideration for the grief of others,” said the Colonel. “Especially given how many members of *your* family have died over the past month.”

The Shanks Family Curse had indeed been particularly active of late. In just the last month, Armitage had seen a giant mutant maggot eat both his parents, then watched a vast tentacled beast devour his uncle. To make matters worse, a genie had kidnapped his auntie for reasons Armitage had completely missed. On that point at least there was little to worry about. Urbi Hotep could look after herself, and was probably enjoying all manner of adventures that would one day be very entertaining to hear.

All things considered, Armitage was coping remarkably well. He was aided by the belief that his hair had come to life and now spoke to him with a voice that only he could hear.

“Armitage, I think I’ve missed something,” said the Hair. “Who is this old woman?”

“That’s the Colonel,” said Armitage. “She used to go exploring with Granddaddy Shanks, before he went on his final epic quest to Antarctica and was never seen again.”

“Introducing me to your new friend, ey?” said the Colonel, resting a hand atop Armitage’s head and giving it a little jostle.

“Please tell her not to touch me,” the Hair shuddered.

They arrived at the Colonel’s ageing army jeep, which had been given a coat of black camouflage paint out of respect for the occasion. Ariadne, Arthur, Armitage, and Christopher all climbed in and put on their seatbelts, while the Colonel began fiddling with a large bundle of keys. After a few false starts and more than a few rude words the engine rumbled into life, and they made their way across Mernanshire to meet with Mr McGregor.

Mr McGregor was the Shanks family solicitor, and he had proven himself to be highly skilled at keeping them all out of prison. The police may have been happy hiding bear traps in graveyards, but they knew better than to try such extralegal skulduggery around Mernanshire’s finest lawyer. Mr McGregor knew all about ‘search warrants’ and ‘reasonable causes’ and many other things that would make the police disappear and never return again. Some even claimed that he had once faced Chief Constable Donnervan in a fight to the death over a pool of hungry piranhas. Mr McGregor himself said that this was highly unlikely to have ever happened, but that is exactly what you would expect a lawyer to say.

With no fear of being arrested in Mr McGregor’s office, anyone who had ever met Henry Shanks was free to find out if he had left them anything in his will. By the time the Shanks family arrived the room was packed full, and it took no small amount of friendly shoving to create a space amid the throng.

Armitage managed to squeeze himself into an empty void between bony legs. A cluster of adults loomed above him, soaked in the smell of the sea and sporting animals as fashion

accessories. Armitage felt safe assuming that these people had worked with Uncle Henry back when he was a pirate.

“I’m sure it was the way he would have wanted to go,” said the one with a parrot on their shoulder. “Wrestling dragons above an erupting volcano.”

“Sorry, what?” said Armitage.

“That’s not how it happened,” said another with a monkey on their back. “He was riding the dragon so he could fight all the magma monsters.”

“No, that’s not right either,” said Armitage.

“It doesn’t matter how he died,” said a third with ants in their pants. “What’s important is that we get all our stuff back!”

“That’s true!” the parrot pirate agreed. “It’s been years since he borrowed my favourite cannon for some unbelievably inventive plan. Now, at last, I shall see it returned!”

“Henry did have a habit of taking other people’s stuff,” the monkey pirate agreed. “I lent him my lawnmower when I first took to the sea. Didn’t think I’d need it again. There hasn’t been a day since that I’ve not regretted that decision.”

“He took something from me that I always kept close to my heart-” the ants pirate began, before being cut off by an infectious spread of hushing shushes.

These shushes were prompted by the arrival of a man in an expensive suit. He moved without trouble through the parting crowd, placing himself in a prominent position behind a polished desk. He waited as the shushing itself took longer than necessary to fall silent, and then he began to speak.

“Good morning. For those of you who do not know me, my name is Mr McGregor. Today I shall be reading the will of the Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks. I understand that many of you have travelled long and far to be here, battling wind and rain and

strange shadowy creatures that loom out of mountain mists, so I shall make this as quick as I possibly can.”

Mr McGregor placed a briefcase on the polished desk, picked out a piece of paper, perched a pair of glasses atop his nose, and began to read.

“I have nothing. I owe much. The rest, I leave to whoever spends the weekend in Mr McGregor’s haunted house.”

There was silence as Mr McGregor slipped the paper back into his briefcase and returned the glasses to his suit pocket.

“What, is that it?” said Christopher, pulling a face to convey that he was less than impressed. Not everyone in the room shared his confidence.

“Your haunted house?” said the parrot pirate. “Not sure I want my cannon back that badly.”

“A whole weekend?” said the monkey pirate. “Think I’ll just buy a new mower myself.”

“The creepy one with all the ghosts and things?” said the ants pirate. “Eh, it was only a pen.”

“*All that remains,*” said Mr McGregor, reasserting his control of the room, “is for me to say that we shall be using the Bleak Black House on Hideous Hill, as I am having the Weird Old Witch House down Dolor Lane redecorated. Any who wish to claim a share of Henry’s inheritance will need to register their names at the house on Friday evening, then still be both alive and present on Sunday morning. Are there any questions?”

“Will there be free food?” called several people at once.

“Yes,” Mr McGregor sighed. “The weekend will indeed be fully catered.”

Half of the room cried huzzar. The others sucked air through their teeth as they tried to decide if free food cancelled out the supernatural dangers. Mr McGregor decided that his work here

was done and took a water sprayer to the crowd to encourage them out of his office.

Armitage ducked behind a potted plant to avoid both the water and the crush for the door.

“You know,” said the Hair, “I have a feeling that this weekend is going to go really badly.”

“Do you think so?” said Armitage. “What makes you say that?”

“Oh, I don’t know, I’m probably worrying over nothing. We’re just going to spend the weekend with the sly and slippery friends of your sly and slippery uncle, while at the same time enjoying the many terrors of Mr McGregor’s haunted house. With a plan like that, what could possibly go wrong?”

Chapter 2

Mr McGregor's haunted house tottered on the edge of a cliff, looming over Mernanshire Bay. Atlantic waves churned endlessly at the rock below, lending a slanted look to Hideous Hill that the Bleak Black House did its best to complement. Faulty lighting flickered through crooked windows. Wrought iron spikes lined fence and roof tops and many other things between. Bats tangled with seagulls, flitting around wobbling chimneys. Had any thrown more than a glance at this display they may have wondered why the bats seemed so much larger than the birds.

Ariadne swung a knocker down at the door, while Arthur gave Christopher a clout round the ear and told him to stop picking his nose. Their thunderous call was answered as the door creaked ominously open, dragged by a smiling woman in a bright and flowery blouse.

"Hello there, come right on in." she said, before calling across the hall. "Mr McGregor, more guests have arrived!"

"Ah, the Shanks family, good evening to you all," said the lawyer, emerging from a nearby room. "I see you have met my haunted-housekeeper, Ms Bramblebottom."

"Oh, please, just call me Bertha," said the woman, waving wriggling fingers at the children. "I'll be looking after you all weekend. Whenever you need clean towels, fresh food, or general electrical maintenance, you just come looking for me."

"You are among the first to arrive," Mr McGregor explained, "so there is plenty of time for Ms Bramblebottom to show you to your rooms. If you could just sign your names here in the

attendance book, that shall be all the paperwork required.”

“I see the Contessa is here,” said Ariadne, noting the name above her own.

“Indeed, she is waiting in the dining room. The other signature belongs to a scientist of some sort. He is currently unpacking in the room next to your own, so I am sure you shall meet him shortly.”

“Hinzelvud,” said Arthur, reading their neighbour’s name aloud and almost writing it instead of his own. “Not sure I know him, but it will be a pleasure to meet Scarlett again. Christopher, Armitage, why don’t you keep the lady in the dining room company while we deal with the luggage?”

Armitage scribbled his name in McGregor’s book, and after a moment’s thought wrote ‘Armitage’s Hair’ on the line beneath.

“Why am I *your* Hair,” said the orange tangle. “Why can’t you be *my* child?”

“Because then *I’d* have to write ‘Armitage’s Hair’s Child,’ ” said Armitage. “And that would just be silly. Maybe we should think of a name for you. Mr Hairy, perhaps, or—”

“Hair!” said the Hair. “Hair is just fine. Let’s put a stop to this line of thinking before it goes too far and I have to rip off your head with my roots.”

Armitage wandered into the candlelit dining room, finding a lady toying with mantelpiece clutter.

“Goodness me,” she gasped. “Can you be Christopher Shanks?”

“I’m Christopher,” said Armitage’s cousin, walking into the room behind him. “Who are you?”

“Then you must be Armitage,” said the woman, crouching down to address the children. “You hadn’t even been born when Henry and I last met. I am Contessa Scarlett, an old friend of

your uncle. Unfortunately I lost touch with him many years ago. Such is often the way with the passing of time. Still, it will be a pleasure to get to know the next generation of the family, enjoying this haunted house in his honour. I'm sure it is exactly the sort of tribute Henry would have wanted."

"Well, yeah, of course it is," said Christopher. "That's why he told us to do it in his will."

"Ah, you have your grandfather's charm," said Scarlett, rising once more to her full height. She turned back to the fireplace, letting her fingers dance over the ornaments piled upon it.

"Before you arrived, I was admiring the unusual things that always seem to gather in ageing houses. Look at this ghastly cuckoo clock and this old, smelly pot. That belongs under a bed, not in a room where people are eating. And what's this? Oh, that is rather unpleasant actually, I'm fairly sure there are laws against these."

Where Scarlett's hand had hesitated, Christopher's shot out to snatch the offending object.

"What is it?" said Armitage, as they poked and prodded the end of a stiff, severed limb.

Scarlett thought momentarily of evading this question. Then she remembered that these were Shanks children, and would no doubt already have seen much worse.

"That is a hand of glory," she answered. "Cut from a criminal hanged in a gibbet, with wicks twisted into the fingers to form a grotesque candelabra. If those fingertip candles are ever lit, anyone nearby will fall into a deep sleep. As such, they are particularly sought after by thieves and burglars ... er, or so say all the myths, anyway."

"Look, there's something written on its display stand," said Christopher.

“Dear McGregor,” Armitage read aloud. “I hear from mutual friends that you have been collecting weird and horrific things. So when I saw this, I thought of you. Yours Sincerely, Anton Chekov.”

“Mr McGregor!” Christopher bellowed into the hall. “Why do you collect weird and horrific things?”

“I’m sorry?” said the lawyer, coming to investigate. “Oh, I see. You found the hand. I assure you, Christopher, the towers of tasteless tat filling every room in this house were not my choice of décor. The moose heads, the suits of armour, the dubiously bound books in the library, all belonged to my great-great-great-uncle, Abercrombie McGregor. He was given this house by a friend after moving to England from America. The story goes that the two of them got up to so much mischief that they even made enemies of the Queen herself. We have tried to forget those dark days of our family history, but some grim spectres of the past never completely fade away.”

Shuddering tremors shook the room as someone outside smashed the knocker against the door.

“We’ll get it,” said Christopher, dragging Armitage off with him into the hall. The house shook again as the caller wrought their impatience upon it.

“Hold your horses, I’m coming,” called Ms Bramblebottom from upstairs, but the children were already at the door. They pulled it open to reveal an imposing shadow stood against a bleeding sunset.

“Hello, who are you?” said Christopher.

Belittling eyes bore down on the boy and curling lips spat their disgust.

“I am Inquisitor Reverend Reetch, Grand Master of the Church of Five Chalices, priest, defender, champion, and Arch

Nemesis of the Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks.”

“Yeah right, join the queue,” said Christopher.

“And what do you mean by that? The battles we raged are legend! It was not without desperate, bitter struggle that the pirate slipped constantly past my blade.”

“Are you sure?” said Armitage. “Uncle Henry was always telling us stories of his adventures and he never mentioned you.”

The inquisitor gave Armitage a look that could kill, but the child seemed strangely immune to his Himalayan Death Stare. His mood grew darker still as he was jostled out of the doorway by the arrival of the Colonel.

“Excuse me, move aside, big bags coming through.” There was a clamorous crash as a pile of excessively large army rucksacks was dumped onto the floor. Reetch stood alone and ignored as the Colonel responded to welcoming greetings. Then she pulled a hollow elephant foot from her luggage, set it down by the door, and stood her hiking cane proudly inside.

“There you go, now it’s just like home,” she said.

“Well really. There was no need to bring an elephant foot umbrella stand,” said Mr McGregor. “This house is a few hundred years old, so obviously has one of its own.”

“You should always be prepared for the worst,” said the Colonel. “I learnt that fighting for my life in the Quicksand Maze of Mierda Ayuda. Good grief! What is *he* doing here?”

“Ah, recognition at last,” Reetch smiled in triumph, only to realise the Colonel was pointing at someone else entirely. Everyone turned to see a small, pale man coming down the stairs with Ariadne and Arthur.

“Hope we weren’t keeping anyone waiting,” said Arthur. “We got talking to Professor Hinzelvud here. He was showing us how his walking stick can turn into a coat hanger. Boy, do I know what

I want for Christmas.”

“Yes dear, I noticed the hints, stop wagging your eyebrows,” said Ariadne.

“So, Professor Hinzelvud,” scowled the Colonel. “How exactly did *you* know Henry Shanks?”

“I must admit, I did not know him at all,” the scientist smiled. “While I appreciate that many of you will be using this weekend as some kind of memorial occasion, there is in fact no limit on who may attend a Haunted House Inheritance Event. A complete stranger could turn up, and would still have to be welcomed. Is that not so, Mr McGregor?”

“It is indeed,” said the lawyer, and, realising that he might never again have everyone’s attention, seized his chance to explain what would happen next. “Now I know many of you have the Haunted House Clause written into your own wills, but for those of you who don’t, I shall quickly go over a few of the rules. First, you must remain within the grounds of the house from now until I return. Second, only the living may claim their prize. Should you die, don’t bother trying to haunt the house yourself, you still won’t get anything. Most importantly, if any of you find your way down to the basement, you will notice a trapdoor set into the floor. Please restrain any urges to open it, as there is *something down there*. At least, that is what my father told me before his mysterious death, and I have no desire to find out anything more about that.”

Armitage saw his cousin’s eyes light up at the mention of this forbidden trapdoor. Mr McGregor’s audience began yawning and shuffling their feet as he droned on about first aid boxes and fire exits, but he soon regained their attention as he moved on to the matter of food.

“Finally, the weekend will begin with the traditional banquet,

where everyone may get to know each other while enjoying Ms Bramblebottom's fine cooking. I think that's everything I have to say. Are there any questions?"

A hand went up at the back of the crowd, and a timid voice asked, "Yes, sorry, I've only just arrived. Did I miss anything?"

"Only everything," said Mr McGregor, rolling his eyes. "If the rest of you would like to take your bags to your rooms, I'll stay here, repeat all that I have just said, then leave you to enjoy your meal. In case there is anyone I don't see again, I shall say goodbye now; until next we meet on Sunday morning, when I return for the survivors."

Chapter 3

Ms Bramblebottom was already pushing around a serving trolley when Armitage returned to the dining room.

“Come grab yourself a seat, young ‘un,” she said, piling meat and vegetables onto a plate and drowning them under a flood of gravy. Armitage climbed onto a chair next to Scarlett. She sat at the head of the table with closed eyes, enjoying the smell of her meal.

“Contessa Scarlett?” said Inquisitor Reverend Reetch as he walked into the room. “I would not have expected to find you among this squalid crowd.”

The inquisitor never burdened himself with any belongings that could not be hung from his belt or slipped into secret pockets about his person. This allowed him to avoid wasting time lugging baggage upstairs and instead head straight to the feast, hoping to find a seat next to as few undesirable people as possible.

“Hello Reetch,” said Scarlett. “Surely you hadn’t forgotten that I used to sail with Henry. You were there with us at the Troll Fleet Festival.”

“Well, yes, but that was a long time ago.” said Reetch, taking a seat across from Armitage. “I thought you had put such things behind you.”

“Mint sauce, your holiness?” offered Ms Bramblebottom, wobbling the jug to make it look more attractive.

“No, thank you. Say, you look familiar. I feel I have seen your face before … at a freak show, maybe?”

The room grew cold as the haunted-housekeeper locked eyes with the inquisitor. Then her throat began gurgling and her cheeks began swelling and she spat a blob of stringy phlegm right into Reetch's food. Ms Bramblebottom slammed down the plate in front of him, then stormed off to serve Professor Hinzelvud further down the table.

"What was that all about?" asked Reetch, turning back to Scarlett. "And why are you looking at me like ... Oh, I see, that must have sounded quite offensive. I didn't mean to be rude, she *does* look like someone I once met at a freak show."

Armitage's attention strayed towards the old man who had arrived after Mr McGregor's speech. He shuffled into the room and perched next to the inquisitor, for the other side of the table was now fully filled with the Shanks family.

"Is your name Doctor Deluge?" said Christopher, reading the side of the man's bag.

"It's pronounced De-loo-ge," said the man. He spoke in a way that suggested this question had been asked many times before and he had long grown sick of answering it. "Calling me 'Doctor Deluge' makes it sound like I build weather controlling super weapons ..." He trailed off with a nervous laugh, his eyes darted around looking for something else to talk about.

"Do you not want to take the bag to your room?" said Scarlett, attempting to calm his unease.

"No no, it will be fine down by my feet. I don't like to be parted from my surgeon's bag. I have had it disappear from hotel rooms and the like far too many times. Next thing you know, people are injecting themselves with untested medical concoctions and there are massive hairy monsters everywhere you turn. I'm sure you know how it is."

"Well, quite," Scarlett nodded politely.

“That’s everyone served,” said Ms Bramblebottom, settling into the conspicuous space between the Colonel and Professor Hinzelvud. “Let’s tuck in.”

An eager silence descended on the crowd as they began filling their faces with food. Even Reetch got stuck in, for he was no stranger to kitchen staff spitting into his meals. It was only as everyone’s jaws tired of chewing that conversation returned between mouthfuls.

“Doctor Deluge,” said Professor Hinzelvud, pouring himself a glass of water. “I understand you have hit problems with your latest research project. Nothing too disastrous, I hope?”

“Ah, on the contrary, it has proven the ruin of many years work,” said the doctor. “I have been trying to solve the common complaint of losing your way in life. Maps were an obvious answer, but finding a map for your life is next to impossible. That was when I realised humans do not have enough hands!”

Confused expressions surrounded the table, so Doctor Deluge tried to explain himself.

“Think about what you do when you use a map; you use one finger to follow the lefty-righty lines and another to follow the upsy-downsy lines.”

“The lines of latitude and longitude?” suggested the Colonel, rousing from amid her steak.

“Yes yes, I’m sure laymen have plenty of simple words to help them with complicated scientific principles. Anyway, these two fingers are all very well on a two dimensional map, but in the real world you need a third finger, to help you pin down how high up or low down you are. Once all that is done, and you know exactly where you are, a fourth finger is needed to point in the direction you wish to go.”

“All this sounds very clever,” Hinzelvud interrupted, “but is it

not just an excuse to stick extra arms onto people?”

“Not people,” said Doctor Deluge. “That would be entirely unethical. I have been sticking the arms onto clones! I thought about using five arms, so they could find their way through time, but then I realised that they would have plenty of places to keep wrist watches. Not that it matters any more. As you say, we have met with calamity. Someone broke into our laboratory and stole all the test subjects.”

“So where did you learn to make clones?” asked Armitage, trying to steer the conversation towards something easier to understand.

“I owe that to Henry Shanks,” said the doctor. “I met the pirate in a pub the night I graduated from medical school. He needed a ship’s doctor, so I took a break from my career and set off for adventure. All my early work was inspired by what I saw that year. You know those tortoises that have shells shaped like sofas, the ones they give to old people to help them up and down stairs? I invented those! Developed the necessary genetic engineering techniques after we ran ashore on the Galapagos Islands.”

“Why did you only stay with Uncle Henry for a year?” said Christopher. “Didn’t you want to be a pirate forever?”

Doctor Deluge laughed, then ate a slice of beetroot before continuing.

“Look around you, children. How many of Henry’s crew are here tonight? The answer is none, for few pirates are lucky enough to last as long as your uncle. His previous doctor had been crushed by a gigantic bronze statue that wanted its treasure back. The next one fell foul of the Compost People of Compost Island-”

“Oh, don’t even get me started on *that* fiasco,” Reetch

interjected. "That island is *very* misleadingly named!"

"You need to relax more," said the Colonel. "If you keep boiling your blood over Henry he'll be the death of you yet. He wasn't all that bad, you know."

"No, obviously," Reetch conceded. "He was only bad when he was stealing and killing."

"None of us are blameless," said Ariadne. "We've all done bad things in our lives."

"Few have done things as bad as he," muttered Reetch, making Arthur explode with rage.

"If you hated Henry so much, why are you even here?"

"To make sure he is dead, of course! It would be just like him to make some kind of triumphant return from the grave, once again becoming a colossal pain in my bottom!"

"I saw him swallowed by a monster the size of several islands, hugging a barrel of exploding explosives," said Armitage. "What more proof of his death do you need?"

"Ah, but we only have your word for that, don't we? I think it is very convenient that there were no other witnesses to his demise. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if *you* were the Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks!"

Reetch lunged across the table, wrapping his hands around Armitage's face.

"Ahhrg, bite him!" shouted the Hair, and Reetch reeled back as Armitage followed this suggestion.

"He bit me!" Reetch squeaked, blood dripping from his fingers.

"You grabbed his face!" screamed Arthur.

"I thought it might be a mask!" screamed Reetch even louder.

"That's really stupid," said Ariadne. "Why did you think that?"

"It isn't as stupid as it might at first sound. There are a species

of aliens called Greys, who move among us disguised in body suits, undetectable to the human eye.”

“Yeah, everyone stopped listening when you accused our family of being aliens,” said Christopher, gripping hold of his knife in case the inquisitor launched another assault.

“Fine then,” Reetch sulked, slumping back into his seat. “Don’t listen to the member of a millennia old secret organisation, what would he know?”

The rest of the meal passed awkwardly, until people began retreating to their rooms without even having thirds of pudding.

“Ms Bramblebottom, please, let me help with the washing up,” Reetch offered as everyone left the table. “It would be the least I can do to make up for my earlier behaviour.”

“Are you talking about when you called me a freak, or the time you attacked that child?”

“When I called you a freak, obviously. Wait, that was a trick question, wasn’t it?”

“The nerve of that man,” Arthur seethed as the Shanks family headed upstairs. “I was prepared to ignore the insult of him being here in the first place, but to go as far as—”

“Don’t you worry about Reetch,” said the Colonel. “He’s a bit misguided, but he at least tries to mean well.”

“I’m sure time will tell on that matter,” said Arthur. “And while we’re airing our grievances, Colonel, do you want to explain your distaste for Professor Hinzelvud?”

“Gah, he just caught me by surprise is all. Made himself pretty unpopular on one of your father’s expeditions. That was a lifetime ago though, I’m sure it won’t be an issue.” The Colonel paused, then started to chuckle. “And if he tries to make it an issue, well, let’s just say that I have a little friend in my room who likes shooting burning ionized gas at my enemies.”

“A *plasma rifle?*” choked Ariadne. “You brought weapons here?”

“To a weekend at Mr McGregor’s haunted house? Most certainly, I’m surprised you didn’t!”

“I was hoping the weekend would provide a peaceful and relaxing retreat. It seems I was being incredibly optimistic. Now then boys, this is your room, let’s get you both to bed.”

“Yes, that sounds like a jolly good plan,” agreed Christopher. “After all, the best sleep happens before midnight, and tomorrow’s are most enjoyable after a bright and early rise.”

Ariadne glared at her son with a parent’s all-seeing eyes.

“I mean it, Christopher Shanks. There will be plenty of time for exploring this house tomorrow. You can stay up talking in bed if you like, but if I hear you have been causing mischief then first thing in the morning I’ll march you right back home. Do you understand me?”

“Yes mum,” Christopher moaned.

Arthur and Ariadne kissed the children goodnight, then headed to the Colonel’s room to enjoy some after dinner port.

“Well, Christopher handled that disappointment with unexpected grace,” said the Hair. “I was expecting him to-”

“Don’t bother searching for your pyjamas,” Christopher cut in. “We give the adults an hour or so to forget about us, then we’re off to cause some mischief.”

“Ah, there we go,” the Hair sighed. “And so it all begins.”

Chapter 4

While the children awaited an opportunity to slink off across the mezzanine, Doctor Deluge sat on his bed studying pictures of hairless men.

“Hinzelvud asked about the project,” he said to the tape recorder spinning away on his lap. “He makes it sound like polite concern but I’m sure he is mocking my failure. I told Henry’s nephews that I owe my career to that old pirate. Now we’re both finished, and I’m here scrounging for his stolen doubloons.”

A rapping at the window set the doctor on his guard. Branches were bouncing in the wind outside; nothing for him to worry about.

“Those boys have such wonderful heads of hair,” he muttered, staring at his reflection in the benighted glass. “If this weekend makes me the money to continue my work, there are two questions I have to answer. The first; why are my clones always bald? The second; why are my clones always *evil*? ”

Doctor Deluge turned off his recorder then reached for a drink of water. He stopped as he noticed the spider straddled across his glass.

“Sixteen legs,” he counted. “What a wonderful house this is.”

The doctor picked up his slippers, checked that nothing had crawled inside, then slipped them onto his feet. He stepped out from his room and headed to the kitchen, smiling at overheard voices while passing an oversized urn.

“Do you think he noticed us?” whispered Armitage.

“No,” hissed Christopher. “He’s walking past, shhh!”

“Trouble sleeping?” said Reetch, meeting the doctor on the stairs.

“No no,” said Deluge. “How could I fail to sleep, with trees scratching at the windows and rodents scurrying through the walls?”

He continued hobbling down the steps, clinging to the banister with both hands.

“Considering they are made entirely of angles, these stairs are surprisingly curvy.” Deluge turned to Reetch for validation, but the inquisitor had continued on his way. The doctor was all alone in the dark.

Deluge’s foul mood did not improve in the kitchen. The cups on the draining board were smothered in suds, while those in the cupboard were encrusted with dirt. The turn of a tap saw the faucet spew a torrent of slime, which bounced back up at the doctor and showered his pyjamas in an embarrassing splatter. He watched the gunge filling the sink, then frowned at the washing up sat soapy and clean nearby.

“What now? I can’t even get myself a glass of water? What fresh misery could befall me next?”

The gunk on the doctor’s pyjamas began creeping up his body. He glanced down at the climbing droplets, watching them merge wherever they met. Scientific curiosity gave way to startled concern as one of the blobs smothered his mouth. The mess in the sink crawled out to entangle his legs, sending him tumbling down to the floor. Teeth within the slime began biting into his skin. There was a snapping like the sound of breaking bones and a slurping like the sound of jelly being sucked up through a straw.

“Hey, wow,” said Christopher as the children arrived to investigate the commotion. “How good is that?”

“Yes, I’m sure those were exactly the last words the doctor

wanted to hear,” said the Hair.

“We should hit it with sticks!” said Armitage, searching around for suitable weapons. The slime had finished feeding and was crawling back into the sink. It left no trace of Doctor Deluge.

“Is that you, Ms Bramblebottom?” called Professor Hinzelvud, walking into the kitchen with a box tucked under his arm. He was just in time to see the slime slip gurgling and belching down the drain.

“Huh,” he responded, watching the children attack the plughole with wooden spoons. “That’s … weird.”

A guttural snarl rang out from the pipes beneath the sink. It rumbled through the floor and headed into the hall. Hinzelvud hesitated, glancing at the children, then ran off in pursuit.

“Did you notice the mysterious box Professor Hinzelvud had under his arm?” said Christopher. “Let’s go follow him, see what he’s up to.”

“This is his reaction to seeing a man get eaten by gelatinous slime?” said the Hair. “That boy is devoid of feelings! Really, Armitage, what is wrong with your family?”

Hinzelvud stumbled from room to room, tracking confusing plumbing and the strange wet sounds carried within. The chase led him up stairs and down corridors and up more stairs again, until neither he nor his young observers entirely knew where they were. Another corridor brought the trail to what seemed like a dead end before the professor noticed a hatch above, opening out on a moonlit sky.

“He’s climbing onto the roof,” said Christopher, hiding behind a dead potted plant. “There won’t be any cover; we’ll be noticed for sure. Still want to follow him?”

“You know what our parents would say,” said Armitage.

“Never should a Shanks be afraid to do something just because it’s a stupid thing to do.”

“I love the Shanks Family Motto,” said Christopher. “It makes all of life’s little choices so much easier to make.”

“I thought we had agreed to forget about the Shanks Family Motto,” objected the Hair as they climbed up through the hatch.

“*You* agreed,” said Armitage. “I still think it’s a good motto.”

“I suppose it served Henry well.”

Further cynical commentary was cut short by grasping winds. Armitage and Christopher both paused to steady themselves, flinching as something swooped overhead. The arrival of noisy, clumsy humans had stirred the bats into a frenzy.

The cousins could see Professor Hinzelvud crawling over damp, sloping tiles. He was edging towards a pipe coming up from the house, a pipe overflowing with glutinous goo. After a moment spent steadying himself, he slid the mysterious box across the rooftop. It opened with a flash, releasing an endless eruption of light.

Armitage threw his hands across his eyes, squinting through gaps between his fingers. The slime shrieked and flailed, lashing at the offending object and knocking it aside. Hinzelvud leaped to save the box as it bounced away. The slime slithered over to a stack of chimneys and dived back into the house.

Christopher turned to his cousin, squeaked in panic, then shouted a warning that came too late. One of the frantic, flapping creatures barrelled into Armitage, launching him off his feet and then off the roof and then tumbling down towards the floor. Armitage had just enough time to wonder how he had ever mistaken those things for bats before everything went black.

Chapter 5

After a while the tumbling stopped and Armitage felt safe opening his eyes.

“That really hurt,” he said.

“Errr, yeah, I think that will prove to be something of an understatement,” said the Hair.

They were sprawled on the floor of a long, dark tunnel that led towards a distant light. Whoever originally built this tunnel had chosen the unorthodox building material of twisting green clouds. As Armitage pulled himself to his feet, he noticed that his hands, arms, and indeed his entire body, had somehow been replaced by similar translucent gas.

“The word ‘ghostly’ springs to mind,” he said. “And I have a worrying feeling that this is because I am now a ghost.”

“Well, I suppose I had a good week,” conceded the Hair. “I saw some pretty dismal places and met some extremely irritating people. However, it was a taste of life that few hairs are ever given, so I shall not complain as much as I want to. I guess we need to head to the light then. Move on to the next stage of existence, or something.”

“Heaven can wait, let’s check out this place,” said Armitage, pointing at the ghost of a rustic seaside inn.

“I love that you think you’re going to heaven,” said the Hair.

Despite its white walls and black, thatched roof, the inn was simultaneously a predictable shade of green. A sign above the door bore the name *Last Orders*, while a blackboard announced that the special today was fish.

Armitage took a deep breath through force of habit, then stepped into the building. Then he stepped back out of the building, walked all the way around it, and returned once more within.

“It’s much bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.”

“You were expecting otherwise?” asked the Hair.

“No, I just wanted to make sure I had good cause to be impressed.”

Armitage set off through a topsy-turvy labyrinth. There were floors that became walls and walls that became ceilings, all held together by stairs that made everywhere somewhere else. Whichever way up a surface lay there was someone upon it making merry. Vikings quaffed from golden horns, chatting with Sikhs who were happily sober. Mayas played darts with Babylonian scribes while suffragists taught druids how to play cards. Musicians of all ages took turns to play and the floor was figuratively alive with a thousand different dances.

It took Armitage a while to reach the bar, but no time at all to attract the publican’s attention.

“Uncle Henry!” he exclaimed.

“Armitage!” cheered Henry Shanks, passing a tankard to a nearby nun. “Good to see you again! Hang on, I’ll get someone to take over here and we’ll go find a place to sit.”

The pirate poured the pair some mead and they retreated to a quiet corner.

“Welcome to the *Last Orders*,” said Henry. “Finest meadery in any afterlife. I must admit, I didn’t expect to see you so soon. What was it that ate you?”

“I didn’t get eaten,” said Armitage. “I fell off a house.”

“Fell off a house? How big a house?”

“Must have been at least the third floor.”

“Wow, that must have hurt.”

"Well, I apparently died, so yes, I guess it hurt quite a bit."

Henry tipped his chair back on two legs, for now he was dead he feared no danger.

"Hmm, that doesn't sound right. Tell me the whole story."

Armitage went over everything concerning the will and the haunted house and the monster on the roof, waving his arms about in the air and providing sound effects with rasping spit.

"That all sounds very strange," said Henry. "I've seen a lot of bizarre things in my time, but never have I seen a Shanks that died without getting eaten. Unless ... yes, that's it! You must be having a near-death experience!"

"A what?" asked Armitage.

"A near-death experience!" said Henry, following this unhelpful repetition with a more useful explanation. "That's what happens when you almost die but the doctors save you, right in the nick of time."

"But Doctor Deluge just got eaten."

"Indeed, and I remember my daddy mentioning that Hinzelvud is more of an astrophysicist. But it doesn't need to be a doctor, anyone who knows their stuff can do it. The Colonel and Scarlett are brilliant at this kind of thing, and Arthur and Ariadne have been through worse. I'd even trust Reetch to lend a hand, so you're probably perfectly safe. Might as well relax and enjoy the mead before you're sucked back into your body."

"Well that's a good thing," said Armitage. "I didn't want to die yet. Hang on, if I can only die by being eaten, does that mean I'm otherwise invincible?"

"I wouldn't push your luck," said Henry. "Great Grandmother Gertrude thought like that. Broke her leg during a daring train robbery, then couldn't escape the wolves that overran her hospital."

"Oh well, it was worth asking," said Armitage with a shrug. "You know, some people are saying you didn't really die."

"What?" Henry laughed, doing that thing people sometimes do with their eyebrows. "I was swallowed by a monster the size of several islands while hugging a barrel of exploding explosives. How much more proof do they need?"

"That's what I said," nodded Armitage. "I'm glad it all worked out in the end. You look younger now than when you died."

"Yes indeed. I always had a youthful spirit in life, so it makes sense that I should have one in death too."

Armitage stared at his reflection in the mead, then started on the more difficult questions.

"Is Urbi here as well?"

"That was the first thing I checked when I arrived. Don't you worry about her. She's got plenty of time left yet, and lots of things to do in it."

"Then ..." Armitage paused and bit his lip. "Have you seen my parents?"

"Nah, it's usually only the good places that allow your soul freedom of movement. Er, not that I don't think your parents went to a good place, understand, but I've only been here for a few days now, and your parents have over a fortnight's head start on me. Anyhow, let's talk about something happier. Are you looking forward to spending the rest of the weekend away?"

"Yeah, I guess so," said Armitage. "But it looks like I've seen more ghosts here than I will back at the house."

"Well that's certainly true," said Henry. "There aren't any ghosts at all in Mr McGregor's haunted house."

"Really? Then why is it called a haunted house?"

"Oh, that's just for tax reasons," said Henry with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I wouldn't make anyone waste their time in a

house that was actually haunted. That would be really boring.”

“I fail to see how a haunted house could be more boring than an *un*-haunted house,” said Armitage.

“You’d understand if you’d met as many ghosts as I have,” said Henry. “You see, ghosts are all really dull. Not the sort of ghosts here in my meadery, mind. I’m talking about all the ones who stay in the land of the living just so they can float around whining at people. Unbearable things, the lot of them.”

“Hang on,” said Armitage, struggling to take everything in. “If Mr McGregor’s haunted house is not in fact haunted, then why did you send us there, and what was that thing that ate Doctor Deluge?”

“Sounds like a good old fashioned slime monster to me,” Henry replied. “I knew the Bleak Black House wasn’t haunted, but I’ve always suspected it might be *infested*. They say that Old Abercrombie McGregor used to collect monsters, trapping them round the house like it was some kind of evil petting zoo. Then, after he mysteriously disappeared, some of the beasts escaped. Now they crawl all over the place; under the floor boards, in the fridge, down the toilets, absolutely everywhere.” Henry paused to finish his drink. “And that’s why it’s a brilliant place to spend the weekend,” he concluded with a smile.

“Hang on,” said the Hair. “If I understood all that, then rather than sending us to a house where the worst that could happen is that some dead guy might moan at us, Henry has instead sent what little is left of his family, cursed as they are to always get eaten, to a place where there are lots of things that will quite happily eat us.”

“That’s what it sounds like to me, too,” said Armitage, before relaying this speech to his uncle, just to make sure.

“Sometimes adults do things that seem strange to children,”

Henry answered with a chuckle. “You’ll understand when you’re older.”

“Old people will be the death of us,” muttered the Hair.

“... in any case, if Magma Monsters come above the earth’s crust then by rights they should be called Lava Monsters ...” said Ariadne.

“What was that?” said Armitage.

“What was what?” asked Henry and the Hair together.

“I thought I just heard Auntie Ariadne say something about Magma Monsters.”

“Oh, that’s good,” said Henry. “You’re regaining consciousness. You’ll be alive again in no time.”

“Well, it’s been good to give you a proper goodbye,” said Armitage, as his green, glowing form began fading away. “It’s really cheered me up to see that you’re okay. You know, apart from being dead.”

“I had more than my share of life, Armitage. Now, you go and enjoy more than your share too. I’ll keep a seat at the bar free, for when you finally fall foul of tooth and jaw.”

“See you later, Uncle Henry,” said Armitage, and with a final wave, he disappeared.

Chapter 6

Armitage opened his eyes. He tried to move, but every part of his body hurt in several different ways.

“He’s awake!” Ariadne cheered, moving sheets and pillows to help the child sit up. Armitage looked around and guessed he was in the lounge. The clock on the mantelpiece was striking ten and morning light flowed through the windows.

“You had a nasty fall there,” Ariadne continued. “Bounced over the rooftops, tore through a tree, smashed apart the outdoor privy, then landed in the cesspit below. It’s a wonder you have as few injuries as you do.”

“Strong bones,” said Arthur, leaning over the back of the sofa. “Gets that from our mother’s side of the family. How do they feel, anything broken?”

“No, I’m all right,” said Armitage. “I almost died but instead I went to a ghost pub and I met Uncle Henry and now I’m alive again.”

“Oh you poor thing,” said Arthur, hugging his nephew’s head. “You’ve been through so much. If Hinzelvud ever shows up again, I’m going to give him a piece of my mind!”

Armitage made a strangled gurgling noise until his uncle released him. Creaking hinges called across the room, and everyone turned to see Christopher poking his head around the door.

“If Armitage is all right, am I still in trouble?” he asked. His parents gave him a pointed look that lingered for longer than Christopher felt comfortable with.

“You can come in and see Armitage,” said Ariadne.

“Now that you’ve finished causing trouble,” said Arthur.

There was an edge to the adults’ voices. Their eyes followed Christopher as he scurried into the lounge, almost daring him to do something wrong.

“Hey look, swords!” he said, pointing to a pair of rapiers mounted above the fireplace.

“Christopher Peabody Shanks, you leave those swords alone,” said Ariadne and Arthur as one.

“I’m just saying is all,” Christopher mumbled.

“Hah, Peabody!” smirked the Hair.

“Christopher, your mother and I have been up all night,” said Arthur in a voice laden with blame. “I’m sure we can trust you to take care of Armitage now that he’s awake.”

“We’re going to go and relax in the garden,” said Ariadne. “If you need us, come and get us. Not that you’ll need much just sitting there … *not causing mischief*?”

At that the adults left the room, leaving unspoken threats hanging in the air.

“What was wrong with them?” said Armitage.

“They’re angry because I let you fall off a roof.”

“What? It wasn’t your fault. Did you tell them about the slime monster?”

“Yeah, they said ‘slime monsters are no excuse for poorly thought through explorational strategies.’”

“That does sound like something they’d say,” Armitage agreed.

“So, you all right?” said Christopher.

“Yeah,” said Armitage. “I was a ghost for a bit and I met Uncle Henry. He told me lots of interesting things and now I feel much happier than I did before.”

“That’s cool,” said Christopher. “Hope you enjoyed the fun while it lasted, ‘cause I don’t think we’ll be allowed any more this weekend.”

“I don’t think anyone will be able to stop us,” said Armitage. “Just look around the room at all the stuff we’ve been left with.”

Christopher cast his eyes over tables, chairs, and bookcases, searching for anything that might cause him amusement.

“You’re talking about the *swords*,” he whispered with approval.

“I’m not talking about the swords,” said Armitage. “Uncle Henry told me this place was infested with monsters, and if you pay attention you can see that he was right. Look, there’s one over there!”

Christopher followed Armitage’s pointing finger to an entirely uninteresting wall.

“I see you hit your head harder than we thought,” said Christopher.

“There’s a big purple crab-thing!” said Armitage. “Climbing right over that painting!”

“Woah!” Christopher jumped to his feet and twisted about, noticing all the bugs that scuttled around the room. There were woodlice with too many heads and slugs that were moving far too fast. There were worms that were luminous blue and ants that were neon red and a herd of tiny creatures that were nothing more than colourful blobs.

“Where did all these ... *things* come from?”

“I think they’ve been here a lot longer than we have,” said Armitage. “We’ve just been ignoring them because we didn’t notice how weird they were.”

“Though how we missed a two foot purple crab-thing is beyond me,” said the Hair.

A scratching noise from up the chimney diverted the

children's attention. Crusty clods of dirt fell from the flue, bouncing over the hearth as the scraping grew louder.

"I wonder what that is," said Christopher, moving closer to investigate.

"Armitage, stop hurting and start moving," urged the Hair. "We need to be somewhere else, now!"

The fireplace exploded. Soot vomited across the lounge, drowning the room in suffocating smog. A shape stumbled out from the flurrying dark, grabbing the choking children and throwing them over its shoulders. It advanced across the room, tossing aside obstructive furniture, kicking its way through the nearest door, and collapsing into the hallway beyond.

Armitage gasped for breathable air as dust settled around him. He found himself lying between Christopher and Scarlett, all smothered in soot. The three of them sat up and looked into the lounge, where all the expensive antique furnishings shared their black, encrusted state.

"Oh dear," said Scarlett. "Ms Bramblebottom is going to kill me."

"Now why would you think that?" asked the haunted-housekeeper.

Scarlett and the children turned to find Ms Bramblebottom and Reetch walking into the hall.

"Ms Bramblebottom," Scarlett began, "this isn't what it looks like—"

"Really? It looks like you were chasing the children's slime monster through the chimney, then dragged half the house down with you when you lost your footing and fell."

"Oh, in that case this is exactly what it looks like," said Scarlett. She began winding up a cable tied around her waist while doing her best to make amends. "The Colonel was up on the

roof with the other end of the rope, so I'm not sure how this accident happened. Point me towards a mop and I'll get everything cleared up, I really can't apologise enough."

"It's not a problem, really it isn't," said Ms Bramblebottom. "These things happen in haunted houses. Did you at least find the monster?"

"Unfortunately not. I hit a maze of shafts and tunnels and the oozing trail became really confusing. Seems like half the fireplaces in the house feed into that flue."

The other end of the cable arrived in Scarlett's hands earlier than she expected. Everyone stopped to study the chewed and twisted wire, watching strands of goo dribble onto the carpet.

"Those are teeth marks," said Reetch.

"Indeed," said Scarlett, speaking in forceful tones to drown out Christopher's ruder reply. "How very delightful. Right, next thing's next. Some of us need to wash and change, that room needs cleaning, and the Colonel needs calling down from the roof. Come on boys, let's get ourselves showered and find fresh clothes."

"Are you saying we can leave the lounge?" Christopher grinned, seizing upon the chance to escape his parent's orders.

"Well, you can hardly go back in there," said Scarlett. "You'll just have to amuse yourselves elsewhere in the house."

"Brilliant!" said Christopher. "How do we get to the basement?"

"What?" said Ms Bramblebottom as Christopher bounced expectantly around her. "Oh, I see. This is about that trapdoor, isn't it? Look, children, Mr McGregor was just pulling your leg. This house doesn't really have a basement, and it certainly doesn't have some sort of evil and mysterious trapdoor. Ho ho ho, the very notion of the thing!"

Ms Bramblebottom kept chuckling as she shooed the children towards soap and shower. Scarlett used the bathroom first and then the adults returned downstairs, leaving Armitage and Christopher dangerously unsupervised.

“It would seem Ms Bramblebottom doesn’t want us to open that trapdoor,” said Christopher.

“Probably with good reason,” said the Hair.

“But we’re going to do it anyway?” asked Armitage.

“Do I even need to answer that?” replied Christopher.

“Just checking the world hadn’t radically changed while I was dead.”

“I hope she wasn’t joking when she said the trapdoor doesn’t exist,” said the Hair. “Because if it does, I have a feeling we’ll be back at the *Last Orders* before the day is done.”

Chapter 7

Ariadne dreamed of Africa. The savannah rolled loosely defined before her, trees and bushes and grassland broiling together beneath the blistering sun. Painted rocks littered the landscape, hinting of peoples and places hidden always beyond the next hill. Predators prowled unseen around the well-trodden path, and amid acacia branches monkeys threw poo at each other.

Creaking wood sent her clutching for a gun that was not there.

“Jumpy,” said the Colonel.

Ariadne made an unspellable sound as she searched the garden for her bearings. The Colonel was slouching into a faded deckchair beside her, Arthur whistled a tune in the distance, and the grey, grim air of the haunted house closed in around her once more.

“Ah, Colonel, apologies. I think I must have dozed off.”

“You’ve been up all night, get some rest while you can. I’m not holding out for a peaceful day.”

Ariadne noted the rifle lying on the Colonel’s lap. Its lights were not lit and its barrel looked cold and none of its inbuilt computers were making their usual noises.

“Am I to guess the hunt was fruitless?” said Ariadne.

“Scarlett lost the chimney trail. Er, she had a bit of a soot related accident involving the boys. Her and Bertha have sorted them out, so don’t you worry about that.”

The Colonel paused to see if this news would end their conversation. Ariadne was watching Arthur bend over a flowerbed so missed her friend’s implications.

“Collecting cuttings?” said the Colonel.

“Hopefully so,” said Ariadne. “We are arranging the flowers for a fête next month. Back when we were anthropologists, we collected carnivorous plants from all over the world. Yet it’s been so long since we retired from the field, all those plants now seem so ordinary. If we can’t find something new and exciting in the rockeries of a haunted house, then we might as well give up being florists.”

“I see you’ve changed the name of the shop,” said the Colonel, nodding at the van sat in the drive. The words ‘*Flowers by Arrangement*’ were freshly painted on the side.

“Yes indeed,” said Ariadne. “We thought ‘*Shanks’s Perfectly Legal Palace of Plants*’ was a bit of a mouthful. Also, it somehow seemed an admission of guilt, even though the name *specifically* mentioned our innocence.”

“The police still blame you for those missing pets?” said the Colonel.

“Pets and more besides,” said Ariadne. “Sorry, you were saying about the slime monster?”

“Oozed back off to wherever it came from; probably got a nest somewhere. I’ve seen the things it must eat, scurrying about when they think we aren’t looking—”

“Oh, I’ve noticed them!” said Ariadne. “Have you seen the family of tiny, colourful blobs? They’re ever so cute.”

The Colonel ignored this derailment of her drama and pushed on with her sombre assessment. “-and at the rate slime monsters split in two, we’d be drowning in the things if something even bigger wasn’t eating *them*. So I think we’ve got more to worry about than a single slime monster. I don’t suppose Hinzelvud showed up while I was on the roof?”

“Oh, come now,” said Ariadne. “Would you really want life to

be that easy?"

The Colonel grunted and shifted in her seat.

"I just want to put at least one of our problems behind us. Hinzelvud came here uninvited, with plans other than mourning. What was he doing up on that roof? What is he doing here at all? He has answers, Ariadne, answers that I want for myself."

Ariadne signalled agreement with a stern noise at the back of her teeth.

"He led the children into danger and sent my nephew falling from the roof, so I would quite like some of those answers as well. You can start with how you met Hinzelvud and why you hate him so."

The Colonel said a rude word under her breath. "Well manoeuvred, old friend. I suppose you need to know what we are dealing with. It all started on one of old Shanks's Arctic expeditions. Must have been the nineteen sixties, you remember the one?"

"Now, Colonel. I am officially too young to remember that far back," said Ariadne.

"Ah, yes, understood. Well, as ever, the world famous explorer was searching for something and, as ever, he wasn't telling anyone what we were looking for. Said we would know it when we found it, yet didn't seem to know where to start. He had us trekking back and forth over glaciers and frozen wastes. We scoured the ground for signs of lost cities. We deciphered the mythologies of long lost tribes. We set up telescopes everywhere we went, because to him the skies seemed as likely a hiding place as any other.

"That was where Hinzelvud came in. He was just a kid at the time but had developed some new sort of, I don't know, space studying machine thingy. To be honest, I never really paid him

much attention, so I'm not exactly sure what he did. We woke up one morning to find him missing. The huskies were gone, the land-speeders had been sabotaged, and a set of tracks led away, ahead of our expedition.

"Cost us a day repairing the damage, and we set off the following dawn. Only needed to follow the tracks three hours at most before we found the compound. Great big electric fence, made useless by a wide open gate. Plates of half eaten food, furniture tossed about, cabinets without drawers, fires smothered in charred documents. You've found your fair share of rapidly evacuated secret bases, you know what it's like. Place was deserted, obviously. Never saw Hinzelvud again, until last night."

"So this compound was what he was looking for?" said Ariadne.

"Who, Shanks?" said the Colonel. "No, no, nothing to do with that. There was some good stuff though. We filtered through the burnt papers, checked for loose floorboards, followed all the usual procedures. Ended up finding scraps of design schematics and odd pieces of ... technology, but not like any I had ever seen before. We reckoned they were trying to design some new flying machine. Found a landing pad in an open hangar, black and yellow hazard lines marking a big, round, saucer-like shape on the floor."

"So, why didn't you want to bring this up last night?" said Ariadne.

"Well, it's like you said; none of us are blameless, we've all done bad things in our lives. I wasn't about to dredge up gossip over half a century old. Wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. Too trusting, that's my problem. 'Ello, what's he got there?"

Ariadne followed the Colonel's eyes to where Arthur was

pulling himself out of a hedge. He headed over to join them, carrying a mysterious box.

“Would you look at this,” he said. “I found it over by the, er, well, I don’t know what sort of plant it was actually, but it looked suitably frightening!”

Arthur dragged a garden tea table over to the deckchairs, brushed aside mismatched crockery, and set down his find. The three of them inspected the metal box; the Colonel and Ariadne stroking their chins and Arthur twiddling his curly moustache.

“What do you suppose it is?” said the Colonel. She looked up from the mystery to find Ariadne and Arthur staring at her in anticipation.

“*You’re asking us?*” said Arthur.

The Colonel shook her head. “How your pioneering father raised such a litter of Luddites, I have no idea. It’s a wonder Christopher has the talent he does. Where did you say you found it?”

Arthur led them across the lawn to a bunch of battered bushes. The Colonel poked at the plants with her cane, then peered up at the haunted house.

“This is beneath the same part of the roof that Armitage fell from,” she said.

“Christopher did say that Hinzelvud had a box,” said Ariadne. “He was using it to do something to the slime monster.”

“Then the trail is not as cold as I had feared,” said the Colonel, ushering everyone back towards the house. “Hinzelvud will want the box, and we want Hinzelvud. I don’t know for sure what this box was built for, but *I’m* going to use it as *bait!*”

Chapter 8

Armitage and Christopher showered away the soot, changed into clean clothes, considered burning the dirty ones, failed to find any matches, then went to the toilet for good measure. For as Christopher said, “The last thing you need during a haunted house weekend is to be in the middle of an exciting adventure then suddenly find yourself needing a wee.”

“Or a poo,” said Armitage.

“Or several poos” said Christopher, for whom such things usually came in threes.

“Why are we dwelling on this subject?” asked the Hair.

“We are free!” Christopher cheered. “Free to explore this haunted house!”

“*Infested* house,” said Armitage.

“Free to explore this *infested* house,” Christopher corrected himself. “And not a moment too soon! This weekend was in danger of drowning amid personal feuds, mad science, and secret societies!”

“Yeah, grown-ups always find the most boring things to talk about. So, where do we start exploring?”

Christopher pondered the question with a thoughtful stroke of his chin.

“Well, if we are going to find that basement, I guess we should start on the ground floor.”

“Seems the logical place from which to get under the house,” Armitage agreed.

“Does nobody else remember the pipe that went from the

kitchen sink up to the roof?" said the Hair. "I don't think logic and this house have much in common."

The children, of course, ignored this cynical critique and headed downstairs to the entrance hall. Knowing now that there was more to this house than at first there seemed, they took the time to study their surroundings. There were the two elephant foot umbrella stands, several suits of armour, multiple grandfather clocks that each told different times, and various animals that had been killed and stuffed and subsequently went extinct. The walls were covered in portraits of old people wearing silly clothes, and cats and dogs wearing clothes still sillier. A well calculated cleaning regime had left atmospheric cobwebs anywhere that lacked an alternative focal point, and all over everything there crawled critters and gribblies and boogers and ploops.

"That's the lounge, and there's the dining room," said Christopher, studying the many doorways that led from the hall. "Neither of those contained ways to the basement. Where shall we try next?"

"The ballroom!" said Armitage, reading the plaques on the other doors. He did a little jump for joy, skipped across the hall, burst into his chosen room, then slumped in bitter disappointment.

"This is the worst ballroom ever."

"You thought it would be a ball pit, didn't you?" said Christopher.

"We will never be able to trust words again," said the Hair.

There were no balls in the ballroom, being as it was a large open space for fancy parties. There was a stage, where a band of tiny, colourful blobs played tiny, colourful drums and tiny, colourful guitars and tiny, colourful keyboards. Other tiny,

colourful blobs clung to the edges of the dance floor. None of them seemed in the mood for tiny, colourful fun. They were giving each other embarrassed looks, as though they all regretted coming to this intrinsically awkward social occasion.

“This is making me deeply uncomfortable,” whispered Armitage to Christopher.

“We should make our excuses and leave,” Christopher hissed back.

They both backed out of the room, closing the doors behind them.

“This time, I choose,” said Christopher. He found another door, walked through, tripped over a plough, and landed in a sticky mess of mud. Armitage came in behind him, looking around at the soil and sprinklers and the grass and the goat.

“Huh,” he said. “Someone’s filled this room with a field.”

“Goats give me the creeps,” said Christopher as he picked himself back up.

“You and me both,” said Armitage and the Hair together.

A rasping rattling sounded behind them. They turned in time to have noses thrust in their faces. Two creatures prowled around them, showing off their muscles and spines and claws.

“There’s another one above us,” said the Hair. “Just saying, you know, in case you’d missed it.”

Armitage looked up to see the thing skittering across the ceiling. It paused to sniff and lick the air, dropped down on the goat, and sank its teeth into the animal’s neck. There was a gurgling sound, like someone using a straw to get at the very bottom of a milkshake. Then the goat began to deflate.

“This is even more uncomfortable than the fluff disco,” said Christopher.

“Uncomfortable is not the word I would use,” said the Hair,

as its scalp was probed by the closest creature's tongue.

"I feel these two are trying to decide if we are goat enough to eat," said Armitage.

The beasts appeared to come to a conclusion. They flexed their muscles and poised to pounce, indicating their readiness with wiggling bottoms.

A previously silent sprinkler began to splutter. A spinning jet of spray sent the children and creatures reeling from the torrent.

"Run!" shouted Armitage and Christopher and the Hair.

They fled the distracted predators, slamming the door shut in a collision of pursuing claws and splintering wood. The cousins collapsed in a gasping, soaking puddle.

Ms Bramblebottom gave them a nod as she walked past, dragging an industrial hoover with a colourful, smiling face.

"You'll want to stay out of that billiard room," she said. "That's where we keep the chupacabra."

"Ah, of course," said Christopher. "Mexican goat eaters, I should have known. We need to change into dry clothes."

"At this rate," said the Hair, "you'll be exploring in your pyjamas by the end of the day."

"Well, obviously," said Armitage. "The end of the day is when you wear pyjamas."

"Wow, that's deep," said Christopher.

Once freshly dried and dressed, the children stood before their next room.

"So, what are we likely to find in this library?" said Christopher.

"Bookworms," said Armitage. "Bookworms with very sharp teeth."

"Paper wights," said Christopher. "Anti-poltergeists that hold down all your paper no matter how hard you try to pick it up."

“Shelves and books,” said the Hair. “Because my optimism is infinite.”

They opened the door to find a library filled with shelves and books.

“I refuse to believe we’re getting off that easy,” said the Hair.

“Time to find out what terrifying books lurk within the library of a haunted house,” Christopher cheered.

They began browsing the collection. All the books seemed suitably ancient. Their pages looked as though they had been stained with tea bags and occasionally burnt in strategically stylish places. Many of them were instructional guides to alternative hobbies.

“*Commandant Clarissa’s Curious Compendium of Cryptid Creatures (and how to cook them)*,” said Armitage. “I wonder if Ms. Bramblebottom has been feeding us the monsters.”

“*How To Collect Dangerous Animals*, by Clare Foley,” said Christopher, “I guess this is the book the older McGregor used to fill the house.”

“Ooh, this one will show us how to find the basement,” said Armitage, tugging at a book entitled *How To Find Secret Passages*. Armitage felt a resisting tug as he pulled on the book, as though the other side of the volume was attached to some hidden mechanism. The shelf started spinning, rotating into the wall, carrying Armitage and Christopher along with it.

The children stood still for a moment as their eyes became accustomed to the gloom of this freshly found secret passage.

“That was a really effective book,” said the Hair.

“Right then,” said Christopher, rubbing his hands together. “Now we’re getting somewhere!”

Chapter 9

Ms Bramblebottom walked into the lounge, dragging the industrial hoover with a colourful, smiling face behind her. Scarlett and Reetch had gathered mops and buckets and brushes and brooms. They spent a while looking at all the soot, pointing at things, discussing cleaning techniques, and generally doing anything they could to avoid actually setting to work. Eventually though, they simply had to start tidying up the mess.

“You know, Reverend, you really don’t need to help,” said Ms Bramblebottom, taking ornaments down from the mantelpiece. “I’m sure the Contessa and I can manage without you.”

“Nonsense,” said Reetch, readying a suitable box to keep the bric-a-brac safe. “I appear to have a bad reputation among those gathered here this weekend. Helping with the cleaning will give me the opportunity to get into their good graces.”

“Helping with the housework doesn’t instantly entitle you to respect,” said Ms Bramblebottom, selecting her favourite broom from the equipment pile. “Are you really surprised everyone hates you? At dinner last night you tried to rip off that child’s face!”

“Well, yes,” said Reetch, “but he’s probably evil.”

“Even if that were true, it would not justify violence at the dinner table,” said Scarlett, soaking a mop in soapy water. “And do you really think a young child like Armitage could be evil?”

“We are not alone, Scarlett,” said Reetch. “We share our world with forces that would rather have it for themselves. Aliens from above and demons from below and other things from slightly sideways that are difficult to explain.”

“We all know that, Reetch,” said Ms Bramblebottom, her sweeping becoming increasingly pointed. “What does it have to do with the Shanks family?”

“There are things out there that live forever, and other things that do not die-” Reetch began.

“Aren’t those both the same thing?” said Scarlett.

“No, there are many things that gain immortality through the very act of death. That is why I am here. I will not be satisfied that Henry Shanks is truly gone until I have some small part of his inheritance, for there is no way he would willingly let me take his stuff.”

Scarlett shook her head as her mop followed the path of Ms Bramblebottom’s broom.

“I think you hate him a lot more than he ever hated you,” she said. “In fact, I don’t think he hated you at all. He once told me he admired your dedication to doing good things in a world where good things are so hard to do.”

Reetch made an angry strangled noise in his throat. “Why is it that even when Shanks pays me a compliment, it feels like I am losing and he is winning?”

“Because your ego is bigger than this house?” said Ms Bramblebottom.

“How did you even end up travelling with him?” said Reetch to Scarlett, ignoring the haunted-housekeeper’s jibe. “I mean, your sister has recently become a cardinal hasn’t she? And your mother was an astronaut? Your family is so well respected! To meet you among such a crew as his ...”

“It certainly wasn’t something I planned,” said Scarlett. “Do you remember when those terrible rumours started coming out of Russia?”

“I do,” said Ms Bramblebottom, “and I recall you were one of

the first people to investigate.”

“I was,” said Scarlett. “I sailed through the northeast passage, picking a careful path between the Russian coast and the Arctic ice. Refugees flooded down from the Ural mountains, looking for any escape. We didn’t truly understand what we were up against, so crowded as many on board as we could.

“It was when we returned to warmer waters that we encountered Henry’s ship, the *Arethusa*. They boarded us thinking they had snared quite the prize. Then we all realised the full extent of Russia’s troubles. As we repelled the pirates, chaos spread beneath us. The refugees fled onto the deck, and the living dead followed close behind.”

“Cold Ones,” corrected Ms Bramblebottom. “Sorry, but being a haunted-housekeeper you learn to be really picky about what you call different monsters. Otherwise you feed the wrong food to the wrong creatures, and before you know it everything has spiralled out of control.”

“Spiralled out of control,” said Scarlett. “Yes, that pretty much sums up what happened next. Henry and I got as many people back on the *Arethusa* as we could. We ended up saving each other’s lives, and a truce was called between our crews. Henry promised to get us and the surviving refugees somewhere safe. That took a little longer than expected due to all manner of unexpected diversions. They say my ship is still out there somewhere, with a crew of Cold Ones terrorising the oceans.”

“Aye, the *Scarlett Scourge*,” said Ms Bramblebottom. “To have your name used in such a way is poor reward for your good works. All the world leaders were twiddling their thumbs and trying to ignore the problem until you forced them to pay attention.”

“Oh, that’s unfair,” said Scarlett. “They could hardly react to

rumours alone. Imagine if they had just started saying that corpses were climbing out of their graves. People would think they had gone mad!"

"Trustworthy leaders would have been believed," said Ms Bramblebottom. "And with fair warning, people could have started preparing for the dangers ahead."

"Um, excuse me?" said Reetch.

"You mean they would have panicked," said Scarlett. "And inevitably done misguided and dangerous things. By waiting sensibly, we discovered that the dead were only rising up in that one part of the world. Everybody else had nothing to worry about."

"Could I interject?" said Reetch.

"Nothing except the head start the dead gained through our inaction," said Ms Bramblebottom. "Now they sweep out from ground zero, despite all attempts to contain them."

"Can I just ask something?" said Reetch.

"Yes, what!" said Scarlet and Ms Bramblebottom together.

"Would anyone mind if I nip to the toilet?"

The others paused as they adjusted to this new topic of conversation.

"No," said Scarlett. "Nobody would mind if you nip to the toilet."

"Oh, good, thank you," said Reetch, as he scurried away.

"Do you think we scared him off?" said Ms Bramblebottom.

"We did get a bit heated," said Scarlett.

"Some things are worth arguing about."

"Yes, indeed. That's why I'm giving a speech at the forthcoming World Peace Summit. It is time the whole world worked together to stop this new Cold War."

Ms Bramblebottom nodded, allowing herself a cheeky lean on

her broom. “It’s good to finally get a quiet moment. Reetch has been following me around ever since last night, trying to make up for that insult over dinner.”

“He can be a bit much, can’t he?” said Scarlett. “Still, this past hour or so has been productive.”

The soot and dust and charcoal and ash had all been scrubbed away. The room gleamed the gleam of a freshly cleaned room, and a yellow and red sign warned that the floor was slippery when wet.

“Productive indeed,” said Ms Bramblebottom. “And with Reetch out of the way, I can finally get on with the rest of this weekend’s little chores.”

All of the ornaments still needed to be returned to their places, so Scarlett thought nothing of Ms Bramblebottom picking up one of the mantelpiece swords. She started looking around for that inevitable sooty spot that they had somehow missed, while the haunted-housekeeper advanced upon her with murderous intent.

Chapter 10

Inquisitor Reverend Reetch stepped into the bathroom as something dropped ploppingly into the toilet. He peered into the bowl and saw the thing disappear down the drain.

“If that was not a scorpion, then it was something far worse,” he said, for he was the sort of person who talked to themself while alone in the toilet. “I think I shall assume it *was* a scorpion and try to put it out of my mind.”

He flushed to ease his fears, waiting for the water to settle before he continued. The seat had been poorly bolted in place and it wobbled as Reetch tried to make himself comfortable. He started humming a tune that usually helped his movements, but was thrown offbeat by the sound of moths ramming the bathroom light.

When at last his labour was complete he reached out for toilet paper, but found only a naked cardboard tube.

“Will the horrors of this house never end?” he raged, waving his fists in the air. He resolved to wipe his bottom with his hands then wash them immediately afterwards. Reetch soon regretted this decision, for the tap broke away from the sink without any trace of water or plumbing. A search for soap and towel revealed neither, so he wiped his hands on his trousers before storming back downstairs.

“Sorry that took so long,” he said, walking back into the lounge. “You would not believe the difficulties I had.”

Reetch’s difficulties were brought into perspective by the mess before him. Scarlet was picking herself up off the floor and

blood was spoiling the freshly mopped floorboards. Ms Bramblebottom was nowhere to be seen.

“What happened?” said Reetch.

“Bertha tried to attack me,” said Scarlett. “Fortunately she slipped on the wet floor, despite this obvious sign warning of that exact hazard.”

“Come, sit down,” said Reetch. “Your voice is wavering and we need to treat your wounds.”

“Oh, that’s not my blood. I always keep a dagger in my boot. The two of us had something of a scuffle and then she fled down a secret passage.”

“Ah, the trusty boot knife, a wise precaution. I favour these exotic swords myself,” said Reetch, indicating the scabbards that were never absent from his belt.

“Do you not worry that the people who made those swords might be offended at your using them? I mean, their culture is very different to yours, and you are only using them because you think they look ‘cool?’”

“Well, you already sound more like yourself,” said Reetch. “We have no time for such concerns. We need to bring our haunted-housekeeper to justice! Where is this secret passage?”

“The fireplace span round. I don’t know how it happened though, everything during the fight is a bit of a blur now.”

“Understandable,” said Reetch, studying the fireplace. “Well, this is a well built façade. I’m not going to waste hours looking for the moving brick or whatever makes it work. Let’s get the others and inform them of these new developments.”

Reetch marched off on his righteous quest, only to be almost instantly distracted.

“Hello, what’s this?” he said, peering into the dining room. The table had been thrown onto its side out of the way, leaving

plenty of space for the mysterious box that sat in the middle of the floor.

"That looks like the sort of box the Shanks child was talking about," said Reetch. "The one Professor Hinzelvud—"

Reetch was cut short as he was lifted from the ground in a tangle of deep pile rug. "Ghosts!" he cried, drawing a sword as skilfully as possible in this less than ideal situation. He flailed the sword frantically yet safely around him. The ripping rug disgorge him onto a hardwood floor. Reetch looked up to find himself staring down the barrel of a fully charged plasma rifle.

"Gah, Reetch," said the Colonel. "You're not Hinzelvud. Sorry you two, false alarm."

Ariadne and Arthur poked their heads above the overturned table.

"Oh well, better luck next time," said Arthur

"Reetch has ruined the biggest rug in the house," said the Colonel. "I'll need to devise a different trap."

"Don't worry about me, I'm fine" said Reetch, though as nobody had been worrying about him anyway, he need not have bothered.

"Has Reetch told you that Ms Bramblebottom tried to kill me yet?" said Scarlett, catching up with the rest of the crowd.

"She did?" said the Colonel. "That's terrible! Who will we trust with the cooking now?"

"That's hardly our most important concern," said Ariadne.

"No, the Colonel raises an important point—" began Arthur, before Ariadne cut him short with an elbow beneath the ribs.

"It seems like a great deal has happened in the past hour or so," she said. "I think we all need to sit down and compare notes."

Everyone else nodded in agreement and began gathering chairs.

“Hang on,” said Arthur. “Where are the kids?”

“We left them using the shower,” said Scarlett.

“Ah good. I would hate to think they were loose in the house, getting into trouble and causing no end of mischief.”

Chapter 11

Armitage and Christopher pushed through the cobwebs that clogged the secret passage. Narrow beams of light slipped between cracks in the walls, flickering as rats scurried from shadow to shadow. The floor crawled with creatures that were not technically snakes, but were best described as basically snakes. Dead birds decorated unexpected places, being chewed upon by carnivorous caterpillars.

“Dark and undesirable,” said the Hair. “Just like everywhere else you take me. How do we keep finding these places?”

“Well, in this case, a book made that shelf spin round,” said Armitage. “It was less than five minutes ago, have you forgotten already?”

The Hair began explaining that it was obviously a rhetorical question, but Armitage had turned his attention elsewhere.

“Christopher, did you miss this secret door?”

Christopher turned back to inspect his cousin’s discovery.

“Huh, yeah! Not sure how, it’s more like a regular door than a secret door.”

“Apart from how it’s hidden in this dark, secret passage,” said Armitage. He turned the handle and pushed the door open.

Not even the flickering rat light reached this room. Armitage and Christopher both fumbled for a light switch but the walls were bare. Christopher collided with something that felt like a table, sending other smaller things falling and rolling over the floor. A search around his feet found a scatter of matches and candles.

“Oooh, matches!” said Christopher, striking a light. He began gathering them up as Armitage looked around.

This room made the rest of the house seem tidy. The flame lit only a fraction of the jumble, promising the potential for more curiosities beyond.

Armitage wiped a crust of dust from a glass case. The thing inside was like an insect with bones, a lizard with hair, a rat with thorns. Its innards had been cut out and arranged in an informative display, as though on show in an old museum.

Christopher found a place to perch his candle, then began setting up a few more. As his eyes adjusted to the light he saw he was putting the candles on top of another glass case. This one contained a dog sized frog, mounted on metal pins in an unnatural yet exciting pose. It had more legs than might be expected, and eyes that twitched as though the creature were still alive.

“There’s dust over everything,” said Armitage, shaking clean a pile of paper.

“Yeah, it must be years since anyone else has been here.”

“Hey look, here’s a drawing of the thing that ate Doctor Deluge,” said Armitage, before reading aloud the accompanying notes. “The slime monster resembles a boiling pile of tyres. It appears to be nocturnal, and its adversity to light may prove its weakness. Like most of our specimens it is vulnerable to fire, but this remains an impractical solution for daily life.”

“Weird,” said Christopher, flicking through a book that was apparently a diary. He picked a random page to read. “S responded to my suggestion that we catch ourselves a fish. He claims ‘the cage has not yet been built that can hold such a thing, though it may surprise you that I have met a Scottish scientist working on this very problem.’ I replied that it was indeed a

surprise to learn there are scientists in Scotland, but he did not laugh as I did. Growing up in such an isolated corner of nowhere, he has much sympathy for the savage places of the world.”

“I bet this has something to do with Mr McGregor’s great-great-great-uncle,” said Armitage. “The one who collected all the weird and horrific things in this house. It looks like he was studying them.”

“Sounds about right,” said Christopher, picking up a picture frame. “The man here looks just like Mr McGregor. Must be the older one, what’s ‘is name, Abercrombie. Hey, look at this other guy stood next to him. Doesn’t he look *famili-ar*? ”

Armitage looked at the antique photo. A handful of faces peered back, old friendships disappearing into a brownish blur.

“Nope, can’t say that he does.”

“Did you notice how I said ‘familiar’?” said Christopher. “Making it sound like *family*-er?”

“I did notice, but I didn’t get why.”

Christopher took a moment to consider his next clue. He found an old ink pot and used his little finger to fish out everything left inside. A dab on the photo smeared a beard on the man’s face. Another left a blob covering one of his eyes.

“How about now?”

“Nope, still don’t see where you’re going with this. Woah! Yes I do! That’s Granddaddy Shanks! How did Granddaddy Shanks know Abercrombie McGregor?”

“Wait, what did it say in that diary?” said the Hair

Armitage grabbed the book and searched for the right place. “S responded to my suggestion that we catch ourselves a fish,” he read. “S as in Shanks?”

“Mr McGregor said they were given this house by a family

friend,” said Christopher. “Granddaddy could afford to go off exploring everywhere, maybe he was rich enough to just give people houses?”

Armitage nodded. “They say Granddaddy Shanks could pull gold out of his bottom. At least, that’s the way Mummy Shanks always put it. Other people say it differently.”

“That’s just one of those weird Shanks family myths,” said Christopher. “Like how he could supposedly change the colour of his skin and breathe underwater. People say all sorts of rubbish about our family.”

“Yeah, what’s with that?” said Armitage.

“We need to find someone who can tell us more,” said Christopher. “Let’s go ask the Colonel, she knew Granddaddy personally.”

“Ariadne and Arthur can probably help too,” said the Hair.

“Oh yeah,” said Christopher, after Armitage had passed the suggestion along. “I’d forgotten about them. We’d best get back before they miss us.”

“Good plan,” said the Hair.

“But first let’s see where the rest of that secret passageway goes,” said Christopher.

“What? No! That’s the exact opposite of the good plan,” said the Hair, but its protests were predictably ignored.

Chapter 12

The secret passage continued worming through the house. Occasional holes in the walls allowed the children to peer into the rooms beyond.

“We’re in the main hallway now,” said Christopher. “Look, you can see everyone else sat in the dining room. Probably talking about boring grown-up things.”

“I think we’re looking through the eyes of the paintings,” said Armitage.

“Yeah, classic haunted house.”

They pushed onwards, down the path and around a few sharp corners.

“Psst, over here.”

“Over where?” said Armitage.

“I didn’t say anything,” said Christopher. “That voice came from outside. Where are we now?”

They found another crack in the woodwork, but their view was blocked by pots and pans.

“*There* you are!” said a hidden voice that sounded just like Ms Bramblebottom. “Where have you been?”

“Avoiding everyone else, obviously,” said a second voice that sounded exactly like Professor Hinzelvud. “I suspect they blame me for that kid falling off the roof.”

“No, really? Did you use your rocket science to figure that out?”

“Astrophysics isn’t the same as rocket science. Anyway, it’s not my fault he followed me up there.”

“What were you doing on the roof in the first place?” said the almost certainly Ms Bramblebottom voice. “You weren’t meant to do anything until after I had briefed you.”

“And when was that going to happen?” asked the essentially confirmed to be Hinzelvud voice. “Reetch has never left your side, constantly trying to make up for his insult last night. No matter, let’s move on. What progress have you made?”

“Not enough,” said Ms Bramblebottom. “Most of them are little more than dumb animals. I’m getting somewhere with the mould, but I don’t think we can trust it. What about you?”

“The incident on the roof allowed me to test the trap,” said Hinzelvud. “The results were less than we hoped for. Had the slime monster been on its own, I think it would have been sucked in, but then those flappy bat-things turned up. The trap couldn’t handle them all at once.”

“And the slime and night terrors are nothing compared to some of the horrors that lurk beneath the trapdoor,” said Ms Bramblebottom. “There is always something down there ... in the dark ... waiting to come *out*.”

“Judging by the pipes I followed last night, anything leaking up from below has a ready-made route through the entire house. Was the plumbing designed entirely for the escapees’ convenience?”

“They take the place apart and rebuild it when they think I’m not looking. I try to keep everything in order, but being a haunted-housekeeper is more than a full time job.”

“Not just dumb animals, then,” said Hinzelvud. “We can definitely scrap the plan of me sneaking around, hoovering them up one by one. We’ll need to use the snare-lines.”

“Either way, we’ll be wanting the trap back,” said Ms Bramblebottom. “Not that there’s any rush. Here’s a map of all

the secret passages. It would be best for you to hide yourself until the weekend is over. Then everyone else will have left and we can work in peace.”

“No, we must do this tonight; it is a date of some astrological significance. Many of the things kept in the Entrapment Engine would otherwise barely exist. If we don’t catch them now, we never will again.”

“If you say so,” said Ms Bramblebottom. “Hard way it is then.”

“What about you?” said Hinzelvud. “Are you getting to grips with Scarlett?”

“Yes, don’t you worry about that. I should be off now, before I’m missed. I told them I was just nipping to the toilet.”

“Well, we haven’t been talking for too long.”

“No, but I really do need the toilet.”

“Right. I’ll see you later then. Good luck.”

There were sounds of people leaving the room. Armitage and Christopher were once again alone in their secret passage.

“Well, that conversation was both confusing and incriminating,” said Armitage.

“Confusing and incriminating indeed,” said Christopher.

“So now we’re at last going to try and get back to the others?” said the Hair.

“Yes,” said Armitage, “I think that would definitely be a good plan. A good plan that this time we should actually follow!”

Chapter 13

The secret passage eventually led them out into the conservatory. The hidden door dislodged a pile of basking turtles which scuttled away as the children emerged. Armitage and Christopher ran through the hallway and into the dining room, bumping into Scarlett who stood drying her hands in the doorway.

“Oops, careful how you go, boys,” she said, before returning to her conversation. “I really don’t mind, Arthur. The Colonel and Reetch are better at traps and baddie catching and such like, while you and Ariadne have still only had a few hours sleep. Best you all leave the cooking to me.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” said Arthur, calling after Scarlett as she left. “Let us know if you need any help.”

“Christopher Shanks! Look at the state of you,” said Ariadne. “What have you been doing? Crawling through a dusty passage hidden in the walls of the house?”

“No,” said Christopher, rolling his eyes.

“Well, yes,” said Armitage. “That is exactly what we’ve been doing.”

“Oh yeah,” said Christopher. “Sorry, I just lied instinctively. Anyway, that’s not important right now. Is Ms Bramblebottom back yet?”

“I doubt we’ll be seeing Bertha any time soon,” said the Colonel. “Why do you ask?”

“We just heard her and Professor Hinzelvud talking about some secret plan,” said Christopher.

“We didn’t understand all of it,” said Armitage. “But it sounded like they were going well past mischief. In fact, it sounded like they were up to *no good!*”

“Then you’d better sit down and tell us everything,” said the Colonel. “Reetch, you going to come listen to this? We might need your help here.”

The inquisitor stood at a window, looking out over the cliffs. He turned to acknowledge the Colonel, then pointed across the bay.

“There is a ship out there,” he said.

“A ship in Mernanshire Bay?” said Arthur. “That will come as shock to everyone, especially all the sailors and fishers living in our coastal town.”

“Mock me if you wish, florist, but I would not mention it without good reason. That ship was there last night, drawing attention by being far too fancy for this poverty stricken port.”

“It’s not much, but it’s home,” said Ariadne, trying to restrain her clenching jaw.

“A few minutes ago, it started flashing a signal light,” Reetch continued. “Then it dispatched a small row boat that is heading towards the shore.”

“That’s just smugglers,” said Christopher. “People say they have underground tunnels in the cliffs, where they have smuggling fun at smuggling parties with all their smuggling friends.”

“It is more than just smugglers that use those tunnels,” said Reetch. “And they go through more than just these cliffs. They weave their way under the whole planet. The Corporation, the Templars of True Meat, even the Church of Five Chalices, all the secret societies have used them at one time or another. Some say if you go deep enough there are whole civilisations hidden in the

middle of the world.”

“Monks,” said Armitage.

“I beg your pardon?”

“There are monks, on the boat.” Armitage had pulled his telescope from his pocket and was studying the smaller vessel. “I think Christopher’s right. They must be smugglers, they’re bringing big treasure chests with them.”

Armitage let Reetch borrow the telescope.

“Monks indeed,” said the inquisitor. “Men of the cloth should know better. Were I not bound to stay in this house I would go deal with them myself. No matter, I am sure the local police are perfectly competent.”

“Yes of course,” said the Colonel, talking over Ariadne and Arthur’s smirking. “So why don’t you come over here and we’ll find out what the youngsters have to tell us.

Armitage and Christopher began waving their arms in the air and talking all at once.

“Woah, slow down, one at a time,” said Ariadne. “Armitage, you go first.”

“They were talking about finding the box. The one Professor Hinzelvud had on the roof. It sounds like they lost it.”

“That box?” said Arthur, pointing at the mysterious box they had put to one side.

“Yes,” said Armitage. “That’s the one. Go us! They said it was meant to suck up the monsters.”

“But they also said it doesn’t work very well,” said Christopher.

The Colonel leant on her cane even though she was sitting down, a pose that gave her an air of very deep thought indeed.

“Sounds like a monster trap,” she said. “The military were experimenting with those a few years back. Made one that could

catch a small gremlin if it stood within two feet of the machine. They never did figure out how to crank up the suction.”

“Oh-oh-ooh, they mentioned snare-lines,” said Armitage.

“Hmm, interesting. The military scientists suggested making laser beams that worked like fishing lines. Hook the creatures, drag them into the trap.”

“Suggested, maybe,” said Reetch, “but never practically realised. My church spent millions trying to perfect that technology. We could get the snares to work in theory, but their mechanisms were far too big. One person alone could not lift them up. Two people working together could not move them with the speed and grace necessary to catch anything.”

“Just because you couldn’t manage it doesn’t mean it can’t be done,” said the Colonel.

“And how would one mad scientist prevail where the combined resources of the Church of Five Chalices failed?”

“He obviously wasn’t alone,” said Ariadne. “He’s been working with Ms Bramblebottom, and possibly others as well.”

“This all just leaves us back where we started,” said Reetch. “We need to find Bramblebottom and Hinzelvud, bring them both to justice.”

“Not quite where we started,” said the Colonel. “Now we know they are working together. Find one and the other will not be far away.”

“They were talking about that trapdoor,” said Christopher. “The one Mr McGregor said we definitely shouldn’t open, and which Ms Bramblebottom told us definitely doesn’t exist. We’ve been looking for it, but we haven’t found a way to the basement yet.”

“And they know about the secret passages,” said Armitage. “Though Ms Bramblebottom doesn’t ever clean them.”

"Probably tops them up with extra dust and spiders," said Arthur. "That's part of a haunted-housekeeper's job."

"Then it seems our path is clear," said the Colonel. "We need to find these passages. The children have found one connecting the library and conservatory, but it sounds like there's plenty of others. I know we've all been avoiding it, but those secret doors won't reveal themselves. At least, not until we tweak all the furniture and poke all the ornaments."

"Fine," said Reetch. "We should split up, that way we can cover more ground. Also, we'll increase the chances of meeting with calamity, thus ending our part in this tedious chore."

"I'm beginning to wish we had brought some weapons with us," said Ariadne.

"Er, maybe we did?" said Arthur. Ariadne gave him one of those looks, doing that thing people sometimes do with their eyebrows.

"You told me to pack anything useful looking into the van," said Arthur with a sheepish shrug. "I know you wanted a peaceful weekend, but they were already wrapped up and conveniently placed by the door. And not by *me*, I might add."

"Right then," said the Colonel. "You two go get your weapons, then start in the lounge. We already know there's a way in to one of the passages there. I reckon Bramblebottom would make sure that she and the professor would have the other entrances close to hand, so Reetch can search the kitchen and I'll take Hinzelvud's bedroom."

"What should we do?" said Christopher.

"You two have the most important job of all," said the Colonel, placing confidence inspiring hands on the children's shoulders. "Guard that box. Hinzelvud and Bertha will be coming after it, with sharp swords and strange science and any number

of dirty tricks. Don't let them get it. We don't know why they want to suck up all the monsters, but I can only imagine that the fate of the world hangs in the balance!"

"Oh, Colonel. You always say that," said Arthur. "Boys, take the box into the lounge. Ariadne and I will be right with you."

"Let's get started," said the Colonel, and so started they all got.

Chapter 14

Armitage and Christopher took the box into the lounge.

“I like the Colonel’s style,” said the Hair. “She has basically told us to sit down and not cause trouble, but has made it sound interesting enough to stop Christopher doing the exact opposite.”

“Oh, I almost forgot,” said Christopher. “We were going to ask the Colonel about that photo. Come on, let’s go do it now.”

“Well, it was a good attempt,” said the Hair.

“We shouldn’t leave the box,” said Armitage.

“Obviously, bring it with us,” said Christopher. “We’ll be with the Colonel, she’ll make sure nothing bad happens.”

They caught up with the Colonel as she sat picking the lock on the professor’s door.

“Do you know these people?” said Christopher, showing her the photo. “I mean, that’s obviously our granddaddy, and we think that’s Abercrombie McGregor, but we wondered if you recognised the others.”

The Colonel snatched a glance at the picture as she fiddled with her skeleton keys.

“Very nice, that’s a real antique you’ve found. Those are the heroes I looked up to as a child. When my friends and I played in the streets, I was always Caleb. He’s the one on the left there; died exploring ruined temples in Peru. My brother would run around making plane noises, pretending to be Valli the Vedda pilot. She’s the one on the right; flew all over the Himalayas finding lost plateaus full of prehistoric animals. Kid across the street had white hair, so always had to be Doctor Stone. He’s the one in the

glasses, photo must be from before he got lost in those catacombs.”

Something in the door went click. The Colonel smiled as it swung open.

“So this doesn’t have anything to do with what’s happening now?” said Armitage.

“Seems unlikely,” said the Colonel. “Let’s see what we have in here. If Hinzelvud thought this room was secure, he might have left all sorts of incriminating clues.”

The Colonel began pulling apart a chest of drawers while Christopher rummaged through a pile of suitcases. Armitage took a seat, still hugging the mysterious box.

“This is definitely Hinzelvud’s stuff,” said Christopher. “I guess he didn’t want to drag big bags of clothes down those dark and narrow corridors.”

“Do you think he sneaks in each morning to change his pants?” said Armitage. “We could catch him tomorrow when he comes back for more.”

“I suspect he’s planning to go the whole weekend with just the pair he’s had on since Friday,” said the Colonel.

“Ew,” said Armitage. “Grown-ups are gross.”

“Well now, what do we have here?” said the Colonel, opening the wardrobe. “A large trench coat, hanging from the cane that turns into a coat hanger which so impressed Arthur. We’re on to a winner here, boys. You can tell a lot about someone by looking through their pockets.”

“My pockets are full of matches,” said Christopher.

“Mine are empty,” said Armitage.

“I am politely resisting the urge to say anything,” said the Hair.

“And in Hinzelvud’s ... oh dear, that’s not good.”

The Colonel pulled a face at her find. It was a metal disc,

slightly larger than her palm. The centre had been moulded to look like a clenched, armoured gauntlet. Around the outer ring were inscribed the words '*Fighting For Our Own Tomorrow*'.

"This is a seal used to distinguish high ranking members of the Iron Fist," said the Colonel.

"What's the Iron Fist?" asked Armitage.

The Colonel sat beside him on the bed, motioning for Christopher to join them.

"Most people have ideas for making the world a better place," she said. "And everyone's ideas will be different, but that's not a problem. As long as we all talk and listen to each other, life will muddle on. Sometimes we'll need to change things, and the things we've already changed will eventually need changing again. Fixed things never stay fixed forever; but as long as everyone is listening to everyone else, we can keep things more fixed than broken."

"Sometimes, though, you get people who don't listen. They think they know what's best for all, and won't have anyone telling them they're wrong. Put lots of those people together, and you've got trouble. They trick themselves into thinking they're listening to everyone else, when really they're just listening to themselves all over again."

"And that's how you get groups like the Iron Fist. A lot of people telling each other they're right, when really everyone is at least a little bit wrong. And there's no shame in saying you're wrong, but the Iron Fist have forgotten that."

Armitage was about to respond to all this when Ariadne and Arthur stormed through the door.

"There you are!" Ariadne scolded the children. "Two minutes we were gone, just two minutes. Don't ever run off like that without telling us where you're going!"

"I've kept an eye on them. No harm's done," said the Colonel.

“I found this. Hinzelvud is with the Iron Fist.”

“Well, I wish I could say that’s surprising,” said Arthur. “And I did so like that coat hanger.”

“Fits with what we already know,” said Ariadne. “The Iron Fist often work with inhuman allies. It would be just like them to want to use all the things in this house.”

“But use them for what?” said the Colonel. “I’m not liking the shape of this at all. I can’t find any secret passages in here. We should start going over the lounge.”

“It occurs to me,” said Arthur, “that whenever there’s a book or film where people stay in a haunted house, they never excuse themselves to go to the toilet.”

“Is that your way of saying you need the toilet?” said Ariadne.

“Yes,” said Arthur. “Yes it is.”

“Go on then, does anyone else need to go?”

“Nooo,” sang the cousins, shaking their heads.

“Attended to the need at nine o’clock this morning,” said the Colonel. “Regular as clockwork.”

“Good to know,” said Ariadne, rolling her eyes. “I hope Reetch is being more productive.”

Inquisitor Reverend Reetch had walked into the kitchen, finding Scarlett hard at work.

“Don’t mind me,” he said. “I’m just looking for secret passages.”

“Oh yes?” said Scarlett, absorbed with the complicated job of using the sausage making machine.

“Indeed; we think Ms Bramblebottom and Hinzelvud are hiding in them.”

Reetch picked up the kettle and put it back down. Looking

around, he could not see anything change. He rummaged through the cutlery tray. Still nothing happened. He tinkered with the jars on the spice rack. If there were any hidden passages in the room, they remained stubbornly concealed.

“There are some curious consumables here,” said Reetch. “Purple lotus. That sends people into a deep, deep sleep, doesn’t it? And this snake venom definitely shouldn’t be kept in a kitchen.”

“You need such poisons when looking after a haunted house,” said Scarlett. “Sometimes you have to dose up whole herds of monsters just to change the sheets in peace.”

Reetch laughed as he continued jostling pots and pans.

“One hour of standing in for Ms Bramblebottom and you’ve already got the hang of it,” he said. “You’ve certainly put some effort into getting our food ready. That pile of sausages must be as big as a person!”

“Almost,” said Scarlett. “I took out the bones and various inedible bits.”

“What was that?” said Reetch, paying more attention to his search than the conversation. He opened the fridge and flicked at its light switch a few times. It did not reveal any secrets.

Then Reetch noticed the rotten growth crawling out of a bottle in the door. It was green and furry and it was turning itself inside out. Plates of chitin encased the soft spores, giving it the look of a large lobster with the wings of an even larger fly. It began moving as though warming up for a dance, made a noise as though it was clearing its throat, and then it began to sing;

*Clean out your fridge, it’s starting to stink,
The mould in the milk is learning to think,
The cheese from last year fills me with fear,
It was once Cornish Blue, but now it’s all pink!?*

“Eww,” said Reetch, sickened and disgusted. “I’m really not sure about that last line at all—”

His constructive criticism was cut short as Scarlett clamped a rag over his mouth. He had just enough time to recognise the smell of purple lotus before he fell into a deep, deep sleep.

“Thank you for that distraction,” said Scarlett. “I didn’t know you could sing.”

“I can sing, I can dance, I’m having difficulty with the poetry,” said the lobster-mould. “But I can fix the problem you have with the monster trap. I’ve been listening to your discussions, and I’m willing to help you out.”

“What’s in it for you?” said Scarlett, doing that thing people sometimes do with their eyebrows.

“Just don’t put me in the monster trap. Simple as that.”

Scarlet stroked at her chin, studying what she assumed was the lobster-mould’s face.

“That could be arranged,” she said. “What’s your plan?”

“Have you considered using live bait?” said the mould.

Scarlett looked down at the sleeping Inquisitor.

“Well, now you mention it ...”

Chapter 15

The Colonel kept Ariadne company as she waited for Arthur to finish in the toilet.

“Those weapons you had in the van,” said the Colonel, “there were no shoulder-mounted ray rifles, by any chance?”

“Now where would we get military hardware like that?” said Ariadne.

“Some peace-shooters, at least?”

“Not our style at all.”

“Just the elephant guns then,” said the Colonel, casting her eyes over the long, thin weapon that Ariadne was casually leaning on.

“Not just *any* elephant guns. Elizabeth and Victoria here have been in the family for over a hundred years.”

The Colonel laughed, shaking her head. “Antique elephant guns. Not quite the backup I was hoping for. He’s taking his time in there.”

Ariadne pressed her ear to the toilet door. She could hear Arthur finishing the tune he always hummed to help his movements.

“He’s almost done,” she said.

Beyond the door, Arthur’s third poo dropped ploppingly into the bowl, because some things are hereditary. He noticed there was no toilet paper but, being no stranger to public events, he had brought plenty of his own. He finished his wiping, stood up, and flushed. Black gunge spewed around the inside of the toilet. It circled the bowl and gathered into a boiling knot.

“The slime monster,” said Arthur, glancing through a window to see that dusk had fallen across the bay. “Of course, you must be nocturnal.”

The slime slurped up to perch on the toilet seat. Arthur was already running out of the room as it sprang towards him. He went tumbling onto the floor outside, the goo stretching out to entangle his legs. Arthur felt teeth tear through his shoes and tongues began to tickle his toes. He could see the Colonel taking aim with her plasma rifle, could see Ariadne putting herself between the slime and the children, could see the back of the monster flipping over to feast on his face.

Arthur flailed to find his elephant gun, which had gone crashing to the floor as he burst out the toilet. Grasping fingers found the stock, and he brought it round in time to block the slime monster. The gunge wrapped around the barrel, the weight of the creature pinning Arthur to the floor.

“Hold still, Arthur,” said the Colonel. “I can’t get a clear shot.”

“Last recourse of the monster hunter,” cried Ariadne. “Hit it with sticks!”

She swung Victoria at the boiling blackness. The slime reshaped itself, rearing up to fend off this new foe. Ariadne bought the gun’s butt back around for a thrust, knocking the creature away from Arthur.

“Still not getting that clean shot,” said the Colonel.

“Can’t break away without giving it the upper hand,” said Ariadne, her improvised club swinging at the slime again and again.

“Then keep it distracted. I’ve got an idea.”

The Colonel leapt over the side of the mezzanine, riding convenient wall hangings down to the floor below. A quick search found her what she was looking for.

“Got it!” she shouted back to the others. “Throw that thing downstairs!”

Ariadne battered the beast over the banister. It tumbled to the floor and exploded, scattering screaming splatter across the room. The globules wasted no time in oozing towards each other’s calls, looking to reform into a single gelatinous whole.

“Oh no you don’t,” said the Colonel, switching on the industrial hoover with a colourful, smiling face. The machine began to wheeze and suck, swallowing up the slime.

“Good plan, Colonel,” said Arthur, pulling himself to his feet and watching from atop the mezzanine. “You missed a bit though, on top of that cabinet.”

“And there’s a blob by that hat stand,” said Ariadne.

“And more of it over by that chair,” said Christopher.

“Er, should we be trying to put *all* of the slime monster in the vacuum?” said Armitage. “Won’t it just pull itself back together inside?”

The hoover began sparking and smoking and doing other unsettling things that suggested Armitage may be right. The colourful plastic began to split. Slime started sweating through the cracks.

“The excessively large urn!” said the Hair. “Armitage, do the spider thing!”

Armitage understood his Hair entirely, and dragged Christopher across the mezzanine. They grabbed the excessively large urn that they had hidden in the night before, ran it down the stairs, and slammed it over the crumbling machine.

“Get something to slip under the urn,” called Armitage. The adults followed his lead, pulling one of the portraits off the wall.

“Just like when we catch spiders to feed the smaller carnivorous plants,” said Christopher. “Maybe we should do this with other animals to feed the bigger carnivorous plants.”

“Our current methods are more than adequate,” said Ariadne, as a painting of a dog wearing silly clothes was slid under urn and vacuum alike.

“We don’t have a plant to feed this one to,” said the Colonel.

“No, but this house is on top of a cliff,” said Ariadne. She began directing the crowd as they carried away their makeshift cage. They could feel violent thrashing within as they shuffled out the door, down the garden path, and over to the edge of Hideous Hill.

“Now we just need to figure out how to get the slime out of the urn,” said the Hair.

It seemed the same thought was on everyone’s mind, for they all paused a moment, contemplated complicated logistics, then threw the whole lot over the cliff. The industrial hoover, the excessively large urn, the painting of a dog wearing silly clothes, and, most importantly, the slime monster all plummeted into the dark and voracious waves.

“Not quite what I had in mind,” said the Hair, “but I’m sure Mr McGregor didn’t expect his house to survive the Shanks family in one piece.”

“Well, that’s the slime monster dealt with,” said the Colonel as they walked back inside. “Now I feel like we have at least achieved something today.”

“And hopefully Reetch will have found some of those secret passages,” said Arthur, closing the front door behind him.

“Otherwise he missed his share of all that hard work for no

reason at all.”

“Here’s the Contessa,” said Ariadne, spotting Scarlett pushing the serving trolley from the kitchen to the dining room. “Is Reetch still in there with you?”

“No, I haven’t seen him for a while,” said Scarlett. “I have, however, finished preparing our food for the evening.”

At that Scarlett pulled away the lids of the serving dishes, unveiling vast heaps of sausages. All thoughts of passage finding and villain hunting were put aside. Everyone descended on the meaty treats, filling themselves with as many sausages as they could.

“These taste magnificent,” said Arthur, rudely talking with his mouth full. “A rare yet recognisable recipe. Have you cooked for us before?”

“I don’t remember her doing so,” said Ariadne. “Yet I too have a nagging feeling of familiarity.”

As the adults piled more sausages onto their plates, Armitage gave his cousin a nudge.

“Christopher, I’ve got a sinking feeling that all is not as hunky dory as it currently seems. Come on, I need to check something.”

The two children scurried up the stairs. Christopher watched as Armitage searched around the mezzanine, poking his head into all the nearby rooms.

“What are we looking for?” said Christopher. “I can’t see anything.”

“Exactly,” said Armitage. “I left the mysterious box here while we dealt with the slime monster. Now, it’s mysteriously disappeared. Bramblebottom and Hinzelvud must have taken advantage of the distraction and grabbed it.”

“Ah,” said Christopher. “Pants.”

Chapter 16

Armitage and Christopher considered their current predicament.

“Do you think we should tell the others?” said Armitage.

“No, adults can’t handle change,” said Christopher. “They just start panicking; running around and flailing their arms in the air and blaming me for things that are obviously not my fault. We’ll find the mysterious box and have it back here before anyone notices it’s missing.”

“But Bramblebottom and Hinzelvud have it,” said Armitage. “And we still haven’t found any of their secret passages, or the way down to the basement.”

“When we overheard their conversation, our view was blocked by pots and pans,” said Christopher. “I’ve got a hunch we should check out the kitchen.”

The Hair made a snorting noise. “Why would a person employed to feed us all weekend need a secret passage in the *kitchen*? ”

“You couldn’t hear that,” said Armitage, “but my Hair was being very sarcastic.”

“He is a scamp isn’t he?” said Christopher, fondly ruffling Armitage’s mop.

“Please stop people touching me,” said the Hair. “Also, I’m not a ‘he’. *Also* also, I’m not sure you are either.”

Armitage and Christopher had already stopped listening. Their attention was fixed on the task of slipping through the hall unnoticed. The adults were absorbed by the deliciously tasty free

food, so the children easily reached the kitchen without discovery.

“What do you know,” said Christopher, “there are loads more doors in this room.”

Armitage opened the nearest and looked inside.

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up,” he said. “This one is just hiding a cupboard full of mops and buckets.”

Christopher opened the second door.

“And this one is just hiding a pantry full of cabbages and carrots,” he said.

“Ah well,” said Armitage. “It was worth a try.”

Then he opened the third door.

“This one is hiding a staircase that seems to lead down into the cliff,” he said.

“It really was worth a try,” said the Hair. “And there was me thinking that was a meaningless phrase used only by failures.”

“Hiding a secret passage behind an ordinary door,” said Christopher. “Very crafty, Ms Bramblebottom. Very crafty indeed.”

“Ariadne said not to run off without telling her where you’re going,” said the Hair, but knowing they would be ignored they didn’t say it with much conviction.

Christopher pulled on a cord that looked like it should be a light switch. It pleasantly surprised him by genuinely being a light switch. The children set off down the safely lit stairs, walked through a cool room full of meats and cheeses and vegetables, then continued into deeper caverns through the granite cliffs.

“This place is a maze,” said Armitage.

“Yeah, finding the mysterious box could take longer than planned,” said Christopher.

The children felt strong hands clamp around them, wet rags smothering their faces. They tried struggling against the unseen

assailants, but their arms and legs turned to jelly and they fell into a deep, deep sleep. Neither Armitage nor Christopher had ever smelt the purple lotus flower before, but now they would definitely recognise its scent if they ever encountered it again.

Back in the dining room, Arthur looked up from his sausages.

“Is it just me,” he said, “or does it feel like we are the only three people left alive?”

Ariadne and the Colonel looked around. Even the skittering critters had disappeared, leaving the haunted house in eerie silence.

“You’re not wrong, Arthur,” said the Colonel, dabbing her mouth with a napkin. “Where’s Scarlett gone?”

“More urgently,” said Ariadne, “where have the *children* gone?”

The three of them abandoned their food and ran through to the hallway, poking their heads into various rooms. It was the Colonel who happened to check the kitchen, finding the basement door all open and inviting.

“I think I know where everyone else is,” she called to Ariadne and Arthur. “And I have a gut feeling that a rescue mission may be in order.”

“Oh, before we go anywhere, can I just stop by our bedroom?” said Arthur. “I’ve been walking around in bare feet ever since the slime monster ate my shoes and socks.”

“Go on then,” said the Colonel. “I doubt the children will find much more trouble in the time it takes you to do up your shoelaces.”

“Freshly brewed tea will awaken anyone, even those suffering

from the deep, deep sleep of the purple lotus,” said a voice that Armitage did not recognise. “Of course, it must be very *sugary* tea.”

Armitage opened bleary eyes. He tried to move, but he was tied quite securely to both Christopher and Inquisitor Reverend Reetch. Scarlett was moving between them, waving a steaming cup of tea under their noses.

“Yes, I understand *how* we are waking them up,” said Professor Hinzelvud to a large, mouldy lobster. “I just don’t understand *why* we are waking them up.”

Armitage yawned, still half asleep. The three prisoners were sat before the mysterious box. Beyond that, a trapdoor was set into the floor, locked firmly shut by mechanised bolts and bars.

“Monsters prefer lively, wriggling flesh,” said the lobster-mould. “This way, they are more likely to go for our captives and less likely to come for us.”

“This entire plan seems fraught with difficulty,” said Hinzelvud.

“Obviously,” said Scarlett. “You were expecting this to be easy?”

“Contessa Scarlett!” said Reetch, snapping from dreams to dynamics the instant the tea wafted under his nose. “What’s going on here?”

“What does it look like?” said Scarlett.

“It looks like you are going to use us as bait, luring everything that lives beneath that door into your monster trap.”

“There you go,” said Scarlett. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“But why?” said Reetch. “The creatures are already contained. Why move them from one trap to another?”

“We have better use for them,” said Scarlett. “The Entrapment Engine is fixed beneath this house, whereas I need

to take these creatures to the World Peace Conference. There, I will explosively release them, wiping out all the world leaders and creating a global monster infestation. With nobody else to turn to, people will look to the Iron Fist to save the world!"

"The Iron Fist?" said Reetch. "Of course! There were rumours they had perfected their Kobold Bomb. But why would you do this, Scarlett? You hate the Iron Fist and everything they stand for!"

"Oh, I get what's happening," said Armitage.

"Really?" said Reetch, Christopher, and the Hair together. "Care to enlighten the rest of us?"

"As soon as I get a spare moment, I will. First, let's escape this somewhat sticky situation."

"Oh, there will be no escape," said Hinzelvud. "At the optimal hour, we shall open the trapdoor. Then those that dwell below shall awaken, and come looking for a tasty breakfast snack."

"That's you, as you've no doubt guessed," said Scarlett. "As they surge towards you, we shall use the snare-lines to force them into the monster trap."

"So, on the plus side, if everything goes well, the monsters will all be sucked into the box before they get a chance to eat you," said the lobster-mould.

"And after that you'll let us go?" asked Armitage.

"You should never ask questions that can only have bad answers," said Scarlett.

"Your plan will never work," said Reetch. "Snare-lines are too big. One person alone cannot lift them. Two people working together cannot hope to move with the speed and coordination required to catch anything but the most sluggish of demons."

"Then it is a good job I have brought some help," said Hinzelvud.

Six shapes stepped out of the shadows. Armitage recognised them as the smugglers he had assumed were monks. They cast off their robes, revealing that this had probably been a premature assumption.

“One man with the strength of two,” said Hinzelvud. “All thanks to our friend, Doctor Deluge.”

“The four-armed clones,” said Christopher. “It was you who stole them!”

“We are an outlawed political party,” said the professor. “We are forced to steal everything; food, drink, even the very clothes on our backs!”

The clones did not even have clothes on their backs, for few tailors consider the needs of people with four arms. Now they stood both hairless and topless; dressed only in blue, denim trousers.

“The moment approaches,” said Hinzelvud, checking a silver pocket watch. “You lot, get the snare-lines out of those chests. Scarlett, ready the Entrapment Engine.”

As the Iron Fist set to work, Reetch risked whispering at the children.

“I can see my swords, thrown into the corner there. Maybe we can shuffle over to them without anyone else noticing.”

“Right past the clones?” hissed Christopher. “I’m not convinced those snare-lines are *that* distracting.”

“You’re right,” said Reetch reluctantly. “What we need is some sort of spectacular diversion.”

“It is time,” said Hinzelvud. “Scarlett, open the trapdoor!”

Scarlett pressed a big red button, turned a wheel marked with black and yellow tape, then pulled a lever beside which were written the words, ‘DANGER – DO NOT PULL’.

Pistons began pumping. Cogs and gears ground against each

other. Mechanised bolts and bars slid away. In no time at all, there was nothing left to hold the trapdoor shut.

The hinges creaked as the door was pushed ajar.

Wriggling shapes could be glimpsed beyond.

The clones braced themselves, ready from the monstrous onslaught.

“Heads down, boys!” bellowed the Colonel, storming into the room with Ariadne and Arthur close behind. Their plasma rifle and elephant guns loosed a volley that sent the clones tumbling to the floor.

The lobster-mould hovered in the air, looking from the fallen bodies to the open trapdoor and finally to the humans.

“Oh dear,” it said. “You did not want to do that.”

And the trapdoor disgorged its horrors.

Chapter 17

Monsters of every shape and size surged through the open trapdoor. They hopped around, or flew through the air, or just slithered out over the floor. There were big ones and small ones, green ones and blue; some covered in feathers, some smothered in goo. There were insects and plants, and things in-between, invisible creatures that could not be seen. There were bubbles with teeth and rainbows with claws, and water that walked with ravenous jaws. They spilled through the house, filling each floor, these monsters that surged through the open trapdoor.

“As far as spectacular diversions go,” said Reetch, “that will do nicely.”

The three captives shuffled across the basement. The more aggressive monsters were being kept occupied by the Colonel’s plasma rifle. Ariadne and Arthur fired their elephant guns as quickly as they could reload them. Many of the larger creatures were eating the smaller ones, and many of the smaller creatures were eating the larger ones. Even this did little to slow the swarm, as more and more monsters poured up from below.

“That wasn’t a monster,” said Armitage as a hulking shape blundered past. “That was a bear! What was Granddaddy Shanks thinking?”

They reached the inquisitor’s heaped possessions, and his swords were put to use cutting them free of their bonds. Reetch swept his coat back onto his shoulders and took stock of the situation. Hinzelvud and the lobster-mould were trapped in a

corner, fighting off an endless tide of beasts. Scarlett was on the other side of the basement, trying to slip away unnoticed.

"Return to your family, boys," said Reetch. "The Contessa and I have unfinished business."

He turned to find that Armitage and Christopher had already run off to join the others, and so had missed his dramatic reclaiming of power.

Reetch sighed a lonely sigh and set off after Scarlett. He cut a path through blobs and buboes, slime spraying around at every stroke of his blade. Scarlett's path led him down one of the secret passages and up into the lounge.

"I am now doubly glad I wasted no time searching the fireplace," said Reetch, noting that the secret passage had emerged somewhere else entirely. Scarlett stood in the middle of the room, flourishing the mantelpiece swords.

"You've had this coming all weekend," she said, and advanced upon the inquisitor with murderous intent.

Ariadne emptied the last of her ammunition into an avalanche of eyes.

"Any spare lead, dear?" she called to her husband.

"Afraid not, my love. Looks like we're back at the 'beating them with sticks' stage."

"And I'm low on carrier fluid," said the Colonel. "Better make these last shots count. Get to the kitchen, I'll hold the line!"

The Shanks family ran for the stairs as the Colonel surveyed the horrible horde. She picked out a big, angry, red thing and put a ball of flame in the middle of its face. The monster crashed to the floor, crushing the creatures in front of it and clogging the path of those behind.

The Colonel wasted no time on witty one-liners. She followed her friends through the kitchen and into a hall being ripped to pieces. Appendages burst through the floor and walls; hairy feelers and grasping fronds and quivering antennae. Any surface still intact disappeared beneath a crust of creepy crawlies. Scarlett and Reetch wove through the confusion in a dancing clash of blades. Suits of armour and stuffed animals provided bodies for fleshless forms, wading into the riot with sword and mace and tooth and claw.

“Somewhat blocks the way to the front door,” said the Colonel. “Where’s the nearest fire exit?”

“I don’t know,” said Arthur. “I stopped listening when Mr McGregor started on about first aid kits.”

“Yes, I drifted off then also,” said Ariadne. “It hardly seemed as though they’d be needed.”

“Oh! I’ve got an idea,” said Christopher. He grabbed hold of Armitage and dragged him into the chaos.

“Where are they going now?” said Arthur.

“I don’t know, but we’d best be after them,” said Ariadne.

“I’ll catch you up,” the Colonel called after them. “There’s something I need to get first.”

Christopher led the way over a multitude of squirming obstacles, up to the dining room mantelpiece and its horrific collection of ornaments.

“Chekov’s hand of glory!” said Christopher, waving the object at Armitage in case he had forgotten it. “This will send all the monsters to sleep. Just hold them all back while I light it up.”

Armitage nodded, picked up a chair, and smashed it into a lunging crustacean.

Christopher propped up the hand and emptied his pocket of matches. The first snapped as he tried to strike it. The second

spluttered for a moment then died. The third caught light, the flame held, and Christopher moved the match over the wicks. Black smoke began rising from the fingertips, filling the air with nauseous smog.

“It’s working,” said Christopher. “It’s wor-oow!”

Hot wax dripped against Christopher’s skin. He dropped the hand of glory and waved his own hand in the air to cool the pain. The cadaverous candle landed on a cushion that had fallen from Armitage’s chair. Christopher yelped as the cushion caught fire, then moved to stamp out the flames. He yelped again as this burnt his feet and kicked the cushion in spiteful revenge. It flew straight into a curtain, which in turn carried the fire right up the walls.

Armitage swatted away a fly bigger than his head, then turned to watch the widening blaze.

“You know, I was going to ask what would stop the hand of glory sending *us* to sleep,” said the Hair. “But this is better. This is much, much better.”

Ariadne and Arthur wrestled their way into the room.

“This isn’t what it looks like!” said Christopher.

“Yes, yes it is,” sighed both his parents together.

“At least the fire is repelling the monsters,” said Arthur. All around the room, creatures were reeling from the flames and skittering off into the shadows.

“Then fresh exits present themselves,” said Ariadne. She picked up Christopher, held him tight to her chest, and leapt through the window. Time seemed to slow as the glass shattered, a cloud of tinkling crystal falling around her. It was only upon hitting the grass outside that she remembered they were on the ground floor.

"That was somewhat less dramatic than I had hoped," she said, as Arthur carried Armitage safely over the glass behind her.

High above, Scarlett and Reetch smashed through a top floor window. They remained locked in combat as they bounced over rooftops, tore through a tree, and landed in the remains of the outdoor privy.

"You see, I was hoping for something a little more like that," said Ariadne.

"They went from the basement to the top floor," said the Hair. "That must have been quite a spectacular fight to see."

"Pffst, whatever," said Armitage. "I fell all the way from the highest roof."

Scarlett pulled herself out of the cesspit and held her sword to the inquisitor's throat.

"I've done it," she said. "I have bested Inquisitor Reverend Reetch, Grand Master of the Church of Five Chalices. Now, nothing can stop the Iron Fist!"

She began a maniacal laugh, but was cut short as the Colonel smacked her over the head with a large, blunt object.

"Oh, you managed to save the elephant foot umbrella stand," said Arthur, as Scarlett dropped ploppingly back into the toilet. "That's nice, it would have been a shame to lose it."

Reetch was given the task of carrying the unconscious Scarlett, seeing as they were both equally covered in poo. Then they all retreated from the burning building as tentacles thrashed through the windows, the walls collapsed in flames, and the house began to explode for no particular reason.

Chapter 18

Fire engines stormed up the hill, their wailing sirens waking the neighbours to let them know everything would be all right. Fearless Fran the Firefighter led her team against the blaze. They set to work with ladders and hoses, crying ‘Yarr’, ‘Arr’, and ‘Grr’ to celebrate job satisfaction.

Chief Constable Donnervan stood at a safe distance taking statements from the survivors. She noticed the arrival of a very expensive car, but did not dignify it with attention.

“What’s going on here?” said Mr McGregor, stepping out of the vehicle.

“Exactly what it looks like,” said Chief Constable Donnervan. “Your haunted house has held host to a string of unlikely events that have caused at least one death, released a multitude of monsters, and sparked an inferno that will no doubt destroy all the evidence. Why? What did you think was going on here?”

“I do not care for your tone,” said Mr McGregor. “I hope you are not implying I planned all this as some sort of insurance fraud. How was I to know that letting the Shanks family and their friends stay here would cause such devastation?”

The chief constable did that thing people sometimes do with their eyebrows.

“Is that a packet of marshmallows I can see in your suit pocket?” she said.

“I brought enough for everyone,” said Mr McGregor, proffering his briefcase as proof.

"I still don't understand why Contessa Scarlett would join the Iron Fist," said Reetch.

"I can answer that," said Armitage. "I figured most of it out in the basement, but listening to everyone's statements helped fill in a few important details. After we heard her and Hinzelvud discuss their plans from the secret passageway, Ms Bramblebottom said she had excused herself to go to the toilet. When we next met everyone, nobody had seen Ms Bramblebottom, but Scarlett was stood there drying her hands. People *had* seen Ms Bramblebottom, and Ms Bramblebottom *had* been to the toilet, but all the while Ms Bramblebottom had been disguised as Contessa Scarlett!"

Armitage stepped up to the handcuffed Scarlett, who was still somewhat dazed, and pulled off her face. Underneath the mask was none other than Bertha Bramblebottom, the haunted-housekeeper. Everyone made Ahhh! noises at this revelation, then Whaaa? noises as they tried to work out how that made any sense.

"You see, it was actually Ms Bramblebottom that won the fight in the lounge," said Armitage. "She hid Scarlett's body in the secret passage, disguised herself as the Contessa, then waited for Reetch to discover her! The Iron Fist wanted to replace Scarlett with Ms Bramblebottom so they could smuggle their kobold bomb into the World Peace Conference."

"But how did they manage to make such a realistic Contessa costume?" said Donnervan.

"That's a Grey Body Suit," said Reetch. "Used by aliens to infiltrate humanity. I tried to warn people, but nobody listened. The Iron Fist are famed for using inhuman allies. Oh, wait a second, of course! The confusing case of the criminal cabal at the carnival on Caulderdale common! I *had* seen Bertha's face at a freak show; she was Irene the Impressionist, woman with a

thousand voices. That's how she was able to mimic Scarlett so well."

"Hang on," said Christopher. "Go back to the alien bit. I mean, I accept that there must be life on other planets, I'm not some sort of War of the Worlds denier, but does this mean they really do walk among us?"

"There'll be plenty of time to worry about that when you're older," said Ariadne. "Right now, we need to concentrate on finding the real Scarlett."

"Oh dear," said Arthur. "I knew I had tasted sausages like that before. Remember back in our anthropologist days, when we spent a month with the Cumberland Cannibal Cult?"

Everyone took a moment to consider this, before the Colonel broke the awkward silence.

"What about Professor Hinzelvud? He's still in there."

"I doubt anyone's getting out of there alive," said Reetch.

"We did," said the Hair.

"Now, technically," said Mr McGregor, "everyone should stay on these grounds until Sunday afternoon to fulfil the conditions of the will. However, you have all outlasted the house itself, so I'm willing to bend the rules a little. Gather around, and I shall begin handing out Henry's inheritance."

Everyone cried huzzar and things of that nature, while Mr McGregor began reading out Henry's final wishes.

"To Ariadne and Arthur, I unwillingly leave endless reams of inheritance paperwork. I'm very sorry. On the plus side, you also get my prizewinning mead bees. Based on no actual evidence, I have convinced myself that florists must surely love bees."

"Oh, bless," said Ariadne. "I'm sure we'll find a use for them."

"To the Colonel," said Mr McGregor, "you know where it is. Take it, it's yours."

“Message received loud and clear,” said the Colonel, ripping off a smart salute.

“To Christopher and Armitage,” Mr McGregor continued, “I leave this treasure map, which will lead you to my secret stash of homemade mead. I won’t be making it like that anymore, so see that it lasts.”

“Brilliant,” said Christopher. “Another adventure!”

“Yaaaaay,” said the Hair, with poorly feigned enthusiasm.

“To Reetch, I leave the Legendary Moonstone Eagle. They say it bestows those who hold it with intelligence, charm, charisma, and riches; so use it generously.”

“There are so many ways in which that is a passive-aggressive insult,” said Reetch.

“Yes, we get it, the two of you had bad history,” snapped Arthur. “Give it a rest already.”

“At least now you can be certain he’s dead,” said the Colonel.

“That’s easy for you to say,” replied Reetch. “This is the fifth time I’ve been to one of Henry’s haunted house inheritance weekends. Though, it seems this one shall indeed be the last.”

“That’s the lot,” said Mr McGregor. “Now, let’s find part of the fire not yet extinguished and roast these marshmallows-”

“Wait!” said Ms Bramblebottom. “What about me? I spent the weekend in your haunted house, so I’m owed part of Henry’s inheritance too! I demand to get what’s coming to me!”

A rocket ship fell from the sky and ploughed through the haunted-housekeeper. A spray of mud and gristle smothered the onlooking crowd as the spacecraft skidded to a halt. A cow climbed out of the cockpit, hopped over the mess, and walked off into the night.

“*Bovine 1*,” said Chief Constable Donnervan, reading the letters printed on the side of the rocket. She shook her head in

disbelief. “Now you mention it, marshmallows sound like a marvellous idea.”

So everyone set off to roast their treats over the smouldering remains of Mr McGregor’s haunted house.

It was exactly the way Henry Shanks would have wanted to be remembered.

Epilogue

Farmer Giles peered through his telescope at the green flashes of gas erupting from the red light in the night.

“That *must* be methane,” he muttered, “and that can only mean—”

His thoughts were interrupted as Daisy’s head thrust through the window, a bundle of photographs held in her mouth.

“Daisy, my dear!” cheered Farmer Giles. “Welcome home! Let me see what wonders you’ve witnessed!”

The farmer thumbed through pictures of Daisy playing golf, and Daisy planting flags, and Daisy pretending to hold up the world. He knew if he showed these to anyone, people would claim they were all faked; but that always happened with lunar photographs so he did not mind at all.

“What adventures you must have had, Daisy. Come in out of the cold and I’ll cook you up some nice warm grass. I was just drawing up plans for the *Bovine 2*. How would you like to journey to Mars?”