

Prologue - 2013

"I need to make a quick stop here," said Chris and halted outside a dilapidated terraced house, in front of the covered doorway that smelt like piss. He knocked loudly, the sound of his fist on the door echoing away inside the building.

"Jesus Christ," Tom hissed, glancing nervously over his shoulder at the dark street. He'd already objected to his friend's shortcut through this questionable neighbourhood. There had never been any mention of stopping. "What on Earth can you possibly need to stop here for?"

"This is Dave's house," Chris replied, knocking again on the door.

"You've dragged me all the way here at two in the morning to buy *drugs*?" Tom asked, incredulously.

"No, actually," said Chris. "I'm going to ask him for a job. Dave said that he was going away tomorrow so there's going to be an opening."

Tom gave out a quick bark of laughter that was quickly strangled when he saw the gleam in his friend's eyes. "You're serious? You can't just go up to a drug dealer and ask if they've got a position opening up. That's... that's just not how things work."

"Sure it is. It's not like they can advertise on TotalJobs, is it?"

"Well they're not answering anyway, let's go," said Tom. "Besides, we just passed a bunch of guys that looked like police."

"We did?" Christ cast a look back the way they'd walked, although it was a futile effort due since most of the streetlights were out.

"Those guys in suits. They must have been cops, what else would they be doing round here?"

"Buying drugs, probably," said Chris, hammering away once more on the door.

His persistence was at last rewarded and the door swung inwards with an unhealthy sounding groan. Tom recognised his friend's dealer, Dave. He was a pale, rodent like man with long unkempt hair and a matted beard. He peered out, silhouetted by a feeble bulb in the hallway behind him, clutching a black dressing gown shut.

"What are you two doing here?" Dave asked, his voice rasping and strained.

"Sorry, Dave, I know it's late and everything," Chris said, brushing past the smaller man and stepping into the house. "But I really needed to talk to you before you went."

"It's not a good time," Dave croaked.

"It won't take a minute," said Chris.

"You don't understand," said Dave. As he spoke he dropped down onto all fours, his body jerking involuntarily.

Tom started forwards to help but stopped himself in his tracks. As Dave writhed around a viscous blue liquid oozed from the seams of his robe, seeping onto the floor where it formed a strange whirling pattern.

From all fours, Dave looked up, his head trembling and his eyes red and bulging. "You don't understand," he repeated. With that the man exploded, a shower of gore flying outward and plastering the corridor around him. Crouched in the epicentre of the explosion, amongst the shreds of Dave's robe and, Tom noted, shreds of Dave, was a quivering creature of pale muscle with long limbs ending in vicious looking claws. Small red eyes gleamed above a row of jagged teeth.

Chris took a single, stumbling step backwards, wiping the blood spatter from his eyes.

"I told you it was a bad time," the creature chuckled to itself in a rumbling voice before it took a swipe at the blinking figure in front of it, long claws cutting easily through the bones of Chris' ribcage and spilling the contents out onto the tiled floor.

On the doorstep, Tom stood paralysed with shock as his friend crumpled lifeless to the ground, his body landing in the blue liquid with a sickening thud.

Tom heard people shouting behind him, but the noise barely registered. A second later he was roughly shoved aside as two men in suits rushed past him, each with a pistol held out in front of them.

"Get back, beast!" One of the men cried, the ear splitting crack of his pistol following.

A strong hand grabbed Tom's shoulder and he felt himself being spun around. He found himself looking down the barrel of a gun and behind that a moustachioed face. "I think this one's a civilian, sir," said the face behind the gun.

The moustachioed face was replaced with another. This face was older, calmer. "Put him in the back of the car, I'll deal with him when this is over."

Unresisting, Tom felt himself propelled away from the house. As he went he glanced back over his shoulder and soon wished he hadn't. The creature, whatever it was, was gleefully pulling the innards from the limp figure of one of the suited men. As they disappeared from view there

was a brief, staccato burst of gunfire and a bestial snarl. Tom allowed himself to be guided gently into a waiting car.

Shortly afterwards the older of the suits slid into the passenger seat next to him. He regarded Tom silently.

“What- what was that *thing*?” Tom finally managed.

“Son,” the suit said, easing himself back into the car’s upholstery. “Believe me when I tell you that you’ll live a much happier life if I don’t answer that question.”

“My friend...” Tom began, but trailed off, reading the answer already in the other man’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “There was nothing we could do.”

The man in the suit left a few moments of silence for Tom to process this before he cleared his throat and carried on. “Officially, what went down here was a turf war between rival drug gangs. It will be best for everyone if you pretend that you were never here. I’ll give you the number for a therapist. One of our people. You can talk to them about anything. But other than that you can *never* talk of this night again. To anyone. Do you understand?”

The suit squinted in the gloom of the backseats, trying to read the expression on Tom’s face. The younger man was staring off into space. “Do you understand?” The suit repeated.

Tom couldn’t help thinking back to the image of the creature pulling one of the suits apart. “Actually,” Tom said, speaking slowly as though weighing the words carefully in his mouth. “I wonder if you might have a position opening up.”

Chapter 1, Unit 13 - 2016

It was that nice time of the afternoon when, by collective agreement, very little tended to get done in the office. It was too early for anyone to justify leaving altogether but realistically there was no point in picking up a new task once the current one was done.

All along the banks of desk the workers still hammered away at keyboards but the languid calm of the late afternoon was undeniably beginning to settle over them like a snug duvet. From the tea point at the far end of the office the sound of laughter floated gently on the breeze of the struggling air conditioning unit.

Tom scanned idly over the ticket that had been assigned to him. The case file was little more than a collection of a few tweets that had been collated together (as it turned out, eldritch cultists could be surprisingly prolific tweeters). Some frothy mouthed, wide eyed zealot calling

himself 'The Arm of Zanthir' had been busy on social media trying to drum up support for whatever two bit cult they belonged to.

Blood sacrifices featured prominently. Death to all mankind was mentioned once or twice. The tweets contained all the usual sort of things that those types went in for, but Tom couldn't see any evidence that the man had actual knowledge of the supernatural. Mr. Zanthir would appear to be the more everyday, mundane type of cultist then and not one to worry about. Not one for Tom specifically to worry about, at any rate. He scrolled to the bottom of the screen and as a resolution selected "Forward to local police".

Tom leant back in his desk chair, congratulating himself on a job well done and justified to himself that there wasn't enough time to pick up another ticket before 5:30 would roll around, although he might be able to squeeze in one final coffee for the day. He was about to head off in the direction of the caffeine when his attention was drawn to a rectangular message box that appeared in one corner of his screen.

M. Taylor: Can you head over to my office please?

Tom sat for a few moments silently regarding the rectangle until it got bored and disappeared of its own accord. Little good ever started with a visit to Taylor's office. While he took pains to stay on his boss' good side, and rarely gave her cause to complain about his work, this didn't spare him from having time consuming and unsavoury tasks dropped on him from Taylor's great height on a semi-regular basis.

Slowly, in a futile attempt to draw out what might be his last moments of freedom for the afternoon, Tom pushed his chair out from his desk and stood up. He made his downcast way though the identical banks of silent workers, each keeping mankind safe from supernatural evils in their own small ways, or at least giving the appearance of doing so until they could leave.

The predominant colour of the office was light grey. Or at least it was for this floor. Patches of darker grey had been placed about here and there in an attempt to spruce things up a bit but it hadn't really worked.

At the very end of the office overlooking it all was a floor to ceiling glass wall that partitioned off Taylor's private domain. Nondescript white shapes were stencilled on from knee to shoulder height to provide privacy, at least in one direction.

As Tom opened the door, Taylor looked up from her monitor as though surprised to see the young agent, despite the fact she had just summoned him there and that he would have been visible through the stencilled wall for most of his approach down the office. She was a woman who was on the larger side, hair cut short in a sensible fashion, dressed down somewhat for a person of her relative seniority. A woman who could easily blend into a crowd, which was something she displayed an uncanny knack for when she wished to eavesdrop on her subordinates.

Taylor gestured for Tom to come in and as he turned to shut the door he was startled to discover that the two of them weren't alone in the office. A man leant against the wall beside the door, Tom must have walked right past him without noticing his presence. The man was in his mid forties. His clothing, suit and tie, were fairly standard office attire not dissimilar to Tom's but they had a ruffled look to them and his shoes were worn and scuffed. It all came together in a way that somehow suggested the office was not his natural environment. The man stood silently, regarding Tom with dark brown eyes and he felt himself slowly wilt under their gaze.

"Have a seat," Taylor said. Tom eyed the other man briefly in case the comment was directed at him. The stranger only continued silently regarding Tom, so he lowered himself into the chair facing Taylor. Before his buttocks had even had a chance to touch the surface Taylor continued. "We've had a report of a ghost," she said.

"What's this got to do with me?" Tom blurted out in a panic. He hadn't missed a tweet somewhere had he? Ghosts weren't known to tweet, generally speaking.

"Well, Amy's currently on maternity leave," Taylor said.

Machinery began to whirl inside Tom's head, but still he couldn't see how he slotted into this. She was referring to Amy Malton, the department's exorcist. The baby had finally arrived a couple of weeks ago, Tom dimly remembered signing the card. It had a hippo on it.

"Yes," Tom ventured noncommittally.

"And I saw on your file that you took basic field training when you joined the Unit."

Shit, Tom thought, forcing a smile even as sweat began to prickle beneath his collar. He had taken basic field training. When he first joined Unit 13 applying for fieldwork had seemed like a good way to avoid becoming a boring office drone. But that was before he had his cosy semi detached house to go back to. Before he had Megan there waiting for him to come home. And it was before he'd seen other agents come back from field assignments and seen the glassy look in their eyes. Field work had seemed a lot less appealing after that.

"And I see that you have a theoretical background in hauntings," Taylor continued, a glint in her eye.

Tom's smile remained fixed on his face as internally he tried to match that statement up to reality.

Shit, he thought again. One module he took at uni on ghost stories and he had somehow twisted that into something relevant when he applied for the job. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Despite its best efforts to slip away and hide, Tom kept the smile in place as he tried to think of reasons he shouldn't do this field assignment. There were several solid choices, the forerunner being 'I'd be totally incompetent at field work', but while that was true it wasn't quite what he wanted to pitch to his manager.

"My training's only basic and it's a little out of date now," said Tom, attempting to strike a fine balance between the truth, self-preservation and eventual career advancement.

"Yes, well, you'll be in good hands," Taylor said pleasantly, with the sing song quality that Tom had noticed she often had in her voice when she was happy, such as when explaining why overtime will be required from everyone this week or, as it turned out, when sending agents to their near certain and untimely deaths. "Agent Neema here is highly experienced in the field," she beamed at the man who still leant silently against the wall. Tom mumbled a hello towards him but the only response was continued silence and the stony stare.

"He'll be going with you," Taylor continued. "So just follow his lead and you'll be fine.

"The sighting was at a hotel call Turnball Mansions. Boutique-y affair with only ten rooms or so but it's beginning to get a bit of a reputation recently for being haunted. Mostly tourist stuff, you know, the usual, but there's enough there now that we need to look into it. Due diligence and all that. A guest made a report last night so I thought, strike while the iron is hot.

"The hotel's been cleared out for now, under the pretence of a gas leak, but the owner's on hand if you need anything."

Neema finally peeled himself from his perch on the wall. It wasn't clear to Tom if Taylor had given him some cue to get going or if the man had just become impatient. "Let's head over there," he said in a weary, gravelly voice. "I can fill him in on the way."

"Right you are," Taylor replied, her voice again containing a musical, warbling quality. "Good luck!"

Turnball Mansions

Neema leant back in the driver's seat and they cruised along through Westminster in an apparently effortless manner. There were mere inches between the black sedan and the taxi in front, likewise between the cyclists on either side of the vehicle. The numerous scratches and scuff marks that he'd seen as he got in told Tom that the journey wasn't quite as safe as his companion's laid back attitude would suggest.

"Let's listen to this witness statement," Neema said. He stretched over towards the central dashboard and for a few terrifying instants punched at the buttons on the console, neglecting the road entirely. Tom's knuckles tightened on the padded edges of his seat.

The recorded voice of the hotelier issued forth from the speakers in the car doors. "I woke in the middle of the night, everything was pretty dark. I had the vague feeling I was being watched, the hairs on the back of my neck were tingling. I sat up in bed and I saw a dark, ghostly figure at the foot of my bed. Pretty terrifying as I knew I'd bolted the door before I went to bed and I yelled out, and then suddenly an otherworldly fog filled the room. There was a rattling of chains and when the fog had dispersed I was alone in the room again."

"You're our ghost expert," Neema looked pointedly at the younger man. "What do you make of that then?"

"Well," Tom shuffled uncomfortably. He dredged the murky depths of his memory hoping to dislodge something from basic training. "A dark figure, so most likely a phantom of some kind. Ethereal fog and chains, very common in ghost stories but not so much in confirmed paranormal events."

Neema drove on in silence. He seemed to be waiting for more and Tom desperately tried to think of something insightful. "Not much to go on really, is it?" This was the best Tom could eventually manage and it was met only by a further interval of silence. "Look," said Tom. "I don't really have much background studying ghosts, just basic field training. My C.V. might have been padded somewhat when I applied to the Unit."

Spasms wracked Neema's body and at first Tom thought the man was choking before he realised it was silent laughter. "Well don't worry, your secret's safe with me. Taylor's sharper than she lets on, I expect she's already worked that one out anyway. This is a pretty soft assignment, even for a first mission."

"It is?"

"Sure," Neema guided the car between two converging busses. "Ghost cases. There's never a ghost, right?"

"Um, right?" Said Tom.

"I mean once in a blue moon. But not really, not in London. This woman on maternity leave that you're filling in for, what was she called again?"

"Amy," Tom replied.

"Right. This Amy. Rough and tumble type is she? Looks like she spends a lot of time in the field doing battle with the forces of darkness?"

Amy didn't quite fit the mould, Tom had to admit. Even before swelling up in her pregnancy she'd been a well manicured, well coiffed, well perfumed presence around the office. She sent frequent department update emails, was on at least one research committee, organised large

swathes of the in house training, was present in all the meetings whether she was needed or not, and was considerably vocal in most of them. It can't have left much time to be out in the field chanting latin about the place. "Maybe not," Tom conceded.

"No, because exorcism is basically a do nothing job in the city. Take reports, log uncorroborated sightings on a map somewhere. Occasionally go out in the field, which will actually be a plush hotel or something rather than an actual field, and take photos. And in the unlikely event you ever did find something, you just use the app."

"The app?" Tom asked.

"Yeah, the app on your phone," Neema glanced over and upon seeing the blank expression on Tom's face he laughed to himself again. "They did tell you about the app, right?"

"Not as such."

Neema rolled his eyes. "All those latin chants you learnt in basic are in an app now. So you don't even need to remember them, just let the phone speak them out. Put a requisition request in when you get back to the office. Not that you'll ever need it, but might as well have it on you just in case."

With that, Neema leant over to the console again and pumping music filled the car, which seemed to indicate that the conversation was over.

Neema was right, of course, it was common knowledge in Unit 13 that ghosts were rare in the modern age. Humans were common and so were the dangers that they brought upon themselves. Cultists must have made up 75% of the Unit's workload. Bored, misguided and occasionally just plain evil people with too much time or too much of the wrong sort of knowledge. The occasional wizard who had the intellect to cast actual spells but who had managed to avoid frying the circuits of their brain entirely before appearing on Unit 13's radar. Spell casting tended to lead to madness which led to unsubtle behaviour. Even with the Unit's severe budgetary restrictions, casting fireballs up and down Clapham High Street tended not to go unnoticed. The main problem they caused the Unit was that the media team had to keep thinking up new explanations for the public.

Then there were the various beasts which were termed "supernatural" by the agency but in reality a goblin isn't much different from a rare species of primate except for having a little more capacity for channeling magic.

And then there were the daemons of the lesser and greater varieties, but mostly they only cropped up as the result of the aforementioned bored cultists and wizards so maybe they should fall under the human-caused category anyway.

But ghosts? They used to be a lot more common, so the accepted wisdom went. Although exactly why that was the case remained something of an enigma. There was just something about modern living that didn't agree with them. One theory was that the electromagnetic waves, beamed out by radio and t.v. transmitters and leaking steadily from power lines, drained their powers or interfered with them somehow. At any rate, the more modernised an area became the less likely hauntings were. The general rule of thumb was that if you could get fibre broadband then the chance of finding an actual ghost in your house was effectively nill. You needed to get somewhere really remote like the middle of Exmoor or the Scottish Highlands to stand a decent chance. Despite the number of grisly and untimely deaths in London, both modern and historic, the city averaged less than one verified apparition per year within the boundaries of the M25.

Neema drove on without speaking for another couple of minutes before he pulled abruptly over onto the double yellows in front of a hotel. It was a four storey Georgian building, with steps leading up from pavement level and over the small chasm that dropped down to the basement level. An assortment of flowering plants brightened the entryway and the sunshade was stencilled in black lettering with the words "Turnball Mansions".

Still without a word, Neema hopped out of the car and Tom scrambled to follow him. Neema pointed the car's keyfob over his shoulder as he went and clicked a button with this thumb. The sedan's indicator lights flashed in response, the first definitive proof Tom had seen that the lights worked.

A tired looking man in a dazzling white shirt, presumably the hotel owner, stood waiting for them at the top of the steps, clutching his hands before him nervously.

He began a fawning greeting but Neema cut the man off mid sentence. "Room six is it?" He asked.

The hotelier nodded and pointed towards the staircase visible through the glass of the front door. "That's right," he said. "Just up there."

"You'd better clear off then," Neema dismissed him, jerking his head towards the street. "Gas leaks and all that you can't be too careful. We'll take a look around."

The man nodded a quick agreement, Neema had already strode off before any reply could be issued. Tom squeezed through the narrow doorway and chased after his superior as he ascended the stairs two at a time.

When Tom had caught up with him on the landing, Neema had already unlocked the room and stepped inside. Tom nipped in after him. Despite Neema's words in the car, Tom was still on the lookout for a shadowy black figure and felt safer sticking by the more experienced agent and his exorcism app..

Neema made a slow circuit of the room, glancing up and down the walls and making the occasional “hm” noise or muttering phrases like “yes, that’s it.” to himself. When he’d completed his perambulation of the room and returned to the doorway he looked at his younger colleague expectantly. “Worked it out yet?” He asked.

Tom swallowed and tried to decide whether or not Neema was joking. The room looked pretty normal and nondescript to him. It was a bit more upmarket than the sort of hotel room he was used to himself but nothing he’d seen seemed to suggest the paranormal.

The room did contain a large, four poster bed and a log burning fireplace, Tom reasoned that with the right mindset these might be construed to give the room a bit of a gothic feel. “Just an overactive imagination?” He ventured uncertainly.

This earned him another one of Neema’s silent laughs and Tom felt his face reddening in response. Neema reached out a suited arm and pointed down to a smudge of something on the carpet, near his feet. “How about now?” He asked.

Slowly, Tom lowered himself down onto his haunches to inspect the section of carpet in question. “It’s ash,” he said eventually.

“Good.”

“From the fireplace?” Tom glanced over to the cold fireplace in question, a good couple of strides away.

“Yes. So you’re beginning to see?” Neema asked.

Tom raised himself unsteadily to a standing position and looked from the ash to the fireplace once or twice, hoping to divine something meaningful from the two. “Well...” he said, but trailed off into silence.

Neema’s eyes rolled in their sockets. “Come on then, rookie, I’ll show you,” the agent said. He brushed past Tom and led the way back out into the opulent hallway and to the doorway of the adjoining room. A quick rattle of the handle signified that the door was locked. Neema glanced quickly down the corridor to make sure the two agents were alone and slipped a thin metal lockpick from his inside jacket pocket. He gyrated the device around inside the lock and with a few practiced twirls of his finger the lock yielded and the door was open.

Tom raised his eyebrows, impressed, but Neema didn’t tarry at the threshold for any praise. “Quickly,” he muttered and grabbing Tom by the lapel pulled him inside and shut the door.

The room inside was similar in size and decor to the first, but looked much more lived in. Clothes and books were scattered about the place, a large T.V. was mounted on one of the walls, where the first room had had a gilt edged mirror. “The owner’s room, I would assume,”

Neema said. He crossed over the carpet, threadbare compared to the first room and stopped in front of the unlit fireplace.

"This fireplace backs onto the one in the other room," Neema said, pointing at it but looking at Tom.

"Yes," Tom agreed.

"Which means..." Neema prompted.

"They share a chimney stack?" Tom said. Neema made a disgusted expression and turned back to the fireplace.

Neema spent some time inspecting the area around the fireplace, occasionally tapping the wall here or there like a builder looking for studs. Tom hovered over his shoulder but the man's motives remained a mystery to him.

Eventually Neema found what he was looking for and with a gleeful "A ha" he got his fingers into a small groove in the plasterwork of the wall and pulled. A section of wall next to the fireplace, a couple of inches across and about two foot in height, pulled away to reveal a hollow cavity behind it. Peering past his superior, Tom could see a heavy chain, hung in a loop that stretched up towards the ceiling.

"Here we go," said Neema and grabbing the chain he began pulling it downwards, feeding it through his hands. The chain span and Tom jumped as something else sprang into motion next to him. Slowly at first, but gathering speed, the fireplace began to rotate around, the whole thing apparently on some sort of turntable. After about five seconds of vigorous work by Neema, the fireplace had rotated about 90 degrees, revealing a hole in the wall and beyond that entry into the adjoining guest room.

Tom bent at the waist and gingerly inserted his head through the new opening. He gave a low whistle to signify how impressed he was, both at the ingenuity of the fireplace mechanism and his colleague's Holmes-like deductive abilities.

"Fairly obvious what went on here," Neema elucidated as Tom remerged fully into the owner's bedroom. "The owner has this revolving fireplace installed during the last set of renovations. When the guest next door is asleep he opens it up, steps through to pay his guest a little visit.

"Maybe he lightens their wallet. Maybe he's up to something more sophisticated, like identity theft. Maybe it's just how he gets his jollies. Anyway, in he goes.

"In this case, our Mr. Downey wakes up and finds the owner partway through whatever it is he's doing, probably attired in something suitably dark and concealing in case of this eventuality. The ghostly fog will just be a simple magician's smoke bomb or the like, under the concealment

of which the owner bids a hasty retreat back to his own room. He's in a hurry now though, a bit flustered, and he yanks too hard on the chains to close up the fireplace, leading to the ghostly noise that Mr. Downey reported."

Neema finally took a deep breath and gave Tom a sharp nod. "Right, that's that done then. Let's away, I've got to get back to my real work."

Tom scampered after Neema as he marched out of the hotel.

"What do we do?" Tom called out to the disappearing agent. "Hand this over to the police?"

"That's for our superiors to decide," Neema said, arriving at his car parked outside the entrance and reaching for the handle. "You can write this report up, right rookie? I've got to be getting on."

"I guess I could-" Tom began.

"Great, thanks," Neema says, opening the car door and sliding inside. He gestured up the road. "Holborn station's that way."

And with that Neema slammed the car door shut and raced away up the congested street.

Martha's Cottage

It was a clear morning, but the night's chill still lingered. The stiff breeze carried on it the mixed, bitter scents of the town but undercutting that was the brackish smell of the marshes beyond.

Martha was wrapped up against the cold in her old but serviceable duffle coat and cradled a large teacup in both hands. She sipped slowly as he observed her daily vigil of watching the sun rise over Glastonbury tor, savouring the taste of the brandy she'd fortified the drink with.

The peculiar cone of the hill jutted up from the surrounding levels and the top third was visible over the roofs of the houses opposite Martha's as a looming black shape. Sat on the top was the ruined shell of a medieval church, which just now the sun was striking and setting the empty windows ablaze. The tor was a place of power for those attuned to it. One of the most powerful places, in fact, for hundreds of miles in any direction. Most of those who were truly gifted would avoid the place instinctively. It was like standing next to a siren, wailing unceasingly and deafeningly loud. But for those who had trained for it, been raised alongside it, it became more like the sound of the sea; Constant, for sure, but with a rhythmic, peaceful aspect to it.

Martha took the final sip and then sputtered the liquid back into the cup in disgust. The last mouthful had been full of tea leaves. This wouldn't have been so surprising to Martha except that she'd made the cup using a bag. If the universe conjured tea leaves into your morning drink then it was probably trying to tell you something important.

She peered cautiously over the rim of the cup at the arrangement of tea leaves that clung to the bottom.

“Hmph,” she said, giving the cup a gentle swirl to see if she could induce destiny into something a bit more favourable.

“Well I didn’t expect that,” she muttered to herself. “Not after all these years. Why now?” She looked up towards the tor as she asked this last question, almost as though expecting the hill might reply. “Oh well, I suppose I’d better go and find her.”

She reached out for the knobbly, brown walking stick next to her chair and got hold of it on the second attempt. Leaning heavily on the stick, she managed to pull herself up from the chair and shuffled slowly across the patio and inside, closing and locking the screen door behind her.

The little kitchen was barely used, a girl came with precooked meals once a day and Martha could still manage to make herself sandwiches, if the bread was pre sliced, and tea of course. Slowly, Martha went through the practiced motions of retrieving the dried cat food from the cupboard by the door and filling the small plastic dish that lived on the counter. She looked around for the black tomcat but there was no sign of him. He must have slipped out when the door was open and gone to hunt for his own breakfast in the rapidly rewilding grassland at the end of Martha’s garden. “Ungrateful little bugger,” Martha muttered and made her way to the front door.

Her rather voluminous handbag already contained all she needed for this trip, and indeed all that most people needed for most trips. But to be sure she emptied the plate of toffees from the table next to the door into the bag before she left. She stepped out of her home, an outwardly unremarkable ex-council bungalow which, like all the buildings on the street, was centred around a thick chimney of large grey stones. This feature, Martha insisted, meant that the abode was properly termed a ‘cottage’ rather than a bungalow. She walked slowly up the uneven paving of her garden path, turned in the direction of the tor, took one more step, turned again and went down the path again, this time on the other side of the single, thick wire that acted as a fence between her and her adjoining neighbour.

She rang the doorbell for a few seconds. After a brief wait in which nothing happened she rang again, holding the button down even longer. Brian was getting on a bit in years and not as quick as he was. Eventually the door opened and a kindly, octogenarian face peered out from underneath a flat cap.

“I’m going away for a bit,” Martha said, she rummaged deep within her handbag and eventually found her spare key and held it out to him. “Look after the cat, won’t you Brian?”

He held the key in a wrinkled hand and inspected it in a puzzled manner.

"The cat!", Martha repeated, louder. "And cancel my food, would you?" The old boy nodded vigorously. "Yes, oh yes," he said enthusiastically.

Martha fixed him a look for a second or two, unsure what exactly he'd heard, if anything. With a shrug she turned away. The moggy could feed himself if he really needed to.

The morning was crisp and the shadows were still thick and long as she made her way along the familiar streets. It was still early, but already she could hear the sound of the neighbours at the end of the road starting up their daily, running argument. Gradually the ex-council builds with cars parked on the lawns and the identical lines semi detached houses gave way to rows of tea rooms and shops as he neared the town centre. Interspersed with the more common and garden corner shops and express supermarkets were those more unique to Glastonbury. Crystals and charms lined the front windows, sparkling in the morning sun. Carved wooden dragons and knights watched Martha's pass by with unblinking jewels for eyes. Colourful, flowing robes adorned shop mannequins. Martha tutted and shook her head as she went by.

Finally Martha reached the market square and took a few moments pause in the shadow of a large whitewashed hotel.

Outside the hotel half a dozen private hire coaches sat parked up in a line waiting for their parties to emerge. Martha approached the nearest coach and wrapped smartly on the door with the handle of her walking stick. The driver, a rotund man of later years, looked up from his phone and pressed a nearby button to open the door.

"When do we leave for London?" Martha implored, looking up from the curb.

The driver gave her a kindly smile and shook his jowls. "We're off to Bath today, love," he replied with a broad northern accent. "Are you with the right group?"

Without bothering to reply Martha turned and ambled a few feet further down pavement to the next coach and knocked again.

"When do we leave for London?" Martha asked, when the door had hissed open.

"Leaving at half past," the driver replied.

Martha squinted at the clock mounted high on the wall of the hotel. It proved somewhat beyond her power of perception but her intuition told her it was a little past eight now.

"I'll wait onboard," Martha declared and with great ceremony began the process of hoisting herself up the step onto the bus. It was a slow ascent, but she managed it before the befuddled driver had extracted himself from the cab to offer her his arm. She batted him away gently and sidled down the aisle to take a window seat near the back of the bus. Opening her handbag to

get out her knitting, she found instead the engraved hip flask of gin, took a generous swig and smacked her lips together with a satisfied cooing sound.

After a short wait an unsteady stream of retirees emerged from the hotel and made their way onto the waiting coach. A thin, wizened gentleman slid down onto the seat next to Martha.

“Good morning,” the man said, and Martha returned his salutation merrily.

“I don’t remember seeing you before, have you just joined us?” He enquired.

Martha lowered her knitting needles and regarded her companion with arched eyebrows. “Oh, no,” she said. “I’ve been here the whole trip. We had lunch together in Bath, remember?”

The man chewed her bottom lip for a few moments as he considered this. “That does ring a bell,” he conceded eventually. “Only I don’t remember going to Bath.”

Martha extended her hip flask towards the woman. “One for the road?” She asked.

With those words the coach shuddered into life and began its slow traversal of the ancient and mystic avenues and byways of Glastonbury before finally merging onto the mystic A361 in the direction of London.

“What are you going to get up to in London then,” the man asked, waving away the offer of the drink.

“I’m looking for a girl,” Martha replied.

“Aren’t we all?” The man said with a grin of his dentures, chuckling gently at his own joke.

“Aren’t we all?”

Unit 13

It was gone 9:30 by the time Tom made it into the office, hoping to sneak in largely unnoticed. But when he got to his floor there was a big huddle of people, maybe half the staff or just under, at a bank of desks near the tea point.

Tom racked his brains in case there was a meeting he’d forgotten about and decided the best course of action was to glide over to the back of the group and hope it looked like he’d been there the whole time, at least until he could discover the purpose of the gathering. As he shuffled into place behind his colleagues he caught a glimpse of Taylor in the middle of the scrum and made a deft sidestep to try and avoid her eye line. He was acutely aware that he hadn’t ironed his shirt that morning and although Neema would surely pull off his rumpled look Tom didn’t think he quite had his hard bitten reputation as a field agent yet.

Just as Tom arrived at the back of the crowd it began to peel away. As people drifted back towards their desks Tom spied a pram through one of the newly created gaps. The contents of the pram remained unconfirmed, there was a large plastic rain cover over the top, lightly misted with rain on the outside and condensation on the inside. Underneath the plastic was a heavy fabric layer including a hood, the purpose of which was unclear to Tom since the plastic cover was surely intended to keep the rain off. Underneath those two layers was a nest of thick, soft looking blankets.

Tom started to turn to join the back of the migration but he executed the maneuver badly and instead found himself at the very front of the diminishing group, and worse he was facing right at the doting mother, contact now would appear unavoidable

“Hi, Amy,” Tom said. He wasn’t sure the correct protocol for greeting a colleague dropping in on her maternity leave. A hug was too much, surely? He settled for a feeble wave that died halfway through its upwards trajectory and he shuffled forwards to peer into the pram. Picking just the angle he could see through the various layers and see a glimpse of pink flesh within.

“Lovely, isn’t he?” Amy beamed. It wasn’t the trim, energetic Amy that Tom knew before her pregnancy. It wasn’t even the round, beleaguered but still purposeful Amy that inhabited the office for the last couple of months before the new arrival. It wasn’t even something in between, but something else entirely. She was big, but not as big as he was used to seeing her. Her hair was still immaculate, as it always had been, and obvious time had been taken for her makeup. But the way she rocked the pram back and forth in an almost mechanical way seemed listless compared to her usual manner.

“He certainly is,” Tom agreed, craning his neck in an attempt to see the baby’s face amidst the blankets.

“Tom was stepping into your shoes last night,” Taylor said brightly.

“He was?” Amy asked, her eyes flitting up briefly from the contents of the pram but registering little interest that Tom could see.

“Yes,” Taylor said. “He went to a reported haunting last night. No ghost as it turned out though. Isn’t that always the way?”

Amy managed a smile but before she could reply there was a strained gurgling sound from inside the pram and a thrashing movement underneath the blankets.

“Well I should be going,” Amy said, kicking the bottom of the pram to remove the wheel brake. “Before this guy gets too fussy. Lovely seeing you all.” With that Amy and her pram were on the move towards the exit leaving an ominous smell behind. Tom quickly made off in the direction of his desk.

Chapter 2, Unit 13

"We've had another report of a ghost," Taylor said. "I know, two in one week. Like buses, hm?"

Tom forced a smile. "Is Neema joining me again?" He asked, noting the empty spot on the wall where Neema wasn't.

"Well, Neema's a busy man," Taylor said. "And besides all the exorcism is done on an app now, so there would really be no need for him," Taylor returned the agent's insincere smile back to him.

"You got my requisition request then?" Tom asked. He had been worried that he may have made a mistake when filling out the six page form and ordered some manner of exercise equipment instead. Worse, Taylor might have not seen it, or seen it and not deemed it necessary to approve it. But no, she had the look of smouldering fury behind her eyes of someone who had found themselves with no choice but to sign off a requisition request.

Taylor pulled a smartphone out of one of the drawers in her desk and placed it in front of Tom. "I did indeed get your request," she said. "This is preloaded with the uExorcise app. Have a read up on it before you head out there, but it's your basic fire and forget exorcism-in-a-box."

Tom reached out for the device with an eager hand.

"One little thing though," Taylor said just as his fingers close around the black plastic.

"Yes?"

"We don't own the app, we just license it. We get charged each time we use it. £50 per usage, would you believe? I should have moved into the private sector when I had the chance. So please make sure there actually *is* a ghost before you get too trigger happy with it." Taylor punctuated this statement with a merry, tinkling laugh, but beneath the merriment was an edge of sorrow and regret for what might have been. That was fifty quid that could have been speeding down the wires into *her* department every time a nervous rookie jumped at a squeaky floorboard, if she'd just played her cards a little differently.

"Neema reckons that there's never an actual ghost," Tom said, in a futile attempt to convince himself.

"Well Neema may be right," Taylor agreed. "But Agency Risk think that it's worth us checking out anyway."

If he'd been in a more relaxed mood and not about to go out to face potential denizens of the spirit world, Tom would have laughed. Agency Risk used to be a respected and powerful cabal

or seers employed by Unit 13 to try and predict the results of planned operations, and in particular to suss out if there was a credible threat before expensive resources like people were sent to investigate them. However, after one too many operations had ended in rather dramatic failure (and the ongoing healthcare co-payments to the field agents that these failures entailed), the seers at Agency Risk had begun to err on the side of caution. In short, they covered their mystical backsides and almost every case referred to them could be guaranteed to come back with the classification of at least 'substantial risk'.

"What's the job then?" Tom asked.

"Well," said Taylor. "Over in a chapel on Pewter Street, the vicar, one Reverend James, saw a ghost of some description and took a nasty fall as he made his escape. He told the paramedics who collected him what he saw, or thought he saw, and when they wrote their report up the system flagged it to us."

"So head over to the chapel, talk to the vicar and find out what he saw." Said Tom. "Is that about right?"

"That's about right," said Taylor. "If there's anything otherworldly down there give it a quick exorcism with the app, alright?"

Tom nodded.

"Of course if it's a more powerful class of spirit the app will be rather ineffectual," Taylor added brightly. "But that's very unlikely, isn't it?"

Why is she asking me? Tom wondered. "What should I do in that case?" He asked.

"Well get yourself out of any immediate danger, of course. Your safety is the first priority to us." Taylor said. She slid something across the desk and Tom picked it up and examined it hopefully. It was Amy Malton's business card. It read 'Senior Exorcist' and had a mobile number and email address stamped on it. "Give Amy a ring if you need expert advice. But we will have to pay a rather punitive overtime rate since she's on maternity leave so please, please only call her if you absolutely have to. Do try and work things out for yourself first."

"Right," Tom said, pocketing the card.

Tom trudged back to his desk with the feeling of a man condemned. He was going into battle against the forces of darkness and his main weapons were an app he wasn't supposed to use and a phone number he wasn't supposed to call. He took a deep breath and as he let it out he reminded himself of Neema's words of wisdom: the ghosts are never real.

He pushed down the power button of the phone Taylor had given him and waited for it to start up. It looked the same as his normal work issue phone: same model and same operating

system version. The only difference that Tom could discern was that on the home screen there was one additional icon: a cute little rendering of a blue ghost with a sad face and a red cross through it. Tiny font underneath read “uExorcise”.

Tom tapped the uExorcise icon and the whole screen went black for a couple of seconds and he began to wonder if the device was broken, or, more accurately, if he had broken it. Just as he was concluding that he must have, white text appeared on the screen that simply read, “Tap screen to begin exorcism.” He reached out instinctively with one finger but hesitated, heeding Taylor’s warning about the usage costs.

Instead, he placed the phone down on his desk and waggled his mouse around to wake up his pc and searched for the app on the intranet pages. From what he could glean from the scant search results you really did just have to tap on the screen and then the app would play a recording of The Prayer to St. Michael, the standard exorcism litany that all field agents were taught in basic training.

Tom was forced to agree with Taylor, £50 did seem rather a steep mark up on that.

Slowly, Tom started heading towards the exit. Around him everyone was happily bashing away at their keyboards or shouting down their headsets. It didn’t seem real that he was off to fight supernatural entities. When he reached the printers he turned around and headed back to pick up the phone which he’d left on his desk.

Pewter St

Tom stepped down off the bus, following a woman laden with seven or eight paper bags from various high street shops who then staggered off down the street.

As the bus trundled away into the flow of traffic, Tom took a few moments to take in the street. Quite a few of the units were shuttered and closed and the ones that did remain open mostly seemed to be betting shops and charity shops. It had been a while since Tom had been to this area and while he remembered it being a big rough it has obviously gone down hill at a rather fast clip in the intervening years.

He picked a direction at random and got underway, figuring that he had a fifty-fifty chance of going the right way. As he went the street became quieter, he might even have gone as far as to say deserted, and the ratio of empty shops increased.

Just as he was beginning to doubt his choice of direction and consider turning around he found himself outside a chapel, set back from the road by a small lawn that hid it from view as he approached.

Tom crunched his way up the gravel path and hesitated at the oversized oak door held together by a strange pattern of thick iron nails. His hand grasped the heavy ring of the door handle but didn't pull. Somehow it felt strange to open such a grand entry portal just for one person and he considered going round to find the side entrance. After some consideration he decided that sneaking around the back of a possibly haunted chapel wasn't the best of plans. He quickly patted his trouser pocket to reassure himself that the phone was still there and gave the door ring a decisive pull.

The sunlight was flooding in through the stained glass high above and the interior of the chapel was filled with a soft, gauzy light. At the far end a large cross glowed in the sunbeam. The overall effect was soothing to Tom and the airy, well lit room seemed to present little in the way of paranormal threats. A few rows of dark wooden pews nestled together cosily facing the plain stone lectern that stood by the cross, a narrow aisle cut through between them.

A man sat on one of the front pews, the room's only occupant save for Tom. His head was bowed, perhaps in silent prayer, and one of his legs stuck out into the aisle at an uncomfortable looking angle. With a brief check of the corners of the room for any lurking ghosts, Tom made his way across the flagstones.

Despite the rather noisy entrance through the grand oak door, the man's head remained bowed as Tom approached. It wasn't until the agent was almost upon him that he glanced up, but it was a calm, collected movement that suggested he'd been aware of Tom's presence.

Tom needed no introduction from the man, this was obviously the Reverend James. The dog collar and the large grey moon boot protecting his broken leg were enough for the agent's highly trained mind to deduce this. Ignoring Tom's protests, the vicar hauled himself awkwardly to his feet, looming a good couple of inches above the younger man. Tom held out a hand to help him upright, but the vicar ignored it, intent on doing it himself. When he had finished his ascent, Tom made to withdraw his hand but the vicar suddenly reached out and grabbed it and Tom found himself on the receiving end of a firm and energetic handshake.

Tom took in the vicar as they shook hands. Broad shouldered, square jawed, hair cropped back to a few centimeters long. James was maybe a little older than him but not much. It was good not to have preconceptions in this line of work, without the collar and the moon boot Tom wouldn't have pegged him for the vicar.

"I'm here about your ghost problem," said Tom as the vicar finally released his hand.

A look of embarrassment spread across the Reverend James' face and he made a small noncommittal noise at the back of his throat that would allow him the wiggle room to back out with his dignity intact if there turned out to be no such thing as ghosts.

"What can you tell me about this ghost?" Tom persisted. "Any detail could be important."

“Well, yes, ghosts plural, actually, as in more than one,” James said meekly, suddenly finding something interesting to inspect on the floor of his chapel. “There were several of them down there. At least half a dozen I’d say.”

Tom swallowed and tried hard to remain outwardly unruffled. If this case wasn’t a wild goose chase then it had suddenly become much, much more difficult. His thoughts wandered briefly to what Agent Neema might be doing at that moment that so prevented him from being there.

“When you say ‘down there’?” Tom prompted.

“In the crypt,” the vicar replied.

Tom nodded. Of course they would be. “Anything else you can tell me? Who these spirits might be, what might have brought them back?”

“I’m afraid not,” the vicar replied. “I was in the back stowing my vestments away last night when I heard the noises from below. I went down to see what was going on, I thought perhaps my curate might have been down there. But when I saw them...” he trailed off into silence for a few seconds before suddenly snapping himself out of his thoughts and back into the present.

“There are some remains buried in the crypt and I guess they would be the likely candidates. But I’m ashamed to say that I didn’t stick around long enough to find anything out. It didn’t even cross my mind that they might want something from me. I was rather spooked, if you’ll pardon the expression, and I was out of there as fast as I could. Not fast enough as it happens, one of the...” the word stuck in this throat, “ghosts managed to grab me on the way out and I took a tumble on the stairs which landed me in this rather cumbersome piece of footwear.” He indicated the moon boot. “I must have given the paramedics a good story when they showed up. They must think that I’m quite, quite mad.”

Tom could only hope quietly to himself that this was the case. “Well I’ll head down and take a look,” he said. “Which way is it?”

James pointed towards a little wooden door tucked away next to the lectern. The vicar didn’t offer to come with Tom as he ducked through the doorway into the backroom, and Tom couldn’t say that he entirely blamed him.

A narrow staircase led down into impenetrable darkness below. Tom put his hand out in order to grope his way down but as he did so his hand brushed the pull cord for the lights. He gave it a soft yank and a dim bulb slowly faded into life above him. He felt slightly better for being able to see the uneven stairs before him, but not much.

Reaching the bottom step, Tom paused at the small wooden door to the crypt which hung slightly ajar. He placed his hand on the cold iron ring of the door handle and paused, his heart was starting to pound away in his ribcage. He silently repeated his mantra once more: the ghosts are never real. He cocked his head to one side and listened, holding his breath. At first

there was only silence and then as he concentrated he could make out the faint rumble of traffic coming from the street above.

He pushed the door and it swung open with a protracted groan. A small patch of orange light filtered down through the doorway and spilt onto the floor at Tom's feet, leaving the rest of the room in shadow. Without removing his eyes from the darkness, Tom patted up and down the wall beside him with his free hand until he found the smooth plastic of the light switch. He blinked as the darkness suddenly gave way and peered into the newly illuminated crypt. The room was reassuringly free of ghosts.

When the Reverend James had told him there were bodies buried down here Tom had pictured big stone sarcophagi adorned with likenesses of their restless occupants. But actually the small room was almost entirely empty. A couple of paces in front of Tom there was some writing engraved into the stone of the floor. The script had been worn faint by many centuries of footfalls but Tom could just make out that he was standing before someone's final resting place, the name lost now to history.

Stepping cautiously into the room, taking care to avoid the burial plaque, Tom turned slowly to survey the rest of the room. Several other engraved stones indicated more burial sites, Tom could spot nine in total. The whole floor must have bodies entombed beneath it, he thought to himself. Tom took a step forward to one of the plaques at the far end of the room, tucked away where footfalls were less likely to wear it down, and slowly crouched down to examine the writing, which proved to be still just about legible. The date etched into the stone was 1780.

Tom was just considering this when he felt a cold chill seep through him and the hairs on the back of his neck began to rise. The mantra filtered through the recesses of his mind once more: the ghosts are never real. Taking a slim amount of comfort by pretending that he believed this, he gathered his willpower and, very slowly, he turned around.

Oh shit, this ghost was real.

He'd seen a ghost before. They summoned them in basic field training so he knew on a theoretical level what the sensation was like. However the visceral fear of knowing that there was no battery of protective wards between himself and the spirit gave for a rather different experience.

The ghost must have been truly old because there were no discernable features or clothing, in fact it was hard to identify the unfocused haze as human at all. But Tom could definitely sense an intelligence behind its movement, it was no mere wisps of fog.

The shape paused about half a foot from him, giving the impression that it was considering its next move. There was the suggestion of a face but whenever Tom tried to get a good look at it his eyes struggled to focus. All around the room more shapes were gathering form, fog condensing seemingly out of thin air into vaguely human shapes. They milled back and forth,

occasionally passing straight through one another, making it impossible for Tom to count their number even if he'd had the presence of mind to do so.

One of the shapes made a sudden and distinctive movement in Tom's direction and, with a turn of speed that he didn't know he even came close to possessing, Tom uncoiled from his crouched position and launched himself forwards, his feet already running when they hit the flagstones and with a dull hiss as his shoes fought for purchase on the stone floor he flew across the room. Within a second he was on the other side of the wooden door and had slammed it shut behind him. He leant with his back on it, breathing heavily from his sudden exertion.

There was a low, heart wrenching groan as Tom processed the situation he found himself in. Facing not one, but multiple spirits. No doubt angry at their lot in life, and indeed death, and eager to wreak a terrible vengeance upon the world.

Following the instincts that his training had honed, he pulled out his phone and dialled Agent Neema's number.

The phone rang and for a few terrifying moments Tom thought that Neema wasn't going to answer. Just as he thought hope was lost he heard the agent's voice come through. He was crackly and muffled, church crypts turned out not to be the best situated places for phone reception, but he was just about audible.

"What is it?" Neema skipped over any form of greeting, not that Tom was concerned with pleasantries right then.

"G-ghosts," Tom spluttered down the line.

"Really?" The disbelief was palpable, even through the poor quality of the phone line.

"Yes," Tom whined. "Lots of them. You've got to get down here."

"You did get the app, right?" Neema replied.

Tom nodded.

"Right, rookie?" Neema repeated firmly.

"Yes, yes I did," Tom said.

"Well, good. Use it. You do have the requisite training to push a button on a phone screen, don't you?"

"Yes, but," Tom started to reply but Neema cut him off.

“I’ve got to go, rook. I don’t have time to babysit.”

Tom thought he heard a bestial roar from the other end of the phone, like a huge predator moving in for the kill. But maybe it was just the white noise on the phone call. Either way, the line went dead and the home screen appeared on his phone.

Tom inched his thumb over the screen and tapped firmly on the little icon of the ghost with a red line striking through it. Agonising seconds passed while nothing happened and the ancient oak door rattled on its hinges behind his shoulder blades and Tom squeezed his eyes shut. Stealing a glance downwards, Tom made out a loading spinner going round and round on the phone screen. He muttered encouragement at his phone under his breath, followed shortly by threats.

The door continued to thump back and forth, the ancient wood protesting this violent treatment. Just as Tom was convinced the door must give way, the loading spinner faded away and the comforting sight of the push-to-exorcise button appeared. Tom covered it with his thumb, turned around and twisted the door handle with his free hand.

As soon as he did so the door was wrenched out of his grasp, swinging open with a loud crack as it hit into the solid stone wall. The door must have passed straight through one of the ethereal beings, for as it swung away Tom found himself nose to nose with one of them. If any of the amorphous, shifting shapes of its face could be called a nose. It was so close that Tom could feel icy cold air flowing from it.

Tom pressed his thumb down on the button but even as he did so there was a low chuckle, rich with malice, and the device slid through his hand, pulled away by an unseen force, and the phone slithered from his sweat covered palm and landed facedown on the hard flagstones with a dull clatter.

With widening eyes, Tom stared down at where the phone had landed. Face down on the floor, it wasn’t obvious whether it was broken or not but there was no visible glow coming from it. As he watched, the phone began to skitter away from him across the floor, apparently of its own accord, and came to rest a couple of feet away in the centre of the room. He didn’t have time to stand and lament the situation for long, he was spurred into action by a wet, icy feeling on his wrists, and stumbled backward with grasping tendrils of fog slowly drifting after him.

Maybe he didn’t need that phone after all, Tom tried to reassure himself. He learnt the Prayer to St. Michael in basic. He had to commit it to memory in order to pass the module. He inhaled a deep lungful of the musty crypt air and with a wavering, uncertain voice he began to chant.

“Princeps gloriosissime caelestis militiae, sancte Michael Archangele.”

As the ancient screed began to fill the tomb, it was soon joined by a chorus of high pitched squeals of pain. The ghostly figures began to writhe and thrash aimlessly. As Tom's confidence grew so did his voice and he fought to drown out the noise of the ghosts with his prayer.

Overhead the light bulb exploded with a sudden pop, showering him with glass and leaving him in a deep, inky blackness. Tom opened his mouth to recite the next line of the chant but his mouth hung open uselessly as he struggled to remember a single word of latin let alone the next word of the prayer. Defeated he closed his jaw and swallowed.

He could feel a sensation of a cold breeze and not wishing to have a repeat of the icy touch from before he retreated another step, finding himself back out at the foot of the stairs. An angry hiss followed him out of the room. At that moment, a glowing line of blue, just on the edge of visibility, appeared along the floor in the centre of the room. With a silent prayer of relief Tom realised that it was the screen of his smart phone lighting up. A split second later a tinny voice started to come through the cheap speakers and fill the room.

"Princeps gloriosissime caelestis militiae..."

The shrieking and howling began again but the phone ploughed on undaunted by the noise and played away happily even as it was tossed roughly from one corner of the floor to the other as the foggy shapes thrashed and groped at their plastic tormentor.

How much did Taylor say they paid for each use? Fifty pounds? A thousand? As Tom gazed at the zig zagging blue glow with tears in his eyes he swore that it was worth every goddamn penny and more.

A long, warbling note signified the end of the chant and then there was blessed, blessed silence. Tom quietly thanked the app, its creators and everyone in the entire smartphone industry. He stooped down to pick up what was now his favourite telecommunications device in the world when it skittered way across the flagstones and out of reach. Frozen with his hand outstretched, Tom began to wonder if playing the exorcism prayer would banish all the ghosts within undead earshot or just one for each use.

Tom was gazing longingly at where his phone sat glowing in its new resting place when he noticed out of the corner of his vision a dark black stain of ectoplasm that was streaked across the arm of his suit jacket, in the shape of a stretched handprint. All thoughts of heading deeper into the ghost infested room to collect his phone quickly vanished and he quickly withdrew his hand and closed the solid oaken door on ghosts and phone alike. Whether they could, or would, come through the door he didn't know, but at least the shifting forms were reassuringly out of sight.

From his position of relative safety, he frowned down at the tar like black streaks on the fine grey material of his suit jacket. His private rumination was interrupted as a hand touched him gently on the back of his shoulder and he emitted a high pitch squeal as he spun around expecting to

find himself facing an angered spectre. Instead he found himself looking into the enquiring brown eyes of the Reverend James.

"Sorry," the clergyman said gently. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Tom placed a hand to his beating heart and took a few deep breaths before replying. "What are you doing down here?" He asked.

"I heard the commotion and just thought I'd come down and see if I could do anything," James said meekly.

"I'm not sure there's much either of us can do at this point. The exorcism incantation is on my phone," Tom said helplessly. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the oak door, behind which the occasional wail was rising and falling. "And my phone's in there."

The reverend's face lit up in an innocent smile. "Well that was just the prayer to St. Michael, wasn't it? If I heard correctly."

Tom fixed him a keen look. "That's exactly what it was," he said. "Do you know it?"

The reverend look at Tom as though he'd just said something profoundly stupid, which, Tom considered, maybe he had. "I do indeed know it," James said, a touch of pride in his voice. "I just recite it do I?"

Tom nodded and shuffled aside from the door. He watched as the clergyman strode up to the threshold. It was a lopsided stride in order to accommodate the plastic moonboot, but a stride nonetheless. He held his bearing erect and purposeful as he entered into the crypt, filling his lungs as he went. A pair of fog like spectres that were just inside the room instinctively drifted backwards as the broad shouldered vicar stepped inside, his deep voice already intoning the start of the prayer.

The rich timbre of the vicar was soon met by the high pitched wailing and moaning that came in waves from all corners of the room. The sounds pierced right to Tom's soul and he felt the urge to flee back up to the sunlight upstairs, but he forced himself to keep watching. The shapes of the spectres became even less defined, hard to make out as human at all, and the closest one collapsed, seemingly under its own weight, becoming an indistinct cloud around the floor of the room that in turn dispersed into nothing.

The Reverend James took another deep lungful of air and in that brief moment the ghosts began to form and crowd around again but within an instant he had started the incantation and once more the clawing shapes recoiled, wailing and gnashing rose ineffectually as they went.

When the reverend emerged from the room a few minutes later he was red faced and panting for breath, sweat beaded on his forehead and dripped onto the floor. But in the crypt behind him

all was still. His eyes were open wide, almost manic and he had an open mouthed grin as he sucked in air.

Tom looked at him with unabashed awe. "That was quite something," he gasped. "Thank you. Thank you!"

Still grinning, the reverend waved away the praise. "It was my pleasure," he said. "I've been doing God's work for years now, but I never thought I would get a chance to test my faith against actual devilry like that." He turned to look back at his handiwork, still shaking with the exhilaration of his feats.

With one final check that there were no ethereal shapes lurking in the room, Tom crossed the crypt, feet barely making a sound on the flagstones, and picked his work phone off the floor and dusted it off. There appeared to be a small crack in the screen but it still lit up with a reassuring glow when he touched it.

"All the same, I feel I owe you my thanks," Tom said as he put his damaged phone back into his pocket.

"I would gladly do it again," the vicar said. "Who'd have thought it? Fighting evil in my own chapel," he marveled.

"I don't know about evil," Tom said. "Angry, yes. Dangerous, certainly. But evil? I'm not sure."

The reverend didn't appear to be listening, he was pacing up and down the crypt with his lopsided gate, lost in his own thought. "You must come to my sermon on Sunday, sir," James said, still pacing. "Afterwards maybe we can discuss if I can be of any further help to you in this fight against unholy beings such as these," he gestured broadly around the room that had so recently been filled with supernatural terrors.

"Thank you, vicar," Tom said. "Although to be honest I'm not a religious man."

The vicar stopped mid stride and looked at him. "Not religious? When even just now you've seen with your own eyes evidence of the immortal soul and of the work of the devil?"

"Well," Tom shrugged. "We saw evidence of something beyond our physical realm, I admit. But I'm not sure if it leads straight on to believing in the Christian God, or the devil for that matter."

The reverend simply shook his head in response, as though the fallacy of Tom's arguments were self-evident. "All the same, if I can help in any way."

"I'll be sure to contact you," Tom said. "And likewise, you know how to contact the Unit if you have any further disturbances here?"

“If there’s any further trouble here,” the vicar stuck his chin out proudly. “I shall know how to handle it.”