BOTTLED NIGHTMARES Vol. 2

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SHADOW

It had been murder, pure and simple, of that there had been no doubt. No crime of passion this, or an accidental blow resulting in a tragic death.

No, Max Smit knew exactly what he was doing when he bludgeoned his one-time partner seventeen times with a monkey wrench. The incident had occurred whilst the pair were unloading a truck of liquor, smuggled across the Canadian border on June first, nineteen-twenty-eight.

His only regret was not doing the same to the two FBI agents who had been lying in wait when they arrived at the drop off point. But that had really been because of the fifteen soldiers they had brought with them for support at the time of the bust.

Fifteen! That had seemed over kill to Max at the time. But to be fair, who was he to talk?

Why had he obliterated Johnny Jones' head? Simple, greed. They had successfully dodged several border patrols on the way across and were driving to the farmhouse where they were due to sell their illicit cargo, when Smit, always the smarter of the two, had decided he wanted, no deserved! More of the cut.

In the hour-long drive, he had gone from plotting to get sixty percent, then seventy and finally, as they had pulled up at the farmhouse. The whole fucking one hundred percent.

Sadly, if he had waited another five minutes or so after they arrived, before caving in Jones' skull. They would both have been arrested on smuggling charges and he would have gotten maybe one to three instead of the fucking death penalty.

Maybe, Max Smit had wondered for the umpteenth time since his arrest, trial and sentence, he wasn't so smart after all.

Smit felt... Odd tonight as he sat on the bed in his cell on death row, looking out of the cell's small, barred window, and across the barbwire topped walls of the prison and to the light house in the bay beyond.

He had done the exact same thing, every night for the six weeks he had been here since they had transferred him. Before, it had always filled him with a soft melancholy as he watched the light arc across the top of the wire and sweep through the window and across his cell. Illuminating it for a moment as it passed across the walls and ceiling, before disappearing once more. Only to return to taunt him again soon after.

He would sometimes hold out his hand as it passed and let the light play off the palm of his hand and he would make a fist, as if he could somehow grab the beam and let it pull him

away with it. Then he could climb up the light as if it were a rope, right over the walls and to freedom.

Sometimes he wept at the forlorn hope, sometimes he laughed. But tonight, he felt nothing but a growing warmth and calm.

Even when the clatter of a dozen metal cups and plates banged against bars and the shouts and shrieks of the inmates in the cells out in the hallway, began again, and for the second time tonight. Smit didn't so much as flinch.

Even though he knew what that meant. This was death row, and that cacophony was his fellow condemned inmates sending off the next prisoner being dragged through the corridor, past their cells, and through the door and into the room at the end where the hangman waited, and no one ever returned from. A walk they would all have to take sooner or later.

When he had first heard this chorus of the damned, on just his second night here, he had balled up and cried like a baby. As the finality of it all had hit him, pretty much like he had hit ol' Johnny Jones.

But tonight, it barely registered, even though, thanks to his two-bit lawyer, he had been told that he would be next for the noose. Apparently, Smit mused with genuine amusement, it was a three-fer on hangings today. Gallows humour indeed.

The metal slot in the door suddenly snapped open and a familiar sneering face appeared in the gap. Officer Drake, a weedy mouse of a man, who clearly had joined the prison service so he could exorcize a lifetime of beatings and mockery he had undoubtedly suffered himself his whole life.

Drake was the worst kind of bully, he was the type that was masochistically beating himself up inside for all the times he had cried and wet his pants at the hands of others, as he in turn was beating an inmate. So, the more he hated himself, which was a lot, the more he beat himself through you.

Smit looked away from the man grinned and tried once again to catch the light as it passed serenely through the cell. He could see the moats of dust tumbling through the air where the light caught them. Christ, it was the most beautiful thing Max Smit had seen in the whole of his thirty-five years.

Tears came, but not out of fear, but the sheer magic in the light. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he could see faint colours in the usually harsh white. Yes! Blues and reds, other colours he should know the name of, but they escaped him, and others still that didn't even seem to be of this world. Not that it mattered as he watched the undulating ballet before him. Until, once again, the lighthouse beam was gone.

"Hope you enjoyed your last meal, Smit," Drake said from a million miles away. "Cos' you're next for the drop. The Chaplin will be in here soon, to save your soul."

Arh, his last meal, Smit thought dreamily and shifted his gaze over to the metal table which was bolted to the wall. The remnants of his last meal sat on the plate. Just bones now and a smear of grease.

He had requested steak and eggs and an ice cool coke, followed by apple pie and cream. And much to his surprise they had cooked it to perfection and with great care, it was without doubt the best cooked meal he'd ever had.

The compassion shown him by some of the other guards and the cook as he was served the feast had genuinely touched Smit. Due in no small part to his surroundings and normal behaviour of those employed here. As if to hammer home this point, Drake piped up again.

"You hear me, Smit? You're going to swing."

Normally, Smit would have told the weasel to go fuck himself. But he knew if he tried to speak, he would be unable. He was transfixed now by the still lingering multi-coloured illuminances that had been left in the light's wake.

Faint, like smoke but still there, then, just as they were about to vanish, the lighthouse beam reappeared, bringing with it fresh curiosities as the colours returned once more, but brighter, almost solid in the air.

He lay down, suddenly dog tired and watched languidly as the beam, trailing wonders, came in through the window, arced across the walls and ceiling, before disappearing again only to return a short time later.

Over and over, he marvelled at the solidity of the colours within the light and how they spun and twisted through the air. As if waiting impatiently for the light from outside to return with more miraculous corporeal energies.

A discordant sound, low mumbling, then grating like the harsh complaint of grinding machinery in desperate need of oil. Smit tried to ignore the intrusion to all this bliss and for a time it seemed to work, as he concentrated on the darting colours above him, wanting more than anything to join their dance.

But no, despite himself, the mumbling continued. Inarticulate sounds slowly becoming a man's voice but speaking gibberish. Then the odd word of English here and there through the nonsense. Was he himself rambling as he drifted in this sea of light? No, it took Smit a moment to realise that one, it wasn't him speaking, and that two, it was a prayer.

He turned and as the light arced across the room for the countless time, it caught a grubby dog collar around the neck of a grim looking Chaplin. The man was sat on a chair by Smit's bed reading stoically from a bible. Behind him, keeping a weary but respectful distance was a guard, Phillips.

The last rites.

“No!”

He sat up and swung his legs around the side of the bed. Phillips took a step forwards, but the Chaplin held out a hand.

“It’s alright my son,” he told Smit softly. Then continued reading.

Smit stood on unsteady legs. “Stop!” But the Chaplin just kept on mechanically reading.

Fear gripped Smit, but this was fear unlike he had ever felt before. Not fear of death, something much, much worse. Fear of losing the light and all that it brought.

Something was wrong, he now realised with horror. These interlopers had robbed the lighthouse’s beam of its magics. As it passed through the cell again, across walls, ceiling, and across the two trespassers, it was harsh, cold without any substance at all.

He wanted to kill both of them for the theft, he balled his fists, but his head was swimming at the sheer injustice of it all. He felt weak as a kitten again, now that the sublime stimulation within his every fibre had fled.

That once beautiful illumination came back around again, but this time Smit hated it. It cast his paltry shadow on the floor of the cell, then came around to hit Phillips, whose own shadow splashed across the wall at his back as it moved off to illuminate the Chaplin by the bed.

It took Smit a moment to realise that Phillips’ shadow was still at his back on the wall, despite no light being cast on him, except from the meagre overhead bulb.

No, not his shadow, something else, something thinner, like a slash of darkness against the whitewashed wall. The light came around again, and just as before it left a residual black shape on the wall at the guard’s back. But bigger now, even more dense, like a splash of black paint.

Smit turned to the Chaplin, oblivious, still praying away, then back to Phillips, who was looking benignly at the holy man as he mumbled his superstitions. Again, the sweep of the light across the cell, and again the shape at the guard’s back grew.

The shadow grew more distinct with every pass, Smit stared at it in wonder as it took shape. It was now some three times the size of Phillips, who still, like the Chaplin, inexplicable couldn’t see or feel its presence. Smit thought he laughed but neither man acknowledged it.

The shadow then seemed to stand upright, it was definitely a figure of some kind, but huge with unnaturally long arms, the darkness of its body shimmering with the colours he had seen in the air.

So that was where they had gone, Smit thought, to bind this strange, beautiful creation together from the darkness.

It shook, like a dog shaking off rain, and this unfolded a set of massive multi-colours wings which flowed out like oil on water, swirling but never losing their shape.

Now at its full height, it stood ten feet tall behind the hopelessly unaware guard, like some winged demon, ready to strike.

Both the Chaplin and Phillips looked quizzically at Smit, who knew he was laughing now. Their dumbfounded faces just made him laugh all the more.

"Tell me gentlemen," Smit said. "Do you believe in guardian angels?"

As if on cue, the shadow lunged forwards, grabbing Phillips by the shoulders. The man was big, but he was dwarfed by the sheer size of his attacker. The shadow slammed into its prey and Phillips exploded into a mass of pulped flesh and bone. Like he had gasoline for blood, and someone had struck a match.

"Yes!!" Smit shouted in pure joy.

He only wished it had been that bastard Drake, but that would pass. Who knew, maybe he and his new protector could return later to torture the bully? It seemed in that moment, anything was possible.

Smit held out his arms and reached up like a babe to its mother as the shadow approached. It wrapped its arms, still slick with blood, around him and he was lifted off the ground with one beat of its hypnotically swirling wings.

He looked back to see the wall behind him open up as the shadow bore him up, up. He knew they were heading for the lighthouse and that long held dream of escape. It couldn't have been more perfect.

He giggled like a kid as he looked back down at the Chaplin who was looking up at him, opened mouthed. Soon the holy man was nothing but a small dot as he was taken high over the prison, until it too looked like a model fort he had once played with as a child.

Freedom felt like a warm embrace, and he had never felt so contented. As they flew higher and higher, the shadow slowly placed one hand over his eyes, but he didn't mind. What was there worth seeing anyway? The shadow's other hand though, closed around his neck, not too tight, just a light, but oddly scratchy touch.

But Smit didn't care anymore, he just laughed and laughed and lau...

Parker Gayland pulled the gallows trap door release lever and thanked Christ the prisoner finally stopped that strange euphoric laughter. He peered through the gap at his feet as the man twitched a little then just swung there.

The prison doctor rushed over and bared the man's chest, then held a stethoscope to his heart. Checked it twice then the artery at his neck. He nodded.

"The prisoner is dead," he announced solemnly.

The prison Chaplin moved over next to Gayland on the gallows deck and followed his gaze downwards.

"That was... Odd," the Chaplin said.

"I've had them, screaming, cursing, crying, all things. But that guy?" Gayland replied with a shudder.

He loosened the rope a little to allow the two guards below to get Max Smit's body out of the noose. Then he had a thought.

"Hey, Phillips?" He called down.

The big guard, who had been in charge of supervising Smit's last meal looked up as he struggled with the dead man's legs.

"What?" He asked flustered.

"How much paraldehyde did you put in this man's food?"

Paraldehyde was a narcotic they used to calm a prisoner before the execution.

"Dunno, maybe half a bottle."

"What!?" He exclaimed and turned to the Chaplin. "Well, there you go. You're only supposed to use a few drops. No wonder he was laughing."

The Chaplin gave a shrug. "We should all die so happy."

THE BASTARDS IN THE BASEMENT

"Am I having an acid flashback, or do you guys see that?"

Benny followed Anna's gaze across the dimly lit car park. A man dressed in what looked like a heavy blue hooded robe was running from a row of resident's parked cars and towards the entrance door to the Hickson villas apartment building.

"Well, there's something you don't see every day," Chris, Benny's younger brother said.

The trio watched the man as he suddenly stopped and began rummaging under his robe for something in his trouser pocket.

Now, it was just after three AM on a Friday morning and at that time in the city, you could expect to see the unexpected, especially on an early morning stagger home like now.

The three of them had been ambling home after an epic bar-be-que slash drunken late-night party thrown by their pals Dave and Steve, to celebrate the release of their band's new album. 'Beliel's travelling circus: Eclectic electric.'

It had been an event bordering on the biblical and was only just starting to peter out when they had reluctantly dragged themselves away to avoid the inevitable alcohol poisoning that was definitely on the cards.

The man glanced at them, giving a look like *they* were the ones oddly dressed. Despite the hood, Anna could see that he had what looked like runic symbols painted on his face in black ink. And also, a three-inch square piece of paper, again with a cryptic symbol on it, this time in red ink, stuck to the man's forehead.

"Weird city!" Anna announced.

"Hey, isn't that one of the dudes from the second floor?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, think you're right," Benny replied.

The man ran over to the heavy entrance door to the flats and pulled at the handle, but it didn't budge.

"Lost your key fob, mate?" Chris called across to the man.

Anna, Benny and Chris walked over to him, and he eyed them with suspicion. But this slowly faded as he seemed to recognise them as fellow Hickson Villas residents.

"Bit late for LARPing, isn't it?" Anna asked.

The three 'wizards' as they were collectively known to most of the other tower block residents, could often be seen wandering about in strange druidic type attire, but they were harmless enough. And not the weirdest people who called the villas home. And at least they mostly kept themselves to themselves.

You could often see them sneaking off down into the building's basement and everyone thought they were playing

dungeons and dragons or some such game down there. The basement was out of bounds to residents, strictly speaking, but as long as it wasn't a crack den down there, nobody much cared.

Benny fished out his own key fob and shook it. The man nodded and gave him a nervous but thankful smile. Benny then tapped the fob on the receiver by the door and it opened automatically. Now that they were close, Benny could see the man actually looked quite terrified. Now that, he mused, was committing to the game.

The role player went first and then the three of them staggered into the large entrance hall after him. And sure enough, instead of heading for the lift, the man veered right and over to the basement door at the end of a side corridor.

Anna shuddered theatrically and rubbed the back of her neck. "Shit, you feel that?" She said.

The air in here was filled with the smell of static, like you would get on the bumper cars at the fair. Its gentle residual power seemed to hang in the air around them.

Benny felt it too, he rubbed the top of his head and looked at Anna and Chris, half expecting the hair on their heads to be standing bolt upright, like he felt his was.

The role player paused by the basement door and gave them a manic look. "Wonderful feeling, isn't it?" He said cryptically. "Wonderful and terrifying."

"Fuck this, lads," Anna said. "Let's go," she moved over to the lift and hit the call button.

The man opened the basement door, and a soft wave of energy seemed to flood past him and into the entrance hall.

"Jez, what are you doing down there?" Benny asked a little spooked by the sensation.

"It worked!" The man replied, his voice touched with hints of awe and fear. "God help us, it worked."

"Good for you!" Chris slurred, oblivious.

The lift doors opened, and Anna grabbed Benny and Chris by the arm and dragged them inside.

"Avanti!" She exclaimed.

Once inside, she hit the fourth-floor button and after what seemed like an age, the lift doors closed.

"Seemed nice," Chris said with a drunken grin.

"This place is getting stranger by the day," Benny said, and Anna nodded in agreement.

Then she was hit with an odd feeling, nothing to do with what had just happened, just a feeling that something was missing from this picture. It took her a moment to untangle her thoughts, then.

"Here, where's Wicksy!?"

Robby Wicks looked up from his tray of cheesy chips to see that he was all alone. He had been wandering along with Anna, Benny and little Chris. Just concentrating on simply

putting one foot in front of the other, whilst trying not to drop his late-night snack. But now that he had paused and leant against the side of a building to avoid topping over, he noticed that they had wandered off.

"Guys?" Wicksy called out redundantly to the empty street ahead.

Thankfully, the five-story monolithic Hickson Villas loomed large against the night sky ahead, like a beacon to the weary traveller. So, he slipped the tray of chips back in its paper bag to avoid spillage and set off towards home.

Once inside their flat, Chris made his way over to the fridge in search of day-old cold pizza and more beer. Anna and Benny stood in the hallway debating the whereabouts of their missing friend and neighbour.

"Wicksy was with us when we left the party, right?" Anna asked, wracking her alcohol addled brain.

Benny struggled out of his jacket and hung it on a hook by the door. "Think, so?" He replied tentatively.

"Christ!" Anna exclaimed. "He's always wandering off. I should go look for him."

"At this hour?" Benny warned.

She patted the inside pocket of her jacket. "I'm armed, remember?"

She always carried a telescopic self-defence baton with her when they were out and about.

"Still, I'm coming with you," Benny told her in his best 'protective alpha male voice.' Which he had never managed to master.

"You can barely stand up, mate! I'll be fine, I won't go far."

"I'll put the kettle on," Benny announced.

"You do that."

Anna watched him toddle off down the hallway and let herself out. As she made her way down the long corridor leading to the lift at the end, the overhead automatic lights came on one by one as she went.

She took out her phone and selected Wicksy's number.

"You left me," a thin voice answered after a moment.

"Yeah, sorry, love. Where are you?"

"Erm, not far, just past the bins by the market. Two minutes, you home?"

"Yeah, I'll meet you downstairs, I'll buzz you in."

"Ta," he replied and hung up.

As she got to the lift, Anna reached out a hand to press the call button, when a huge wave of energy came up through the floor and seemed to ripple right through her body, from the soles of her feet to the tip of her head and beyond. And for a moment she was suspended as if in water a good three feet above the corridor's tiled floor.

It only lasted a few moments, but she could feel the energy pulsing through her entire body as she hung there, sending her nerve endings tingling. Then there was a soft 'whump' sound, her ears popped and an instant later she was on her backside.

"Kin hell!" She exclaimed and got unsteadily to her feet.

She glanced back down the corridor and was thankful to see she was alone. Christ, she thought, I must be drunker than I realised.

Anna hit the call button with a shaking hand and waited red-faced for it to arrive. She got in and hit the ground floor button. 'Doors closing,' the automatic voice they all referred to as the lift lady announced.

As the lift made its slow descent, she looked at herself in the mirrored side at the back of the compartment. Her cheeks were ruddy and there was a thin sheen of sweat on her face.

It hadn't been an unpleasant feeling, she had to admit, but still she shook its residual effects off and let out a sharp breath. Jesus, she mused, if she could bottle whatever the hell that was, she would be very rich, and very popular.

"Concentrate!!" She told her reflection and took another deep breath.

She watched as each floor button lit up, then flicked off and she counted them down in her head. Three, two, one. Ground. 'Ground floor, doors opening,' the lift lady said, and Anna prepared to exit.

She froze at the strange scene that greeted her as the doors opened. Another of the blue robed weirdos from the second floor, this one a woman, was standing in the entrance lobby talking animatedly to what Anna's shock stunned brain could only partially comprehend as a massive 'thing'.

The creature stood some eight feet tall, so much so that from where she was standing in the lift, Anna could only see up to its bulky shoulders. A small mercy for which her sanity was very grateful for.

Its body was a tight mass of blue grey muscle and sinew. Intermittent forks of blue static danced and played across its almost reptilian, but nearly translucent skin. It was humanoid up to a point, but its long muscular arms, which were gesticulating wildly at the woman, ended in four claws rather than hands. Each thick, gnarled digit was tipped with razor sharp looking three-inch talons.

The thing's voice was so low and guttural that Anna could feel its resonance in her chest like the bass speaker at a concert. It seemed to be trying to articulate words, which clearly weren't English, but they sounded like just so many cavernous grunts and snarls to her.

The woman, who was five feet if she was an inch, had to crane her neck up awkwardly to address the creature. And

despite the massive size difference and the fact she was talking to a fucking monster, she seemed unfazed and if anything, annoyed at the interaction.

Unlike the nervous dude outside, the woman had none of the runes painted on her face, but did have that curious square piece of paper stuck to her forehead, which Anna could see had several small symbols painted in black on it. Different as far as she could tell from the other guy.

Then the creature moved and seemed to want to lunge at her, vicious talons outstretched in her direction, clawing at the air a foot from her face. But it stopped dead when she calmly tapped the paper on her forehead.

"Ah, ah, arh," she scolded as if speaking to a child.

'Doors closing,' the lift lady announced.

The woman turned to see Anna stood there in the lift, a look of shock flashed across her face, just as the doors closed again.

Anna hit the fourth-floor button and slammed her back against the lift wall and waited. Either for the doors to be ripped open, or for the lift to whir into action. She cried out in relief as it started its ascent. And wondered if she had been spiked with something at the party.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fucking fuck!!"

Benny dropped the milk carton he was holding when Anna burst into the flat cursing at the top of her lungs, and it exploded on the kitchen floor.

"Christ woman!" He exclaimed and came out into the flat's hallway as Anna slammed the door shut and locked it. She pressed her back against it as if for extra security.

Chris, pizza in hand peered around the living room door and into the hallway. "Wicksy not there then?" He enquired.

"Oh, Christ," Anna uttered in realisation.

Wicksy would be downstairs at any minute, blissfully unaware of what he would be walking into. Anna took out her phone, but her hands were shaking so much it slipped through her fingers and clattered to the floor. She let out an anguished cry and she went to her knees to pick it up.

"Anna?" Benny said and ran down to her.

"Gotta warn him," Anna said. "Gotta warn him. Christ!"

She burst into tears and Benny crouched down next to her, he put an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"Jesus, Anna, what happened down there?"

"Something, there's something down there. Something horrible," she sobbed.

"Something? Something what?" Benny asked her, spooked at the sudden emotion. "Anna, did someone attack you? I knew I should have come down with you."

"A, a monster," she blurted out. "Something, some king of creature."

"Blimey!" Chris uttered and took a bite of pizza.

"Ssh, hey come on," Benny said softly holding her tight. "It's okay, it's alright now. Anna, come on, take a breath. Tell me exactly what happened."

Anna nodded, she swallowed hard and forced herself to regulate her breathing as best she could.

"One of the wierdos," she said. "From the second floor? She was down in the entrance hall, there was something with her, a monster."

"Christ Anna!" Chris suddenly laughed. "They're role players! It was probably one of them in a costume." She fixed him with a piercing gaze, and he shut right up.

"That was no costume," she told him coldly. "And I don't think they're fucking live action role players."

After banging his head on absolutely nothing for the third time, Robby Wicks gave up trying to walk through the open pedestrian gate to the Hickson villas private car park and sat down on the wall next to it and had a chip.

Sure, he knew he was very drunk, and yes, he had taken one of Pippy's special pills at the party. But still he figured he should have been able to walk through a three-foot opening, something he had done on countless times before and in a worse state than he was now. But for whatever reason, he just couldn't get in.

He had even picked up a discarded coke can out of the gutter and tried to throw it over the closed adjacent and much larger gate you needed to drive through to gain access if you were in a car. But much like his head, it had simply bounced off thin air and back into the street.

Wicksy put down his tray of cheesy chips on the wall next to him and took out his phone. He selected Anna's number, but it wouldn't connect. So, he tried first Benny's then Chris' but with the same result. He could see he had great reception out here but for whatever reason he just couldn't get through.

"Bollocks," he sighed and returned to his supper.

He was mid-chip when he heard the 'clop, clop,' of someone walking close by. He looked up to see a woman come walking out of the shadows at the far end of the deserted street and make her way down towards him.

He could tell instantly by the way she was dressed that she was definitely lost. She wore an expensive looking long black woollen coat which had the collar turned up against the cold night air, and her hands were planted deep in the pockets.

He could just about make out the hem of her black dress underneath the coat, which came to the top of shiny black knee length boots.

Black on black on black, Wicksy thought idly as she approached. Except for her hair. Even in the unflattering glow of the florescent streetlights he could see it was a

vivid, almost blood red and cascaded down her back and shoulders in long loose curls.

Her face, no doubt accentuated by this and her dark clothes was as pale as porcelain. She stopped just in front of him and gave him the most heart melting smile he had ever seen, and it was love at first sight. Her eyes widened as she saw the tray of chips in his lap.

"Ooh, can I have a chip?" She fair cooed.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, course," Wicksy replied and offered her the tray. She delicately picked one, blew on it and took a bite. "You're not from around here," he added, stating the obvious.

"What gave me away?" She asked conspiratorially.

Wicksy thought he caught the hint of a foreign accent, eastern European perhaps, but he was hard to pin down. As he now realised was her age. Thirties maybe? But with the air of someone much younger.

"We have an expression," he told her. "Whenever we see a beautiful woman around these parts. 'Never been to Leeds.' It's a bit sexist I know, but we are ignorant northerners."

"Sexist and a little paradoxical, don't you think?"

Wicksy looked at her blankly, he knew the word but was never quite sure what it meant. Then she smiled that smile again.

"But no," she said. "I'm not from around here. I'm working."

"Oh?"

"Can you keep a secret?" She asked and sat down on the wall next to him.

"I'm famed for my discretion," he assured her.

She leant in and whispered. "I'm a collector of souls."

Sure, why not? He mused drunkenly. Then it hit him. "Eh?"

"Oh, don't worry," she told him casually. "I'm not after yours. I'm not after anyone's tonight."

Wicksy found himself nodding and actually felt relieved to hear it. The woman looked over her shoulder to the tower block behind them.

"No," she continued. "Tonight, for my sins, I'm on damage limitation."

"No answer! Doesn't even connect, no signal at all," Benny said staring at his phone.

"Christ," Anna uttered.

They had all tried calling Wicksy. And she was starting to get visions of the poor sap staggering into the entrance hall and coming face to face with... That thing.

"You sure you weren't tripping?" Chris asked for the umpteenth time.

"No, I wasn't fucking tripping!" She snapped back.

"Okay, okay."

Benny went over to the living room window, which looked down on the usually busy road that ran parallel with the building. Even at this hour, you could still see taxis and the odd delivery truck passing by every so often. There was a crossroads with three sets of traffic signals at the end, where vehicles would often have to wait for the lights to change.

A taxi, then a slate grey prius sped down the road, but the lights were all on green, so they just drove on and out of sight.

"Cock it!" Benny hollered.

"We're four floors up, they won't hear you anyway," Anna reminded him.

Benny looked around the flat, then when through into the adjoining kitchen, he opened a cupboard and took out a pint glass.

"I'll chuck this at the first car that stops at the lights," Benny said. "Worst thing that can happen is they call the cops."

"No, you bloody won't!" Anna told him and snatched the glass out of his hand. "The worst thing that can happen is that you cause a crash!"

"I'll wait until they're parked," he reasoned. "It'll be fine."

"No throwing anything out of the fucking window!" She replied in dismay.

Wicksy threw a chip at the invisible barrier and watched as it bounced off and over his head and landed at the woman's feet who was standing in the street now and had taken to staring up at the building, looking for God only knew what. She glanced at the chip.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Containment charm," she said.

"You did this?"

"Had to. Trust me..?" She paused expectantly.

"Wicksy," he said.

"Please to meet you, Wicksy, I'm Sofia. And trust me, you don't want whatever is in there, getting out here."

"My friends are in there, are they okay?"

"No clue," she replied with a shrug.

Wickey thought about the potential gravity of this. "Any way of finding out?"

"Nope."

The woman, Sofia, sat back down on the wall next to him and stole another chip. "You know," she said mid-bite. "You seem to be taking all this very calmly."

"Just how am I supposed to take it?" He asked, not unreasonably.

She shrugged. "Panic, expletives, prayers to this God or that. The usual human reaction."

“Maybe it’s the booze or Pippy’s magic pill, but to tell you the truth, this isn’t the weirdest trip I’ve been on,” Wicksy confessed.

“Good for you.”

“So, what’s next after containment?”

The woman thought about this for a moment. “Honestly? I’m just riffing here,” she admitted. “Normally, I’m the one causing all the mayhem and mischief. But the way I see it? It could all just fizzle out or turn into a right bloodbath.”

“Let’s hope for the fizzle then eh?”

“I’ll drink to that.”

The entrance door to the building opened and a man in a thick blue hooded robe staggered out and into the car park. He seemed to be talking animatedly to someone inside and raised his hands defensively then shook his hooded head.

“Hey fuckwit!” Sofia shouted and got to her feet.

The man turned to them and Wicksy saw that he had strange symbols painted on his face and an odd-looking piece of paper attached to his forehead.

“Oh!” Wicksy exclaimed in recognition and jumped up next to Sofia. “That’s one of the role-players from the second floor.”

“You know this clown?” She asked.

“After a fashion. There are three of them, you’ll see them prancing around in get ups like that from time to time. Harmless enough.”

Wicksy then gave an involuntary shudder. He could just make out a dark misshapen shadow creeping forwards over the threshold of the open door and towards the man. The role-player’s face grimaced in terror at whatever was casting the shadow and backed away. He tapped the paper on his forehead and gave the slightest shake of his head.

The shadow stopped before the caster revealed itself, but then Wicksy caught a glimpse of a massive arm swipe at the man but was gone a moment later and the shadow receded back inside.

The automatic front door began to shut, but a woman, maybe in her early thirties, dressed in a similar robe but with the hood down moved into the door’s path, and it opened again as the proximity senser detected her presence. Just like the terrified man, she had a square of paper on her forehead, but no symbols on her face.

“Morris!” The woman called out. “Get back in here!” She sounded like she was talking to a naughty child who was straying into traffic.

Morris shook his head. “You have to stop this,” he replied, his voice was audibly trembling as he spoke. “This is madness!”

“Morris!” She scolded again.

“Never thought it would actually work,” he uttered. “Christ, what have we done?” He added louder.

“What we have done,” the woman told him triumphantly. “Is something amazing! No one in history has ever achieved this!”

Sofia took a step towards the invisible barrier at this. “Erm, excuse me? That’s not technically true,” she informed the woman.

There was a loud cavernous snort of fear from the entrance hall behind the woman, followed by a bestial growl that threatened to loosen Wicksy’s bowels.

“Kin ‘ell,” he squeaked out.

“And it always ends badly for laypeople like you,” Sofia added with gravitas.

The blue robed woman spun around to whatever was making that unholy noise inside.

“Cease!” She ordered, then turned back to Sofia and Wicksy. “And who are you?” She asked, her voice a mixture of anger and thinly veiled concern.

“It’s me, Wicksy from floor...”

“Not you, moron!” She snapped.

“Bit harsh,” Wicksy breathed.

“At the risk of sounding overly dramatic,” Sofia called across to her. “I’m your worst fucking nightmare. Even worse than that thing you have conjured in there.”

Morris suddenly bolted across the car park towards them.

“Morris!” The woman at the door screamed. “Get back here you fucking coward!”

“Jesus, God!” Morris pleaded as he approached. “We’re done something...”

Wicksy was just about to warn the man when he ran face first into the barrier. He bounced back and impressive distance and landed hard on his back on the tarmac.

“Stupid,” Sofia finished the sentence for him.

The blue robed woman looked on in disbelief at this.

“You’re not the only one with a trick or two,” Sofia told her. “And sweetheart, I’ve been doing this a hell of a lot longer than you.”

“You, you can’t hurt us,” the woman shouted and pointed to the paper on her forehead.

Sofia tutted and turned to Wicksy who was still watching a stunned Morris flapping around on the ground.

“What’s that saying?” She asked. “A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing?”

“Something like that,” Wicksy murmured in response.

Sofia looked up at the tower block then back to the car park. She frowned slightly and seemed to Wicksy that she was weighing something up. Morris, his nose caved in, began to bleed and weep on the ground in front of them.

Movement over by the entrance door, drew Wicksy’s attention over there and he saw the third and final of the second-floor role-players, a man in his forties, identically dressed and painted like Morris and with the apparently