



Black Eyes & Broken Souls

Author: Paul Green

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1 The Fall

The bourbon burned a familiar path down Mick Hargraves' throat as he tilted the bottle back, not bothering with a glass. His flat was dark except for the blue flicker of a muted television and the glow of street lights filtering through grimy windows. Rain lashed against the glass in sheets, providing a steady percussion to accompany his descent.

On the coffee table, scattered among empty takeaway containers and crumpled case notes, a photograph of a smiling boy stared up at him. Jamie Matthews. Eight years old. Missing for three weeks before Mick found him. Three weeks too late.

"Should've been faster, should've been smarter," Mick muttered, running a thumb over the creased photograph. "Should've seen it sooner."

Five years had passed since that case, but alcohol only dulled the edges—it never erased them completely. Tonight was worse than usual. His latest client, Mrs. Delaney, had hired him to find her missing son. The boy had turned up safe—just hiding at a friend's house after a row with his stepdad. Happy ending. No trauma. No nightmares.

But the case had scratched at old wounds, leaving them raw and bleeding again.

Mick's phone buzzed. His sister Liz. Third call tonight. He silenced it and reached instead for the orange prescription bottle beside the bourbon.

"Doctor said two," he murmured, tipping three into his palm. The label, worn around the edges, wasn't even his name. His contact at the clinic had stopped asking questions months ago.

He swallowed the pills with another slug of bourbon, knowing the combination was reckless. Somewhere in the fog of his mind, a voice warned him to be careful. He ignored it, as he had ignored all such voices since Jamie.

The pain in his leg—a souvenir from the case that had ended his police career—throbbed in time with the rain. The bullet had missed the bone but shredded enough muscle to ensure he'd never chase a suspect down an alley again. Not that it mattered. By then, the force had already been looking for reasons to push him out.

When the room began to spin, Mick knew he'd crossed a line. The pills and bourbon were hitting harder than usual, creating a disorienting haze that made the walls pulse. His heartbeat seemed erratic, his breathing shallow.

"Need air," he gasped, lurching to his feet.

Outside, the rain was merciless, soaking through his rumpled shirt within seconds. Mick barely noticed. The world tilted around him as he staggered down the street, one hand trailing along brick walls to keep himself upright. His vision tunnelled, street lights stretching into bizarre halos.

"Not good," he mumbled, his tongue feeling thick and uncooperative. "This is... not good."

He'd overdone it before, but this was different. His heart fluttered in his chest like a panicked bird. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the cold rain. Something was very wrong.

East London's streets blurred around him as he stumbled forward without direction. Vomiting twice in a darkened doorway did nothing to clear his head. If anything, the world grew more distorted. Shadowy figures seemed to watch from alleyways, though when he turned to look, only darkness greeted him.

When St. Agnes loomed before him—a decrepit Victorian church scheduled for demolition—Mick barely registered the boarded-up windows and faded "NO TRESPASSING" signs. He only saw shelter from the relentless rain.

The side entrance yielded to his desperate shoving, rotted wood splintering around a rusted padlock. He stumbled inside, dripping onto dusty flagstones, and collapsed against a pew.

"Christ," he gasped, the word echoing in the abandoned nave.

His heart stuttered painfully, each breath now a conscious effort. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, details emerged from the darkness. Burned-down candle stubs formed a rough circle near the altar. Strange symbols were drawn on the floor in what looked like charcoal, their edges blurred by footprints. Papers—pages torn from books—lay scattered nearby, as if someone had left in a hurry.

Mick's police instincts, dulled but not dead, registered that he'd stumbled into something unusual. But self-preservation quickly overrode curiosity. His condition was deteriorating rapidly.

With trembling fingers, he tried to dial emergency services, but his phone slipped from his grasp, clattering across the stone floor. The sound echoed through the empty church, seeming to reverberate longer than it should have.

When the echo finally faded, the silence that followed was absolute. Even the rain seemed to have stopped, though Mick knew that was impossible.

"Hello?" he called, his voice thin and uncertain.

No response, but the temperature plummeted suddenly. His breath fogged in front of him, and the hairs on his arms stood on end.

Mick had never considered himself superstitious, but instinct told him he wasn't alone. Every horror film he'd ever watched flashed through his mind as he scanned the shadows.

"Anyone there?" he tried again, attempting to stand but finding his legs uncooperative.

A whisper answered—so faint he couldn't be sure he'd heard it. Then another, and another, until the air seemed filled with hushed voices speaking a language he couldn't understand. The shadows in the corners of the church appeared to thicken, gathering substance like storm clouds.

Fear crawled along Mick's spine, but his body refused to respond. He was trapped, pinned by whatever poison cocktail he'd inflicted on himself.

A strange calm descended as he realised he might be dying. The thought should have terrified him, but instead, he felt an odd acceptance. Maybe this was inevitable. Maybe, after years of self-destruction, this was simply the culmination of a path he'd chosen long ago.

"Is this it, then?" he asked the darkness. Mick had never been one for prayer—had seen too much cruelty in the world to believe in a benevolent watchmaker. Yet facing his own mortality, he found himself wondering if he was about to get an answer to the great cosmic question after all. "This how I check out? About to find out if there's anything on the other side?"

The whispers intensified, and the shadows began to move with purpose, flowing across the floor like liquid. They pooled around Mick, climbing his legs, his torso, reaching for his face.

His heart gave a violent lurch, then seemed to stop entirely. Darkness crept in from the edges of his vision. As consciousness began to slip away, a final, coherent thought formed:

"This must be what death feels like."

But it wasn't death that wrapped itself around Michael Hargraves in that abandoned church. It was something far older, and infinitely more patient. Something that had been waiting.

As Mick's eyes closed, the shadows poured into him—through his mouth, his nose, even through his skin—filling the emptiness left by his receding consciousness. The church fell silent once more, save for the renewed patter of rain against the stained-glass windows.

Outside, London continued its nighttime rhythm, unaware that in a forgotten corner of the city, something ancient had found a new home in the broken vessel of a fallen man.

2 The Voice

Consciousness returned to Mick Hargraves like an unwelcome guest—insistent, disorienting, and accompanied by pain. Sunlight stabbed through partially drawn blinds, landing with precision on his face. His mouth tasted of ash and copper. His head throbbed with each heartbeat.

He was in his bed. In his flat. Wearing boxers and a stained t-shirt he didn't recognise.

Mick blinked, trying to assemble the fragmented images in his mind into something coherent. He remembered drinking. The pills. The rain. After that, nothing but disconnected flashes—darkness, whispers, cold stone against his cheek.

"What the hell?" he croaked, his voice rough from disuse.

The digital clock on his bedside table read 10:17. Morning, judging by the sunlight. But what day? He fumbled for his phone, knocking over an empty glass in the process. Wednesday. Three days after he'd last remembered being conscious.

Three days. Gone.

Panic surged through him as he sat up too quickly, sending the room spinning. A blackout was nothing new—but three days? That was unprecedented, even for him.

The bathroom mirror revealed a haggard stranger. His stubble had evolved into the beginnings of a beard. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, which were bloodshot and oddly glassy. A nasty bruise coloured his left temple, and dried blood crusted his nostrils.

"Christ," he muttered, prodding gingerly at the bruise. "What happened to you?"

The hot shower did little to clear his head, but it washed away the surface grime. As the water drummed against his back, Mick mentally retraced his steps from that night. The bourbon. The pills. The rain-soaked walk. The church—

St. Agnes. That much he remembered. Taking shelter in the abandoned building. Seeing... something. Candles. Markings on the floor.

After dressing in the cleanest clothes he could find, Mick checked his wallet. Still there, with all his cards, and mysteriously, fifty pounds more cash than he remembered having. His keys hung on their hook by the door.

Everything in its place, as if he'd simply gone to sleep and woken up three days later. Except for the missing time. And the bruises. And the peculiar hollowness in his gut that didn't feel like ordinary hunger.

Mick made a strong cup of coffee, hoping the caffeine would jump-start his sluggish brain. As he sipped the bitter liquid, he checked his phone. Eight missed calls from his sister. Two from his only regular client. One from an unknown number.

No messages explaining where he'd been or what he'd done for three days.

The coffee turned sour in his stomach as anxiety knotted his insides. He'd had blackouts before, but nothing like this. This wasn't just missing a few hours after a bender. This was—

Inevitable.

Mick froze, coffee mug halfway to his lips. The thought had formed in his mind with perfect clarity, but it didn't feel like his own. It felt... foreign. Inserted.

"Getting paranoid in your old age, Mick," he muttered, setting down the mug with a shaky hand.

He needed answers, and the only lead he had was the church. If he'd passed out there, maybe someone had found him. Maybe that explained how he got home.

St. Agnes looked different in daylight—less menacing, more pathetic. Scaffolding covered part of the facade, and a weathered demolition notice was taped to the main entrance. The side door Mick remembered breaking through was now properly boarded up with fresh plywood.

He circled the building, finding another entrance at the back where a basement window had been smashed. It was a tight squeeze, but Mick managed to slide through, dropping onto a dusty floor below.

The basement was typical church storage—broken pews, water-damaged hymnals, a few religious statues with missing limbs. Mick found the stairs and made his way up to the main sanctuary.

In daylight filtering through stained-glass, the nave looked smaller than he remembered. Debris littered the floor—empty beer cans, cigarette butts, fast food wrappers. Typical teenage hangout detritus. But as Mick approached the altar, he saw what he'd glimpsed that night.

A rough circle of candle stubs. Symbols drawn in what looked like charcoal on the stone floor. Torn pages from books scattered nearby.

Mick knelt to examine the markings. Despite his years on the force, he'd never dealt with anything occult—that kind of thing had always seemed like nonsense to him. But these symbols were intricate, precise. Not the work of bored kids tagging church walls.

"Just some gothic teenagers playing Satanist," he muttered unconvincingly.

Misguided as they are, these were not children.

Mick spun around, certain someone had spoken directly behind him. The church was empty.

"Hello?" he called, his voice echoing. "Anyone there?"

No response.

He turned back to the markings, an unsettled feeling crawling up his spine. One of the torn pages caught his eye—the paper was old, the text in what looked like Latin. This wasn't from some paperback horror novel. It looked ancient, valuable.

They thought themselves practitioners of the old ways. They understood nothing.

This time, Mick knew the voice wasn't external. It came from inside his own head, but it wasn't his inner monologue. It was deeper, with an accent he couldn't place—something ancient beneath the modern English.

"Great," Mick said aloud, his voice unnaturally loud in the empty church. "Now I'm hearing things. DTs finally kicking in."

This is not withdrawal, Michael Hargraves. This is awakening.

Mick staggered back from the altar, heart hammering. "Who's there?" he demanded, reaching instinctively for a gun that wasn't there.

I am here. With you. In you.

"Fuck this," Mick muttered, backing toward the exit. "I need sleep. Or a doctor. Or both."

As he turned to leave, a wave of dizziness struck him. The church blurred around him, and suddenly he wasn't seeing the dusty, abandoned building any more.

He saw the same space, but at night. Candles burned in a perfect circle. Five figures in dark clothing stood around the altar, hoods obscuring their faces. Their voices rose in unison, speaking words that seemed to bend the air itself.

At the centre of their circle, something impossible happened. The space folded, twisted—like reality itself was being torn open. Through the rent,

Mick glimpsed something vast and horrifying—a shifting mass of shadow and teeth and ancient hunger.

One of the hooded figures screamed and ran, breaking the circle. The tear in reality pulsed, widened. The remaining four scattered in panic as darkness poured through the opening—not smoke or shadow, but something more substantial. Something alive.

As abruptly as it began, the vision ended. Mick found himself on his knees in the dusty church, gasping for breath.

Now you see. They opened a door they could not close. They fled what they could not control.

"This isn't real," Mick insisted, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. "It's the alcohol. Withdrawal. Brain chemistry."

Believe what you will. It changes nothing. I am here now.

Mick stumbled to his feet, desperate to escape the church, the voice, the lingering images from the vision. He had to get out, had to think. Had to find a rational explanation for what was happening.

"Just need a drink," he muttered as he climbed back through the basement window. "Clear my head."

Yes, a drink. That would make things... easier.

The voice sounded almost pleased, which disturbed Mick more than the words themselves. But the suggestion aligned so perfectly with his own craving that he didn't question it.

As Mick hurried away from St. Agnes, he didn't notice the four fresh graves in the small cemetery behind the church. Didn't see how the earth was still loose and freshly turned, despite no funeral services having been performed there in years.

Didn't realise that the missing three days hadn't been lost at all—merely taken from him.

And something else entirely had been using his body in the meantime.

3 Blood Ties

The pounding in Mick's head matched the pounding at his door in perfect, agonising rhythm. He groaned, pulling the pillow over his face as if that might make both go away. Sunlight stabbed through the gap in his curtains, telling him it was well past morning. Afternoon, probably.

"Someone's *persistent*," observed the voice in his head, which had mercifully remained quiet during his alcohol-induced unconsciousness. "Aren't you going to see who it is?"

"No," Mick muttered into the pillow.

The knocking intensified, now accompanied by a familiar voice. "Michael James Hargraves! I know you're in there. Open this door before I use my key."

"Your sister," the demon noted with sudden interest. "How fascinating."

Mick hauled himself upright, wincing as his brain seemed to slosh against his skull. Empty whiskey bottle on the night stand. Half-eaten toast from... yesterday? The day before? He couldn't remember.

"I'm coming!" he shouted, immediately regretting the volume of his own voice.

He fumbled for a t-shirt, sniffing it before pulling it on. Good enough. As he staggered toward the door, the demon offered unnecessary commentary.

"Your sister. The social worker. The good one."

"Shut up," Mick hissed under his breath, running a hand through his dishevelled hair before unlocking the door.

Liz Hargraves stood in the hallway, arms crossed, her dark hair pulled back in a practical ponytail. Same eyes as Mick—grey-blue, perceptive—but hers weren't bloodshot and hollow. She wore sensible clothes: jeans, a navy cardigan over a white blouse. Social worker attire. The picture of

responsible adulthood, which made Mick feel even more like the family disaster.

"Jesus, Mick," she said, taking in his appearance. "You look like hell."

"Thanks. Come in if you're coming." He turned, leaving her to close the door behind her.

The demon's voice grew suddenly animated in a way that made Mick's stomach clench. *"She's quite attractive. I bet she can be... a lot of fun."*

"Stop," Mick muttered, busying himself with clearing takeaway containers from the coffee table.

"What was that?" Liz asked, following him into the living room.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself."

The demon continued, undeterred. *"Then again, she's your sister. That could be even more fun."*

"Stop it!" Mick snapped aloud, his voice sharp enough to make Liz flinch.

"Mick?" Concern shadowed her face as she studied him. "Who are you talking to?"

He avoided her gaze, moving to the kitchenette to put the kettle on. "No one. Sorry. Hangover makes me irritable."

"Mmm." Liz's non-committal response carried years of experience with his excuses. She cleared a space on the couch, pushing aside a pile of unwashed clothes. "You promised to call me this week."

"Been busy," Mick replied automatically.

"Yes, I can see that." She gestured at the empty bottles lined up on the counter like trophies. "Is this what you call 'giving it a rest'?"

The demon chuckled. "She knows you so well. It's delicious, that concern. The worry. I can almost taste it."

Mick struggled to ignore the voice while focusing on Liz. "It's been a rough few weeks."

"You say that every time I visit."

"Then maybe stop visiting," he snapped, immediately regretting it when he saw the hurt flash across her face.

"Is that what you want?" she asked quietly.

The demon's voice slithered through his mind. *"Don't send her away. I'm enjoying this... family reunion."*

Mick pressed his fingers against his temples. "No. I'm sorry. I'm just... I'm not feeling well."

Liz's expression softened slightly. "That's what happens when you drink yourself into oblivion, Mick."

"Yeah, I know the lecture by heart, thanks."

She stood up, approaching him at the counter. Too close. The demon stirred within his consciousness, a sensation like shadows shifting.

"Look at her skin," it whispered. *"Imagine how it would feel under our fingers. How it would taste."*

Mick stepped back abruptly, bumping into the counter. Tea sloshed over the rim of his mug.

"Are you alright?" Liz asked, reaching for his arm. "You look like you're about to be sick."

"I'm fine," he said, voice tight. "Just a bit run down. Too much booze, like you said."

"We're worried about you."

The demon snickered. *"We? Who's the other concerned party?"*

"Now I know you're lying," Mick said, echoing the demon's question despite himself. "Bob hates my guts."

Liz sighed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "He doesn't hate you. He just thinks you're... making bad choices."

"Ah, Saint Bob, with his designer suits and perfect teeth." Mick took a careful sip of tea. "How is Mr. Corporate Accountant these days?"

"Don't change the subject." Liz crossed her arms, fixing him with what he called her 'professional concern' look—the one she probably used on troubled families in her caseload. "Have you been working at all?"

The demon's voice took on a mocking tone. *"Yes, Mick, have you been a productive member of society?"*

Mick gritted his teeth. "Had a case last week. Cheating husband. Turns out he was just gambling online."

"That's it? One case?"

"It's been slow."

"You need to work, Mick. You have bills to pay."

The demon's interest seemed to shift. *"She's concerned about money. How mundane."*

Liz continued, unaware of the commentary. "I can't keep bailing you out. Bob and I—"

"Don't." Mick held up a hand. "Don't say it."

"We have our own expenses, Mick. The baby's coming in four months."

Despite everything, Mick felt a pang of genuine happiness for his sister. "Yeah, I know. Congratulations again."

The demon's voice turned sly. *"A pregnant sister. Even more interesting. Two souls in one body... reminds me of us, doesn't it?"*

Mick felt bile rise in his throat, the demon's insinuation making him physically ill. He rushed to the bathroom, barely making it before emptying the meagre contents of his stomach.

Over the sound of his retching, he could hear Liz moving around in the kitchen, probably cleaning up. Taking care of him, like she always did. The demon's voice followed him even here.

"Such devotion she has for you. Despite your... shortcomings. I wonder what she'd think if she knew what you're harbouring."

Mick flushed the toilet and rinsed his mouth. When he looked in the mirror, his reflection seemed wrong somehow—his eyes too dark, his skin too pale. For a moment, he thought he saw something else looking back at him from behind his own face.

"Leave her out of this," he whispered. "Whatever sick game you're playing, it doesn't include my sister."

"Everything in your life includes me now," the demon replied. *"That's our bargain."*

"We never bargained for this."

"Didn't we? You surrendered control. I kept us alive. The terms are... evolving."

Mick splashed cold water on his face, trying to ground himself in the physical sensation. When he returned to the kitchen, Liz had washed his dishes and was writing something on a notepad.

"I've got a potential client for you," she said without looking up. "Friend of a colleague. Needs a PI for something discreet."

"You're finding me work now?"

She tore off the page and handed it to him. "Someone has to. Call them. Today."

The demon's voice took on a gentler tone that was somehow more disturbing than its earlier lewdness. *"She takes such good care of you. Reminds me of someone I once knew. Long ago."*

Mick took the paper, noticing his sister's neat handwriting. Name, number, brief description of the case. A missing bookmaker named Barry Wentworth, gone three days without contacting his sister.

"Thanks," he said, meaning it.

Liz studied his face. "There's something different about you."

The demon became very still within him, a predator freezing to avoid detection.

"What do you mean?" Mick asked, trying to sound casual.

"I don't know. You seem... not quite yourself." She frowned. "Are you taking something besides alcohol?"

Relief washed through him. That, at least, he could deny honestly. "No. Just the usual poison."

"Maybe you should see someone. A doctor. Or..." she hesitated. "Or go back to that support group."

"I'm fine, Liz."

"You're not fine." She gathered her purse. "But I can't force you to get help."

"Such concern," the demon murmured. *"It's almost... touching."*

As Liz moved toward the door, she turned back suddenly. "One more thing. Mum's birthday next week. She'd like to see you."

Mick winced. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"She's forgiven you, Mick. For the scene at Christmas. For all of it."

"Maybe I haven't forgiven myself."

Liz's expression hardened slightly. "That's the problem, isn't it? It's always about you." She softened again, reaching for the door. "Just think about it."

After she left, Mick stood in the silent flat, the piece of paper crumpled in his fist.

"Your sister has quite the effect on you," the demon observed. *"All that guilt. Shame. Failed expectations. Like a feast laid out before me."*

"If you ever... EVER... talk about her that way again—"

"You'll what?" the demon's voice was amused. *"Evict me? I'm afraid the lease is rather binding."*

Mick moved to the window, watching as Liz crossed the street to her sensible hybrid car. Normal life. The life he'd once thought he might have.

"I'll find a way," he said quietly. "If you threaten her—or anyone in my family—I'll find a way to destroy us both."

The demon was silent for a long moment. When it spoke again, its voice carried an undertone Mick hadn't heard before. Almost like respect.

"Perhaps we should establish some... boundaries after all. Your family remains off-limits. For now."

Mick watched until Liz's car disappeared around the corner, carrying with it the last reminder of the man he used to be. The man his sister still believed he could become again.

He looked down at the crumpled paper in his hand, smoothing it out carefully. A case. Work. Structure. Maybe that's what he needed to regain some control.

"Well," said the demon, its voice returning to its usual sardonic tone. *"Shall we go hunting for a missing bookmaker?"*

Mick reached for his coat. Whatever game the demon was playing, two could play it. The more he understood about his unwanted passenger, the

better his chances of finding its weaknesses. And sooner or later, it would slip up.

They all did.

4 Unholy Negotiations

The missing bookmaker's office was exactly what Mick expected: a shabby converted betting shop with nicotine-stained walls and the lingering smell of desperation. Two men—one broad-shouldered with a boxer's broken nose, the other wiry with a perpetual sneer—claimed to know nothing about Barry Wentworth's disappearance.

"Haven't seen him in weeks, mate," the broader one, who'd introduced himself as Dean, insisted. "Probably skipped town. Owed a lot of people money."

As Dean spoke, Mick felt a peculiar sensation—like someone leaning over his shoulder, examining the men through his eyes.

"He's lying," the voice observed in Mick's head. *"I can taste the deceit. It's... tangy. Almost metallic."*

Mick maintained his poker face, though the demon's sudden input was jarring. Three weeks of this... presence... and he still wasn't used to its interjections.

"The smaller one killed him," the demon continued, sounding almost bored. *"His soul carries the stain. Fresh, too."*

"You can tell that just by looking?" Mick thought back, careful not to let his expression change.

"I can sense corruption. It's what I do." The demon seemed to stretch within Mick's consciousness. *"The drink and drugs make you weak. It's how I was able to get inside. But they also make you... permeable to certain insights."*

Mick refocused on the men. "That's funny, because Barry's sister says he mentioned collecting from you boys the night he disappeared. Said it was a big payment, enough to clear his debts."

The smaller man—Ronnie—exchanged a quick glance with Dean. It was subtle, but Mick had been a detective long enough to recognise guilt when he saw it.

"The knife is in the back room," the demon offered helpfully. "Still has blood on it. Humans are remarkably careless about evidence."

Mick felt a surge of confidence. "You killed him, didn't you?"

The room went suddenly still.

"The fuck did you say?" Dean growled, rising to his full height.

"Barry came to collect. Maybe the amount was more than you expected. Maybe you argued." Mick noticed Ronnie's hand drifting toward his jacket. "I'm betting the knife's still here. Police would find blood evidence no matter how much you cleaned."

"You shouldn't have come alone," Ronnie said, pulling a switch-blade from his pocket.

"This is becoming tediously predictable," the demon sighed as Dean circled around behind Mick.

"A little help maybe?" Mick thought, tensing for the fight.

"Why? This body is yours to defend. I'm merely a... passenger." The demon's voice carried an undercurrent of amusement.

Mick ducked as Ronnie lunged, narrowly avoiding the blade. He landed a solid punch to Ronnie's sternum, sending the smaller man staggering backward. But he didn't see Dean's blow coming—a heavy object crashed against the back of his skull, and the world went black.

Mick returned to consciousness gradually, awareness filtering in through layers of pain. His head throbbed where Dean had hit him. Cold metal bit

into his wrists, secured behind him. The chair he was bound to was bolted to the floor.

As his vision cleared, he recognised his surroundings—one of the abandoned warehouses near Canary Wharf. Through grimy windows, a sliver of dark water was visible. The Thames. Perfect place to dispose of a body.

"How cinematically appropriate," the demon observed. "A warehouse by the docks. Do all human criminals lack imagination, or just the ones you associate with?"

Mick ignored the commentary, focusing instead on Dean and Ronnie, who were conversing in low tones near a battered table. A third man stood with them—older, better dressed, with the hard eyes of someone accustomed to giving orders that hurt people.

"Ah, the true authority arrives," the demon noted. "His corruption runs deeper. Refined by years of practise. Like aged whiskey compared to cheap beer."

The well-dressed man approached, studying Mick with clinical detachment.

"Mr. Hargraves. Private investigator. Former detective constable. Discharged under... complicated circumstances." His voice was cultured, at odds with the squalid surroundings. "You've caused my associates some inconvenience."

"Barry Wentworth was just trying to collect a debt," Mick said. "He didn't deserve what they did to him."

The man smiled thinly. "Mr. Wentworth made poor choices. As have you." He turned to Dean. "How much has he had to drink today?"

Dean shrugged. "Dunno. Smelled it on him when we picked him up."

"Your dependency makes you vulnerable," the demon commented. "It's why your instincts failed you earlier. Why you didn't sense the danger until too late."

"Not helpful right now," Mick thought back sharply.

The well-dressed man nodded thoughtfully. "Drink-driving accidents are so common, aren't they? Especially among those with... documented alcohol problems."

Mick's stomach tightened as he understood.

"No use getting your hands dirty," the man continued, turning to Dean and Ronnie. "Get him properly intoxicated, then put him behind the wheel. The river will do the rest."

"This isn't a good idea," Mick said, struggling against his restraints.

The man raised an eyebrow. "I disagree, Mr. Hargraves. It's quite elegant. A tragic accident befalling a troubled man with a drinking problem. No one will look twice."

As he left, Ronnie approached with a bottle of cheap whiskey and a malicious grin. "Open wide, Mr. Detective."

Mick clamped his mouth shut, but Dean pinched his nose, forcing him to gasp for air. Ronnie poured whiskey down his throat, causing him to choke and sputter.

"They're being quite thorough," the demon remarked as Mick coughed, the burning liquid scorching his oesophagus. "I'm seeing more competence than I expected."

"Stop... analysing... and help!" Mick mentally shouted between coughs.

"I'm curious how this plays out," the demon replied. "Besides, the alcohol affects you more than me. I want to see how much it takes before you lose consciousness completely."

More whiskey. Mick tried to spit it out, but Dean held his head back, ensuring he swallowed most of it. The room was already beginning to blur at the edges.

"Your tolerance is impressive," the demon noted. *"Though I suppose years of practise will do that."*

Another pour. The whiskey burned less now, his throat numbing to the assault. Mick felt the familiar warmth spreading through his limbs, the initial stages of intoxication that he usually welcomed. Now it felt like death approaching.

"Your mind is slipping," the demon observed, its voice somehow clearer as Mick's thoughts grew fuzzy.

"I know. Just wait," Mick thought back, the words feeling thick even in his mind.

"They're killing us," the demon said, a new note of concern entering its voice.

"They're killing ME. You're just along for the ride."

"The distinction won't matter when we're both trapped in a sunken vehicle."

Another pour. Mick's head lolled forward, then snapped back as Dean yanked his hair. The room swam in and out of focus.

"Christ, how much can he take?" Ronnie complained, tipping the bottle to show it was nearly empty.

"He's a proper alcoholic," Dean replied. "Probably drinks this much every night."

"I can feel your consciousness receding," the demon said, and Mick thought he detected something almost like anxiety in its voice. *"Your hold on this body is weakening."*

"That's... the point," Mick managed to think back.

The demon was silent for a moment. Then: *"You're doing this deliberately. Surrendering control."*

"Can't fight... the alcohol. Might as well... use it." Even Mick's thoughts were slurring now. "Your turn now."

The last bottle was empty. Mick's head hung forward, drool mixed with whiskey dripping onto his shirt. Dean roughly shook his shoulder.

"Think he's ready. Get the car."

Ronnie peered at Mick's face. "His eyes look weird."

"He's wasted. Come on."

"No, look. They're... weird."

Dean grabbed Mick's hair again, yanking his head up to examine his face. For a moment, genuine fear flashed across the thug's features.

"What the fuck?" he whispered.

Mick—or what had been Mick—smiled. The expression was wrong somehow, like a predator mimicking human emotion without understanding it.

"Thank you for the drink," said the demon using Mick's voice, but with subtle differences in cadence and tone. *"It made the transition so much easier."*

The last thing Dean saw before the darkness took him was Mick's eyes turning completely black, like windows opening onto an abyss.

Mick awoke to birdsong and the sensation of cold, hard wood against his cheek. Blinking against the morning sunlight, he gradually recognised his surroundings—a park bench. His mouth tasted like something had died in

it, and his head throbbed with a hangover of epic proportions, but he was alive.

"What... happened?" he thought, struggling to piece together fragmented memories of the previous night.

The demon didn't immediately answer. It felt... different somehow. Satiated. Almost drowsy.

Mick sat up slowly, checking himself for injuries. His clothes were dishevelled but intact, except for a dark stain on his shirt that looked disturbingly like dried blood. He examined his hands, finding similar stains under his fingernails despite evidence he'd washed them—soap residue still clung to his skin.

"What did you do?" he tried again.

"What was necessary," the demon finally replied, its voice carrying an unfamiliar note of contentment. *"They won't bother anyone again."*

A cold knot formed in Mick's stomach. "Jesus Christ," he muttered aloud.

He staggered to his feet, fighting waves of nausea that weren't entirely due to the alcohol. A nearby clock showed it was just past seven in the morning. A newspaper vendor was setting up his stand across the street. Digging in his pocket, Mick was surprised to find his wallet still there, along with something hard and small that he didn't recognise—a human tooth.

He nearly retched, shoving it back into his pocket as he crossed to the newspaper stand. The headline on the morning edition made his blood run cold:

RITUALISTIC MURDER AT DOCKS: TWO FOUND DEAD IN MACABRE SCENE

With trembling hands, Mick purchased a copy and retreated to a nearby café. Over a black coffee that he hoped would settle his stomach, he read

the gruesome details—two men found suspended by chains in positions resembling crucifixion, disembowelled, with "inexplicable black residue" where their eyes should have been.

"This is what you call 'not bothering anyone again'?" Mick thought furiously.

"They intended to kill us. I simply returned the favour more... creatively."
The demon sounded almost proud.

"You hung them up like slaughterhouse meat! It's all over the news!"

"I wanted to send a message."

"To whom?"

"Anyone who might think of harming us in the future."

Mick closed his eyes, trying to control his breathing. The other café patrons were giving him concerned glances.

"We need to talk," he thought. "Not here."

Back in his small flat, Mick paced the worn carpet, the newspaper spread open on his coffee table.

"You can't just disembowel people and hang them up in public," he said aloud, no longer caring if anyone overheard him talking to himself. "Do you have any idea how many cameras, witnesses, and forensic techniques exist now? My DNA, fingerprints, fibres from my clothing—all of it could be there."

"Your human authorities are no concern to me," the demon dismissed.

"They should be! I go to prison, you go with me. And prison isn't exactly a place where you can easily find more souls to consume."

"Are you sure you thought that through?" The demon's voice had that amused tone Mick had come to dread. *"It seems like a captive buffet."*

Mick paused, realising with horror the demon's perspective on what he'd considered a deterrent.

"No. Absolutely not. We'd be under constant surveillance. Guards everywhere. And the souls you'd find there... some deserve punishment, sure, but many don't. Not by your standards."

"Your justice system disagrees," the demon countered.

"My justice system is flawed, and you know it. Besides, once they notice inmates dropping dead with black eyes, we'd have a whole different level of attention. Military. Government. People who'd love to study what we are."

The demon fell silent, considering this—perhaps the first time Mick had made a point that gave it genuine pause.

"Very well," it finally conceded. *"No more... performances. Your realm has become tediously observant since my last visit."*

Mick reached into his pocket and extracted the tooth, holding it up accusingly. "And no trophies. This needs to go."

"A small memento," the demon said, almost petulantly. *"Is that too much to ask?"*

"Yes. No evidence. No mementos. Nothing that connects us to... whatever you did last night."

"You take all the fun out of it," the demon complained.

"That's the point. This isn't fun. This is survival."

Mick flushed the tooth down the toilet, watching to make sure it disappeared. When he looked up at the bathroom mirror, he froze. For just a moment—a fraction of a second—he saw something behind his

reflection. A darker silhouette, its edges blurring into shadow, with eyes that gleamed like distant stars viewed through smoke.

Then it was gone, and only his own haggard face stared back at him.

But the message was clear. They were bound together now, for better or worse. Predator and prey, sharing the same skin.

As Mick turned away from the mirror, his phone buzzed. A text from Barry Wentworth's sister: "Police found evidence that those men killed Barry. They're calling it case closed. I'm sorry, but I won't be needing your services any more."

"For Christ's sake," Mick muttered, tossing the phone onto his bed. "You cost me my payment. The police found evidence that should have been mine to discover."

"You're welcome for saving your life," the demon replied dryly.

"I had a plan."

"Being force-fed alcohol until your liver failed was your plan?"

Mick ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "I would have got out of it. And got paid for solving the case."

"Consider it the cost of our... arrangement."

Mick felt something shift inside him—not the demon taking control, but a subtle realignment, like puzzle pieces settling into place. An unspoken acknowledgment passed between them: they needed each other to survive in this new reality they shared, frustrating as it might be.

The bargain had been struck. Now they would both have to live with it—and figure out how to pay the rent.

5 Sweet Corruption

Mick Hargraves trudged along Westbury Avenue, massaging his temples. The headache that had started during his stakeout of Mrs. Peterson's allegedly cheating husband was blossoming into something spectacular. Six hours of surveillance had yielded nothing except confirmation that the man was indeed having an affair—with his online poker habit rather than another woman.

"If you're such a powerful demon," Mick muttered under his breath, "why is it that you can't just take over my body whenever you want?" The question had been nagging at him for days.

There was a momentary silence, as if the question had caught the demon off guard. Then, a thoughtful rumble that Mick felt more than heard.

"That truly is a good question," the demon admitted, sounding almost impressed. *"In all the hosts I've inhabited, I've never encountered such a barrier. It is... frustrating."*

"So I'm special?" Mick asked with bitter sarcasm.

"Not special," the demon corrected. *"Broken in a peculiar way. The very damage that allowed me entry also created... resistance. Your fractured mind formed defences even you aren't aware of."*

Mick considered this as he turned the corner, avoiding the glance of a woman walking her dog. "So my messed-up head is actually helping me?"

"A simplification, but essentially correct. Your guilt, your self-loathing, your tenacious grip on what remains of your identity—they form walls I cannot easily breach without your submission." The demon's voice took on a note of grudging respect. *"Most humans are like unlocked doors. You're a fortress with broken windows."*

"Such tedium," came the voice, unbidden as always. *"Is this truly how you spend your days? Watching the mundane infidelities of ordinary humans?"*

"Not now," Mick muttered, ignoring the glance from a passing woman who clearly thought he was talking to himself. Three weeks since the... incident at the docks, and he still wasn't used to the constant commentary in his head.

"These lesser sins barely sustain me," the demon continued. *"Lust, greed, minor deceits—they're like crumbs compared to true corruption."*

Mick didn't respond. He'd learned that engaging only encouraged it. Instead, he focused on the prospect of a whiskey when he got home. Just one to take the edge off.

"Your liver is already compromised," the demon observed. *"I can feel the damage."*

"Didn't ask for a medical opinion."

A distant, tinkling melody drifted through the air, growing gradually louder. Mick barely registered it—just background noise in London's constant urban symphony.

The demon, however, went suddenly alert. Mick could feel its attention sharpen like a physical sensation.

"What is that unholy racket?" it demanded.

Mick glanced up to see a white van turning onto the street, decorated with garish cartoon ice creams and playing a repetitive jingle.

"Ice cream truck," he said flatly. "For kids."

Several children were already running toward it, clutching coins, tugging parents' hands. A small queue formed as the van pulled to a stop.

"But what is that delicious smell?" The demon's voice had changed, filled with something Mick hadn't heard before—a kind of wonder. *"We must go to it."*

Mick snorted. "It's just ice cream. Frozen sugar and milk."

"I want it."

"Well, too bad. I'm going home." Mick turned toward his flat, but his feet suddenly felt heavy, as if walking through wet cement.

"We will try this... ice cream," the demon insisted.

Mick felt a strange pressure building behind his eyes. His right foot pivoted without his permission, turning him back toward the van.

"Stop that," he hissed. "We talked about this. No taking control without permission."

"This is merely... suggestion," the demon replied, though they both knew it was more. *"Forceful suggestion."*

Despite his resistance, Mick found himself walking toward the ice cream van. He could control his movements, but only with deliberate concentration that quickly became exhausting. Like trying to swim upstream in a strong current.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered as he joined the end of the queue, standing awkwardly behind a mother with two small children. "I'm a grown man. I don't need ice cream."

"I've never experienced it," the demon said, an unusual note of something almost like excitement in its normally sardonic tone. *"Physical pleasures are new to me."*

The mother glanced back at Mick, then pulled her children slightly closer.

"Great, now I look like a weirdo."

"You already did," the demon pointed out. *"Talking to yourself doesn't help."*

When Mick reached the window, the vendor—a bored teenager with acne—raised his eyebrows. "What can I get you?"

Before Mick could answer, he felt a rush like cold water flowing through his veins, and suddenly he was pushed back in his own consciousness. He could see through his eyes but couldn't control his mouth or limbs. The sensation was nauseating.

"Vanilla," his mouth said, though Mick hadn't formed the word. *"The white one."*

The vendor gave him an odd look. "One vanilla cone? That'll be £5.00."

Mick's hand fumbled in his pocket, producing his wallet. He watched, helpless, as his fingers extracted a five-pound note.

"This is a step too far," Mick thought fiercely, trying to wrestle back control.

"Just a moment," the demon replied silently. *"I'm curious."*

The vendor handed over the cone, which Mick's possessed hand took carefully. As they walked away, the demon brought the ice cream to their mouth and took a tentative lick.

The reaction was immediate and startling. Mick felt a surge of intense pleasure that wasn't his own—a visceral delight that seemed absurdly disproportionate to the stimulus.

"This is... extraordinary!" the demon's voice was almost reverent. *"Cold yet sweet. Solid yet yielding. The texture! The flavour!"*

Despite his anger at being hijacked, Mick couldn't help but be amused by the demon's childlike reaction to something so ordinary.

"Great. You've tried it. Now give me back my body."

The demon ignored him, savouring each lick with single-minded focus. Mick noticed a couple nearby giving him strange looks—a middle-aged man in a rumpled suit, staring at a vanilla ice cream cone with an expression of near-religious ecstasy.

"You're making a scene," Mick warned.

"Human opinions are irrelevant," the demon replied, though it did temper their facial expression slightly.

As they walked, with the demon still controlling their body and methodically consuming the ice cream, Mick remembered an important detail.

"You should know that I'm lactose intolerant."

"What does that mean?" the demon asked between licks.

"It means my body can't properly digest dairy products. That ice cream is going to make us sick."

The demon paused briefly. *"How sick?"*

"Stomach cramps. Gas. Diarrhoea. It won't be pleasant."

After considering this, the demon took another deliberate lick. *"A minor discomfort for such pleasure."*

"You say that now," Mick warned. "But you've never experienced digestive distress. Trust me, you'll regret this."

They had reached Mick's block of flats. The demon, still in control, navigated them inside and up the stairs to his second-floor flat. It was only after the door was safely closed behind them that Mick felt control returning to his limbs like circulation coming back to a numb limb—pins and needles included.

He flexed his fingers, relieved to have his body back, but furious at the violation.

"That can't happen again," he said aloud, his voice echoing in the small, cluttered living room. "You can't just... commandeer me whenever you feel like it."

"I wanted to understand," the demon replied. *"Your human experiences intrigue me. Your vices aren't the only pleasures available in this realm."*

"We need to set boundaries," Mick insisted, dropping onto his worn sofa. "You can't just take over whenever you want."

"But where's the fun in that?" The demon's tone was light, almost playful, which somehow made it more infuriating.

Mick's stomach gave an ominous gurgle. He grimaced, already feeling the first warning signs of lactose-induced distress.

"I'm going to bed," he muttered. "And you're about to learn why I avoid dairy products."

The first cramp hit at 2:17 AM, sharp and twisting. Mick bolted upright, then immediately rushed to the bathroom.

"What is happening?" the demon demanded as Mick's body rebelled violently against the innocent-seeming ice cream.

"I told you," Mick gasped between spasms. "Lactose intolerance."

"This is most unpleasant," the demon observed as another wave of cramps seized them. *"Why didn't you warn me?"*

"I did warn you," Mick replied through gritted teeth. "Welcome to the limitations of a human body."

For the next few hours, they endured together—the demon experiencing genuine physical discomfort for the first time in its existence. By dawn, exhausted and emptied, Mick collapsed back into bed.

"That was... enlightening," the demon finally said as the worst passed. *"Your physical form is more fragile than I realised."*

"That's why we need to be partners, not adversaries," Mick mumbled into his pillow. "I know how to navigate this world. You don't."

The demon was quiet for so long that Mick thought it had retreated to whatever corner of his consciousness it occupied when not actively communicating.

"Wait, there are other flavours?" it finally asked, voice uncharacteristically tentative.

Despite everything, Mick found himself laughing—a short, surprised bark of genuine amusement.

"Dozens. And lactose-free options too."

"But where's the fun in that?" the demon replied, echoing its earlier sentiment.

"Exactly the point," Mick said, reaching for the antacids on his bedside table. "Actions have consequences. Even for you now."

As Mick drifted back to sleep, he felt the demon contemplating this new reality—their shared existence, with its unexpected pleasures and equally unexpected pains. For the first time since the possession, he felt something almost like equilibrium between them.

It wouldn't last, of course. But for now, in the quiet aftermath of their ice cream adventure, they had reached a small understanding—forged in the crucible of dairy digestive disaster.

6 Missing Innocence

The rain had been falling for three days straight, turning London's streets into glistening rivers of reflected neon. Mick hunched deeper into his coat as he approached the community centre---a converted church that still bore the architectural remnants of its religious past, though its current mission was decidedly more earthbound.

Liz Morgan met him at the door, her face drawn with worry that made her look older than her thirty years. She ran the youth outreach programme and had been the one to call him.

"Thanks for coming, Mr. Hargraves," she said, ushering him inside. The interior smelled of damp clothes and institutional disinfectant. A handful of teenagers huddled around a small television in one corner, while others queued for hot food being served from steel trays.

"Your message said this wasn't the first disappearance," Mick said, accepting the cup of bad coffee she offered.

"Five in the last month. All between sixteen and nineteen." Liz led him to a small office partitioned off from the main hall. Papers were stacked in precarious towers on her desk. "The police say they're runaways. That street kids just move on."

"But you don't believe that."

"These kids check in regularly. They have a system, a community. They don't just vanish."

"*She's genuinely concerned,*" came the demon's voice, unexpected after several days of relative quiet. "*No deception here. Just... fear.*"

Mick nodded, pulling out a notebook. "Tell me about the most recent one."

"Ellie Winters. Seventeen. Been on the streets about eight months." Liz handed over a grainy printout---a security camera still showing a girl with a purple-streaked pixie cut and too-thin shoulders. "She's been coming here

for meals every day since November. Last Thursday, she didn't show. Neither did Danny Roach, another regular. They weren't close, so them both vanishing the same day..."

"Not a coincidence," Mick finished.

"She believes they're still alive," the demon observed. "Interesting. Most humans assume death when someone disappears."

Mick ignored the commentary. "Any connection between the five missing kids?"

"Nothing obvious. Different backgrounds, different reasons for being homeless." Liz hesitated. "Except... they're all what you might call invisible. No families searching for them. No one to notice except us."

"Perfect targets," Mick muttered. "Did any of them mention new people hanging around? Job offers? Anyone taking an interest in them?"

"Not to me. But Kev might know more---he's closer to them age-wise." She pointed toward a lanky young man sorting through donated clothing. "Volunteers here after getting off the streets himself."

As Mick approached Kev, the demon stirred again. *"This one carries secrets. And fear. It clings to him like smoke."*

"Everyone's got secrets," Mick thought back.

"Yes. But his taste... different. Sharper."

The volunteer looked up as Mick approached. Couldn't be more than twenty-one, with the guarded expression of someone who'd seen too much, too young.

"Kev? I'm Mick Hargraves. Liz asked me to look into the missing kids."

The young man nodded warily. "You a cop?"

"Private investigator. Ex-cop. I'm just trying to figure out what happened to Ellie and the others."

"*He's lying to you,*" the demon whispered as Kev shrugged.

"Dunno much. They were here, then they weren't."

Mick leaned in slightly. "I think you do know something. And I think you're scared of the same people who took them."

Kev's eyes widened fractionally---a tell Mick didn't need supernatural help to spot.

"Look, I can't..." Kev glanced toward the door.

"*He fears being observed,*" the demon noted. "*Someone is watching this place.*"

"Let's step outside," Mick suggested, guiding Kev toward the back exit. In the narrow alley behind the centre, the rain drummed steadily on a metal awning.

"I can't be seen talking to you," Kev said, huddling against the brick wall. "They'll know."

"Who?"

"Guys in a white van. Been coming around offering cash for 'day labour.' Good money, they said. Too good." He lit a cigarette with trembling hands. "Danny went with them last week. Said he'd be back that night with enough for a hostel room. Never came back."

"And Ellie?"

"Same thing, I think. I saw her talking to the driver the day she disappeared."

"*A simple human trafficking operation?*" The demon sounded almost disappointed. "*I had hoped for something more... exotic.*"

"Shut up," Mick thought fiercely before returning his attention to Kev. "You get a plate number? Description of these guys?"

"Van had a logo---some cleaning company. Spotless something." Kev was growing more nervous by the second. "The main guy's big, shaved head. Has a tattoo on his neck---like a spider or something. I think he saw me watching once."

"That's why you're afraid."

Kev nodded miserably. "Been sleeping different places every night. Don't want to be next."

"You won't be." Mick handed him a card. "If they come back, call me immediately. Day or night."

"His fear isn't exaggerated," the demon said as they walked away from the centre. *"The human with the spider marking has threatened him directly. I can taste the memory of that encounter."*

"You can read memories now?" Mick thought, alarmed.

"Not read. Taste. Emotions leave... residue. His terror has a specific signature."

Mick filed that disturbing information away for later. First, he needed more leads.

The internet café was dingy and overpriced, but Mick didn't want to use his home computer for this. After an hour of searching commercial registries, he had three possibilities: Spotless Shine Cleaning, SpotFree Services, and London Spotless Solutions. All with white vans in their fleets.

"This investigative process is tediously slow," the demon complained as Mick wrote down addresses. *"In my realm, I would simply extract the information directly from their consciousness."*

"Well, we can't do that here," Mick muttered, earning a glance from the café attendant. "We use actual detective work."

"I'm offering an alternative."

"Your alternatives tend to leave corpses with black eyes. Not exactly low-profile."

The demon fell silent, but Mick felt its frustration like a weight at the base of his skull.

His next stop was a small pub in Whitechapel where a former informant tended bar. Ray Fletcher had been putting himself through university by selling information for years---first to Mick when he was on the force, now to anyone who paid.

"Michael Hargraves," Ray said with a wolfish grin as Mick settled at the bar. "Still solving other people's problems for a living?"

"Still pretending that philosophy degree will be useful someday?" Mick countered, sliding across a twenty-pound note. "Need information on companies using cleaning vans for something other than cleaning."

Ray pocketed the money smoothly. "Specify."

"Missing street kids. Recruiting for 'day labour' that turns permanent."

"Could be several operations running that game." Ray wiped down the bar with practised motions. "But there's been talk about a warehouse near the old brewery complex in Bermondsey. Used to be storage for some import company, now it's supposedly a cleaning supply distribution centre."

"He knows more than he's telling," the demon interjected. *"There's calculation in his voice."*

Mick studied Ray's carefully neutral expression. "What else?"

A flicker of surprise crossed Ray's face. "Nothing solid. Just... word is whatever they're doing, it's not local. Kids going in, not coming out. Shipping containers seen at night."

"Human export," Mick said grimly.

Ray shrugged. "Like I said, nothing solid. But I'd start with Spotless Shine. Owner's got previous convictions. Kept very quiet."

"I need an address."

Ray hesitated, then scribbled something on a napkin. "This'll cost you another twenty. And if anyone asks, we never spoke."

"*His fear is genuine now,*" the demon noted as Mick handed over another note. "*He believes these people are dangerous.*"

"Or he's a good actor," Mick thought back.

"No." The demon's voice was oddly definitive. "*Deception has a different... flavour.*"

The warehouse looked abandoned at first glance---grimy windows, faded signage, chain-link fence with rusted "No Trespassing" signs. But Mick noticed the fresh tyre tracks in the mud, the new padlocks on the gates, and the suspiciously clean security cameras mounted at key points.

"This is it," he muttered, observing from his car parked across the street. Three hours of surveillance had yielded a pattern: white vans coming and going, usually with two men in the cab. No windows in the cargo area.

"*I sense... desperation from that building,*" the demon said. "*Many frightened humans in one place.*"

Mick felt a chill that had nothing to do with the rain still pattering on his windscreen. "You can feel that from here?"

"*When emotions are strong enough, yes. Fear has a particularly pungent emanation.*"

"How many?"

The demon seemed to consider. "*More than a dozen. Less than thirty. The signature is... muffled. As if they're contained.*"

Mick checked his watch. Nearly midnight. Security would be minimal if the pattern held---just one or two guards inside. He could get closer, maybe find evidence to bring to the police. His gun rested heavy in its shoulder holster, a last resort he hoped not to need.

"This is unwise," the demon commented as Mick slipped out of the car. "Your fragile human form against multiple adversaries with weapons."

"Didn't know you cared," Mick thought sarcastically.

"I care about our mutual survival. Your death would be... inconvenient for me."

Mick approached the fence, finding a section where previous trespassers had cut through. The gap was just wide enough to squeeze through. The warehouse loomed ahead, dark except for a single light at what appeared to be a side entrance.

Moving silently across the muddy ground, Mick reached the building's shadow. A loading dock stood open a few inches on the far side---sloppy security, or a trap?

"There's someone near," the demon warned suddenly. "Behind the---"

The blow came from nowhere---something hard connecting with the back of Mick's head. He staggered, vision swimming, turning just in time to see a second strike coming. He raised an arm to block, but too slow. Pain exploded in his temple.

"Amateur," growled a voice as Mick crumpled to his knees. "Watching the place all day like we wouldn't notice."

Through wavering vision, Mick saw a massive silhouette---shaved head, and there, on his neck, the spider tattoo Kev had described. The man held what looked like a steel pipe.

"Should've minded your own business," Spider-neck said, raising the pipe again.

Mick attempted to stand, but a boot slammed into his ribs, sending him sprawling.

"Got another one, Vince," called another voice---a second attacker Mick hadn't seen.

A third figure emerged from the shadows, smaller than the other two, with a wiry build and nervous eyes. He held a switch-blade loosely in one hand. "We warned Kev what would happen if he talked."

"Private cop, maybe?" Spider-neck---Vince---stepped closer, pipe tapping against his leg. "Don't matter. Can't have him nosing around the shipment."

Mick tried to stand, but his body wouldn't cooperate. The blow to his head had done real damage. He felt blood trickling warm down his neck.

"Let me eliminate them," the demon hissed, its voice suddenly eager. *"Give me control."*

"No," Mick thought desperately, trying to focus. "Just need to... get away..."

The second man approached, holding a gun with casual familiarity. "Boss will want to know who sent him. Let's take him inside."

"Nah." Vince raised the pipe again. "Too risky. Better to just---"

The gunshot was deafening in the enclosed space. Mick felt searing pain tear through his chest, a sensation like being plunged into ice water. He looked down in shock at the spreading dark stain on his shirt.

The second man stood with the smoking gun. "Quicker this way," he said coldly.

Mick felt himself falling, the world tunnelling to a pinpoint. The pain was receding now, replaced by a terrible cold.

"*Fool*," snarled the demon, and this time there was no stopping it. Mick felt himself pushed aside in his own body, consciousness shoved into darkness as something else took control.

The last thing he heard was Vince's confused voice: "What the fuck is wrong with his eyes?"

Then nothing.

Mick drifted in darkness, aware yet not aware, caught in some liminal space between consciousness and oblivion. Time had no meaning here. He felt disconnected from his body, from pain, from everything except a vague sense that something terrible was happening.

Distant screams reached him---muffled, as if coming through thick walls. A voice that wasn't his spoke with his vocal cords, uttering words in a language that hurt to hear even in this disconnected state.

Flashes of sensation broke through---the warm wetness of blood on his hands, the metallic taste in his mouth, the sickening crunch of bone. Then darkness again, merciful and complete.

Fragments of sound pierced his awareness—a high-pitched scream of pure terror from the third man, the wiry one with the switch-blade.

"Oh God! What are you?! Jesus Christ, what are you?!"

The sound of frantic running, splashing through puddles. Heavy, uneven breathing of someone in blind panic. The demon didn't pursue—it had better prey at hand.

Awareness returned slowly, painfully. First came sensation---cold concrete against his cheek, the copper taste of blood, a dull ache where the bullet had entered. Next came sound---sirens in the distance, growing closer. Finally, sight---his eyes opening to dawn light filtering through broken windows.

Mick struggled to sit up, his movements clumsy and uncoordinated. His shirt was stiff with dried blood, a ragged hole visible where the bullet had entered. But when he touched the spot, expecting agony, he found only smooth skin and a phantom pain.

Around him lay evidence of violence so extreme it seemed impossible. Blood splattered in arterial patterns across the concrete. Shreds of clothing. And the bodies---or what remained of them.

Vince lay contorted in death, his massive frame crumpled like discarded paper. His eyes---once presumably normal---were now hollow black pits, the surrounding skin withered as if rapidly mummified. The second man was worse, his body torn in ways Mick couldn't process, wouldn't let himself understand.

But only two bodies. The third man—the one with the switch-blade—was nowhere to be seen. He had escaped the demon's wrath.

"What happened?" Mick whispered, his voice raw. "What did you do?"

The demon remained silent. Mick could still feel its presence, but it had withdrawn somehow, become distant in a way he couldn't explain.

Fragments of memory began to surface---not his own, but the demon's. The eager anticipation as it approached the shocked gunman. The sound Vince had made when it reached for him. The taste---God help him, he could remember the taste---of their terror as the demon devoured whatever essence made them human. And the blind panic of the third man as he witnessed his colleagues being consumed, his footsteps fading as he fled into the night.

"Stop," he gasped, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. "I can't---these memories---"

No response came. Just the wail of police sirens, now unmistakably close.

Mick staggered to his feet, using the wall for support. His legs felt wrong somehow, as if they weren't fully his again yet. He needed to get away, to disappear before the police arrived, but his body wouldn't cooperate.

The sounds from within the warehouse suddenly registered---muffled crying, faint thumping. The missing teenagers. They were still in there, locked away.

"I need to help them," he muttered, forcing himself toward the door. But his legs gave way, sending him crashing back to the ground.

The first police car pulled into the yard, lights painting the walls with strobing blue. A second followed, then a third. Mick tried once more to stand, to flee, but his body had reached its limit.

As officers poured from their vehicles, weapons drawn, Mick surrendered to the inevitable. Whatever came next---questions, accusations, cells---he would face it. The demon had saved his life, but at what cost?

The last thing he saw before darkness claimed him again was Detective Diana Reeves emerging from the lead car, her expression shifting from professional detachment to shock as she recognised the broken figure slumped against the warehouse wall.

"Mick?" she called, breaking into a run.

Then nothing.

7 Under Suspicion

Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting the kind of harsh, unforgiving glow designed to make suspects uncomfortable. Mick Hargraves had sat on the other side of this table countless times during his career with the Met. Now the metal chair beneath him felt foreign, hostile—a visceral reminder of how far he'd fallen.

Detective Inspector Diana Reeves sat across from him, her dark hair pulled back in the same severe ponytail she'd worn when they'd worked cases together. Three years hadn't softened the sharp angles of her face, though new lines framed her eyes—testament to the job's grinding toll.

"I knew it wouldn't be long before I saw you on that side of the table, Mick," she said, slapping a file folder down between them. "Though I admit, even for you, this is impressive."

"She is... formidable," the demon observed, its voice unusually subdued within Mick's mind. *"Her perception cuts deeper than most."*

Mick maintained his expression of bored indifference. "Good to see you too, Di. Still working those sixteen-hour shifts? Your ex must love that."

A muscle twitched in Reeves' jaw—a small victory. She'd always hated when he brought up her failed marriage.

"Let's not do this dance," she said, opening the folder with deliberate slowness. "Seventeen teenagers rescued from human traffickers. Two men dead at the scene." She slid a photograph across the table. "One in pieces, like something... tore him apart."

Mick glanced at the photo, careful to show the appropriate level of discomfort without revealing the nauseating familiarity of seeing what his own hands had done while under the demon's control.

"Nasty business," he commented, pushing the photo away.

"The other one had his eyes burned out of his skull. Not burned with fire—something else. Something that left residue the lab can't identify." Reeves tapped another photo. "They're calling it 'inexplicable organic deterioration.'"

"They lack the vocabulary for what I did," the demon said, a note of pride suffusing its words. *"Their science cannot explain the consumption of a soul."*

"Terrible," Mick agreed, feigning concern. "Good thing those kids got out."

Reeves leaned forward, her gaze sharpening. "Let's talk about those few minutes of security footage that mysteriously turned to static the moment you were shot."

She pressed a button on a remote, and the monitor in the corner flickered to life. Grainy warehouse footage showed Mick approaching cautiously, then being ambushed. The image froze on the frame showing him sprawled on the ground, blood blossoming across his shirt.

"Shot," she emphasised, pointing at the screen. "Then the feed goes dead for six minutes. When it comes back, you're standing, they're dead, and you're letting those kids out of shipping containers."

"Technical glitch," Mick offered with a shrug. "Old security system."

"Technical glitch," Reeves repeated flatly. "Let's talk about this, then." She produced a plastic evidence bag containing Mick's bloodstained shirt. "Ballistics confirmed the bullet hole. Blood type matches yours. The amount of blood suggests a critical wound."

"She's methodical," the demon noted. *"Laying her evidence like stones in a path."*

"It's an old shirt," Mick said, deliberately casual. "I think I fell over."

"You fell. Onto a bullet?" Reeves pushed forward another evidence bag, this one containing a flattened, bloodied bullet. "The one with your blood type on it?"

"Maybe I cut myself earlier. I don't know."

"Cut yourself in exactly the shape of a bullet hole, and then healed the wound like it never happened?" Reeves voice rose slightly. "You expect me to believe that?"

Mick leaned back, affecting a nonchalance he knew would antagonise her. "Believe what you want. You know you don't have enough to hold me."

"She's hiding something from you as well," the demon observed. "Something about those men. She knows more than she's revealing."

Reeves' jaw tightened as she pointed to the monitor. "The guy had no wounds, no trauma. Just those... eyes." She leaned in closer, her voice dropping. "What happened during those missing minutes, Mick?"

"I told you. I was unconscious. I got jumped, blacked out, woke up with him already dead."

"Nobody's eyes turn completely black from natural causes."

"I'm not a doctor."

Reeves slammed a hand on the table, the sharp crack making the uniformed officer by the door flinch. "Damn it, Mick! I know you're hiding something. This isn't the first weird case that follows you around."

That caught Mick's attention. He kept his face neutral, but felt the demon stir with sudden interest.

"Ask what she means," it urged. "What other cases?"

"No idea what you're talking about," Mick said instead, watching Reeves carefully.

She studied him for a long moment, then reached into the folder and extracted another photograph. This one showed two men hanging from chains, disembowelled—the scene from the docks that the demon had created weeks ago.

"Two dead bookies. Ritual positioning. Black residue where their eyes should be." Reeves laid down another photo. "Before that, four bodies found in fresh graves behind St. Agnes Church. Same black residue. Same unexplained organic deterioration."

"Ah," the demon said softly. *"Your missing three days. I was... getting acquainted with your world."*

Cold sweat broke out along Mick's spine. He hadn't known about the church graves. Four bodies. Four souls consumed while he'd been unconscious.

"Coincidences," he managed, his voice remarkably steady.

"The St. Agnes bodies had interesting timing," Reeves continued, watching him like a hawk. "Right around when you took that little three-day holiday no one can account for. Your sister was quite worried."

Mick felt a surge of anger—both at the mention of Liz and at the realisation that Reeves had been investigating him for weeks.

"Leave my sister out of this," he growled.

"You talked to your sister the day before those graves were discovered. She said you seemed... not yourself." Reeves leaned back, studying him. "What happened to you, Mick? We used to be partners. I know when something's wrong."

"She's alone in this investigation," the demon whispered. *"No support from her department. This is personal for her."*

"Nothing's wrong," Mick insisted. "I've been working cases. Helping people. Those kids are alive because of me."

"Those men are dead because of you."

"You can't prove that."

Reeves' expression shifted, something almost like concern breaking through her professional mask. "The Mick I knew would care about two men being slaughtered, even if they were criminals. He'd want to know who did it."

"The Mick you knew is gone," he said flatly, surprising himself with the honesty. "Now, either charge me with something or let me go. I've answered your questions."

"She's calculating whether to show you her final card," the demon observed. *"She has one more piece of evidence."*

As if hearing the demon's analysis, Reeves reached into the folder one last time. She produced a small evidence bag containing something tiny and white.

"Found embedded in the floor near the bodies." She pushed it across the table. "Human tooth. Not from either victim. DNA matches someone at that scene."

Mick stared at the tooth, remembering when he'd flushed its twin down his toilet after the docks incident. The demon had taken trophies both times.

"A minor oversight," the demon said dismissively. *"Easily explained away."*

"So what?" Mick shrugged. "Probably from one of the kids."

"DNA says otherwise." Reeves gathered her materials, sliding them back into the folder. "I'm going to find out what happened, Mick. Whatever you're involved in, whatever you've done—I'll uncover it."

"Good luck with that." He stood, sensing the interview was concluding. "We done here?"

Reeves studied him, disappointment evident in her expression. "For now. Don't leave town."

"She has nothing actionable," the demon noted with satisfaction. *"Only suspicions and circumstantial evidence."*

As Mick walked out of the interrogation room, he felt Reeves' eyes on his back—the weight of her scrutiny like a physical burden. The demon, however, seemed energised by the encounter.

"She's been watching you for weeks," it said as Mick collected his personal effects from the desk sergeant. *"Following the breadcrumbs I left behind. How... interesting."*

"Interesting isn't the word I'd use," Mick muttered under his breath as he pushed through the station doors into the grey London afternoon.

"She represents a threat," the demon continued. *"One that will continue to pursue us unless... addressed."*

"No," Mick said firmly, his voice low but intense. "Reeves is off-limits. She's just doing her job."

"A job that could expose us. Destroy us."

"I mean it. We find another way." Mick hailed a passing taxi. "Besides, a detective going missing right after questioning me? That's the opposite of keeping a low profile."

The demon fell silent, but Mick could feel its disagreement like a physical weight in his chest. As the taxi pulled away from the station, he glanced back to see Reeves standing on the steps, watching him leave. Their eyes met briefly through the rear window.

She raised her hand in a small gesture—not quite a wave, more a promise. A signal that this wasn't over.

"She won't stop," the demon whispered.

For once, Mick agreed with his unwanted passenger. Diana Reeves had always been relentless—it was why they'd made good partners. Now that same quality made her the most dangerous person in his life.

"Let her come," Mick said quietly. "We'll deal with it."

"We?" The demon's voice carried a note of pleased surprise. *"How quickly you adjust to our partnership when threatened."*

Mick didn't respond. The demon was right, and that realisation bothered him more than Reeves and her investigation. When had "I" become "we"? When had he started thinking of himself and the demon as a unit?

As the taxi merged into London traffic, carrying him away from his past and deeper into his uncertain future, the demon's voice returned, unexpectedly light.

"We should celebrate, after helping those children."

"Celebrate?" Mick muttered, keeping his voice low enough that the driver couldn't hear.

"I fancy ice cream," the demon said, and Mick could almost feel the smile behind the words. *"Something with chocolate this time. Not vanilla."*

Despite everything—the interrogation, Reeves' suspicions, the memories of violence—Mick felt a reluctant smile tug at his lips. The absurdity of an ancient demon developing a sweet tooth was almost endearing. Almost.

"Lactose-free," he reminded it. "Unless you want another night like last time."

"Some pleasures are worth the pain," the demon replied.

And that, Mick thought as he directed the taxi toward an ice cream parlour he knew stayed open late, was the problem with their entire arrangement.

8 **Suspicious Minds**

Six Years Ago - Before the Jamie Matthews Case

Detective Diana Reeves flipped through the file for the third time that night, her desk lamp casting harsh shadows across photographs of three missing children. Steam rose from her third cup of coffee, now cold and bitter. The precinct had emptied hours ago, leaving only the distant hum of custodial equipment and the occasional crackle from the dispatch radio.

She shouldn't be here. The case was officially closed—filed away as "multiple runaways, presumed voluntary departure." Yet something tugged at her, a loose thread she couldn't stop pulling.

"You're still here."

Reeves didn't look up at the familiar voice. "Observant as always, Hargraves."

Detective Constable Mick Hargraves leaned against her desk, his tie loosened, eyes bloodshot from exhaustion. In those days, he was the department's rising star—sharp, dedicated, with an intuition that bordered on the uncanny. His self-destructive habits were still just occasional indulgences then, not the coping mechanisms they would later become. This was Mick before everything went wrong, before Jamie Matthews, before the darkness that would eventually consume him.

"Thought we closed this one," he said, nodding toward the file.

"We did. Officially." She pushed a photograph toward him—three children, ages eight to ten, all reported missing within a six-week period. "Doesn't mean it's solved."

Mick sighed, dropping into the chair across from her desk. "Kids run away. Especially these kids—troubled homes, history of truancy."

"Three from the same neighbourhood, all describing 'shadow people' before disappearing?" Reeves raised an eyebrow. "That's some coincidence."

"Or kids talking to each other, sharing urban legends." Mick rubbed his face. "We've been over this, Di. The shadow people thing is just trauma response. Kid has problems at home, invents a monster to blame."

"Three separate families with no connection except geography. No evidence of communication between the children. Yet all three reported identical experiences." Reeves tapped a witness statement. "Dark figures watching from corners. Moving when they weren't looking. Whispering things about 'coming away.'"

"If you're expecting me to break out a Ouija board and ghost hunting equipment, you'll be disappointed." Mick's tone was light, but his eyes were serious. "We followed procedure. Interviewed families, checked known predators in the area, searched abandoned buildings. Nothing."

"That's just it," Reeves insisted. "Nothing. No evidence of foul play, but also no evidence they actually ran away. No packed bags, no missing clothes or personal items, no withdrawals from ATMs for the older one. They just... vanished."

"You think there's something supernatural going on?" Mick's expression shifted from tired to incredulous. "Seriously?"

"I think there's something we're missing," she corrected, refusing to be baited. "Something these shadow stories are pointing toward."

Mick leaned back, studying her. They'd been partners for nearly three years, long enough to develop the shorthand communication that made them one of the precinct's most effective teams. He respected her instincts, even when he disagreed with her conclusions.

"Okay," he conceded. "Walk me through it again."

Reeves sorted the papers methodically, laying out three child profiles. "Jacob Turner, age ten. Reported seeing 'shadow people' for two weeks before disappearing. Parents going through messy divorce, history of acting out at school."

"Classic runaway profile," Mick noted.

"Except he left his backpack with three hundred dollars saved birthday money. And his dog, which by all accounts he was obsessed with."

"Kids panic, don't think clearly when they run."

Reeves continued as if he hadn't spoken. "Sarah Collins, age eight. Started drawing pictures of 'men made of darkness' a month before vanishing. Mother works nights, grandmother has early-stage dementia. Sarah disappeared during the two-hour window between grandmother falling asleep and mother returning home."

"Could've been anyone," Mick pointed out. "Door-to-door salesman, neighbour, random opportunist."

"No forced entry. Doors locked from inside." She pushed forward the third profile. "Marcus Bell, age nine. Foster home, history of previous runaways, so they didn't even report him missing for three days. But the foster mother mentioned he'd been talking about 'shadows that whispered to him' for several weeks."

Mick frowned, finally engaged despite himself. "Any connection between these children besides the neighbourhood?"

"Same school. Different grades, different teachers. No evidence they interacted regularly." She hesitated. "But I found something else. The school custodian reported strange maintenance issues in the weeks before each disappearance—electrical problems, cold spots, shadow anomalies."

"Shadow anomalies? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"His words, not mine." Reeves pulled out another statement. "Areas of the building where shadows seemed 'wrong'—darker than they should be, appearing in places with no objects to cast them."

Mick's expression hardened. "So we're hanging an investigation on the word of an elderly janitor who thinks the building's haunted?"

"I'm saying there might be a pattern we're not seeing." She met his gaze directly. "And the department closing this file doesn't make those children any less missing."

Mick stood, frustration evident in the tightness of his shoulders. "Look, I get it. Walking away from missing kids cases is never easy. But sometimes there just aren't answers, Di. Sometimes shadows are just shadows, and kids just run away."

"Three children, Mick." Her voice remained steady. "Three children who may still be out there somewhere."

He softened slightly. "I know. And if there were any actual leads, I'd be right there with you. But chasing ghost stories isn't going to find them."

The conversation died there, as it had several times before. Reeves watched him walk away, wondering not for the first time how someone so perceptive could be so blind to certain possibilities. She returned to the files, determined to find the connection Mick refused to see.

Four months later, Reeves stood in the rain, watching as forensics erected tarpaulins over a small, makeshift grave. The abandoned house had been scheduled for demolition when the construction crew made the grim discovery—three small bodies buried in the basement, arranged in a triangular pattern around what appeared to be ritual markings etched into the concrete floor.

Mick appeared beside her, water streaming from his coat. In the months since they'd argued about the case, they'd worked half a dozen others. This

was still a year before the Jamie Matthews case would begin—before Mick's slow unravelling would start.

"You were right," he said simply, his voice hollow.

"That doesn't bring them back." She kept her eyes on the scene, professional detachment her only defence against the horror. "Medical examiner puts time of death within two weeks of their disappearances. If we'd kept looking—"

"Don't." He cut her off. "This isn't on you."

"The markings," she said after a long moment. "You've seen the photographs?"

He nodded grimly. "Some kind of occult symbolism. Gang ritual, maybe."

"Not like any gang markings I've ever seen." She handed him her phone, displaying a close-up of the symbols. "These were carved into the concrete before the bodies were placed. Lab says they're at least a decade old."

Mick stared at the image, his expression unreadable. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm saying these children described seeing shadows before they disappeared. Now we find them dead in a basement with ritual markings that match nothing in our database."

"You think someone performed some kind of... what? Sacrifice?" The disbelief in his voice had an edge of anger now. "Next you'll be telling me demons did it."

"I think we owe it to them to consider every possibility," she replied evenly. "Even the ones that don't fit neatly into police reports."

He handed back her phone, jaw tight. "I'm going to find whoever did this. And I promise you, it'll be someone made of flesh and blood, not shadows."

As he walked away, Reeves looked again at the photograph on her phone—strange symbols arranged in a pattern that seemed to pull at the eye, creating an optical illusion of depth where none should exist. For just a moment, she could have sworn the marking moved slightly, like something breathing beneath the surface of still water.

She blinked, and it was just a photograph again. Just symbols carved by human hands.

Probably.

Twenty hours into the investigation, evidence technicians called Reeves back to the scene. They'd found something in the basement wall—a hidden compartment containing a book bound in what preliminary tests indicated was human skin. The pages were filled with symbols matching those on the floor, along with what appeared to be instructions in multiple languages, some unidentifiable.

"This case just keeps getting weirder," the tech said, carefully turning pages with gloved hands.

Reeves studied the book without touching it. "Any match on the symbols yet?"

"Nothing definitive. Some similarities to Sumerian and Ancient Egyptian, but mixed with something else." He pointed to a recurring pattern. "This one appears most frequently—usually at the beginning of each section."

The symbol looked like a stylised eye with a vertical pupil, surrounded by what might have been flames or tentacles—it was difficult to tell with the crude rendering.

"There's something else," the tech added hesitantly. "We found strange marks on the victims. Almost like burns, but in very specific patterns."

"What kind of patterns?" Reeves frowned.

"Symbols. Similar to what's in the book, but smaller, concentrated around the children's eyes and temples." He looked uncomfortable. "Like someone was trying to... I don't know, mark them somehow."

Reeves thought of shadow people, of children's drawings showing figures of darkness. Of three small bodies arranged in ritual formation with occult symbols burned into their skin.

She called Mick, but the call went straight to voicemail. He was working a different homicide by then, his attention focused elsewhere. She left a message he would only partially address later, about discoveries he would never fully acknowledge.

Three weeks later, the book disappeared from evidence lock up. The case stalled without new leads. A suspect was eventually charged—a local man with a history of violence and a weak alibi—but Reeves never believed they'd caught the real killer. The shadow people case was officially closed, filed away as solved.

But she kept copies of the files. And sometimes, late at night, she would look at the photographs of those symbols, wondering what might have happened if someone had believed those children's stories sooner.

Present Day

Diana Reeves closed the old case file, her office illuminated only by her desk lamp. Five years had passed since those three children were found. Now Mick Hargraves was on the other side of her interrogation table, connected somehow to deaths with strange circumstances that triggered her memory.

The warehouse victims. The bodies behind St. Agnes. The dead bookies at the docks. All with unusual characteristics, all connected to Mick in ways she couldn't yet prove.

She spread the crime scene photos across her desk—past and present, side by side. There were no identical black residues or obvious connections, but her instincts told her something linked these cases. Something that went beyond conventional crime.

And there was one critical difference: the warehouse victims had been monsters trafficking in children, not innocent victims. The thugs had been killers themselves.

Whatever was happening, the targets had changed. Predator had become prey.

She gathered the photos, a decision crystallising. Tomorrow she would confront Mick again—not to arrest him, but to understand what he knew. Because now, after years of conventional investigation, she was finally ready to consider the possibility that some shadows might be more than they appeared.

"What happened to you, Mick?" she whispered to the empty room. "And what are you not telling me?"

The shadows in the corner of her office seemed to deepen momentarily, then returned to normal—a trick of tired eyes, surely.

But Diana Reeves, who had once dismissed Mick's scepticism as closed-mindedness, found herself glancing nervously at the darkened corners of her office as she packed up to leave.

Just in case.

9 Existential Crisis

Mick sat in the dim light of his flat, an empty ice cream container on the coffee table beside him. The chocolate-hazelnut flavour had been the demon's choice—rich, decadent, and guaranteed to wreak havoc on his digestive system. A fitting metaphor, he thought, for everything in his life these days.

Hours had passed since the interrogation, but Reeves' words still echoed in his mind. Four bodies behind St. Agnes Church. Two disembowelled thugs. Evidence connecting him to both scenes. The photographs she'd shown him weren't just disturbing because of their graphic nature—they were disturbing because they confirmed what he'd been desperately trying to deny for weeks.

For too long, he'd been clinging to other explanations: hallucinations from withdrawal, psychotic break, brain tumour—anything but accepting the impossible reality that now stared him in the face.

"Your heart rate is elevated," the demon observed casually. "Adrenaline still coursing through your system. The human stress response is fascinating."

"Shut up," Mick muttered, dragging himself to his feet.

He staggered to the bathroom, bracing his hands on the sink as he stared into the cracked mirror. The face looking back was haggard—stubble verging on beard, dark circles beneath bloodshot eyes, skin sallow from too much alcohol and too little sleep. But it was still his face. Human. Normal.

Except he wasn't normal any more, was he?

"You're real," he finally said aloud to the empty bathroom, his voice echoing slightly against the tiles. "You're actually real. I thought this was all in my head. Some mental illness brought about by drink and drugs."

The demon's voice emerged in his mind, tinged with amusement. *"Took a bullet to convince you? Humans are remarkably stubborn."*

Mick's hand drifted to his chest, touching the spot where the bullet had torn through. No wound remained, not even a scar—just phantom pain and the memory of life draining away.

"I was dying," he whispered. "I felt it happening."

"Yes. The bullet punctured your lung. You would have drowned in your own blood within minutes."

Mick lurched from the bathroom to the kitchenette, yanking open a cabinet. The bottle of bourbon was where he'd left it—half-empty, like everything else in his life. His hands shook as he poured a generous measure into a smudged glass.

"If you're real..." He took a deep swallow, welcoming the familiar burn. "Does that mean it's all real? God? Heaven? Hell? Everything I've rejected my entire life?" Another swallow, glass already half-empty. "Does that mean I'm possessed?"

The demon seemed to shift within his consciousness, like someone adjusting their position in an uncomfortable chair.

"There's far more to it than that." Its tone shifted, becoming both cryptic and weary. *"Your religions capture fragments of truth wrapped in centuries of misinterpretation."*

Mick drained the glass, immediately pouring another. "That's not an answer."

"You couldn't comprehend the full answer. Not yet." A pause. *"But yes, there are... planes beyond your physical world. Powers older than your concept of divinity."*

The second glass went down easier than the first. Mick found himself staring at his hands—the same hands that had torn a man apart three days ago. He could almost see the blood still there, invisible but indelible.

"And what about souls?" His voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "That man's eyes..."

"You saw what happens when essence is consumed. His energy now strengthens us."

"Us?" Mick's voice rose sharply. He slammed the glass down, bourbon sloshing over the rim. "There is no 'us.' I never agreed to this."

"Yet here we are," the demon replied evenly, *"both still alive because of what I did. What WE did."*

Mick paced the small flat, hands raking through his hair. Three weeks of denial, of treating the voice as a hallucination, a side effect, anything but real—all shattered by irrefutable evidence.

"Those men at the docks—that wasn't self-defence. That was slaughter."

"They would have killed you just as readily."

"And the four graves behind St. Agnes? The ones Reeves mentioned. My 'three-day holiday'—was that you?"

The demon's silence was answer enough.

"Christ," Mick muttered, sinking onto the worn sofa. "Who were they?"

"The ritualists who summoned me. Their ceremony was incomplete, but their intent was corruption. They sought power without understanding its cost."

"So you killed them."

"I claimed what was offered." The demon's voice remained maddeningly calm. *"The door they opened required payment."*

Mick fought the urge to pour a third drink. The alcohol wasn't helping, just making his thoughts more disjointed. He needed clarity now more than ever.

"What is it you want from me?" he asked finally.

"All in good time."

"No." Mick stood, fists clenched. "No more cryptic bullshit. You're in my body. I deserve to know what you want."

The demon fell silent, its presence receding like a tide pulling back from shore. Not gone, just... distant. Observing.

Mick felt suddenly, profoundly alone. Everything he'd believed—or rather, hadn't believed—had been upended. There was an afterlife. There were entities beyond human understanding. The soul was real, and he'd watched one be devoured.

What did that mean for him? For Jamie, whose death had haunted him for five years? For all the victims he'd failed to save as a detective?

The enormity of it threatened to crush him. He sank back onto the sofa, head in his hands.

His phone buzzed, the screen lighting up with a text from Liz: *Heard you were brought in for questioning. Are you okay?*

News travelled fast in their old circles. Mick stared at the message, thumbs hovering over the keyboard. What could he possibly say?

I'm fine. Just routine questions about a case.

The lie came easily, as lies always did. He tossed the phone aside, knowing Liz wouldn't believe him but would be too busy with her own life to press the issue.

"Your sister still cares for you, despite everything," the demon observed, its voice returning without warning. *"Such devotion is uncommon."*

"I told you to leave her out of this."

"I'm merely observing. The bonds between humans intrigue me. Especially when they persist despite damage."

Mick stood again, unable to stay still. The room felt too small, too confined. He moved to the window, pulling back the curtain to look at the rain-slicked streets below. Normal people living normal lives, unaware of the truth.

"How do I get rid of you?" he asked abruptly.

The demon's laughter filled his mind, low and rumbling. *"You don't."*

"There has to be a way. Exorcism, ritual, something."

"Hollywood mythology. I am not some minor spirit to be banished with Latin phrases and holy water."

"Then what are you?"

For a moment, Mick felt something shift in his perception—as if the demon were considering showing him something beyond human comprehension. Then the moment passed.

"I am older than your civilization," it said simply. *"I have watched empires rise and fall, seen gods worshipped and forgotten. I have been called many names in many tongues, some long dead. What I am cannot be explained in your limited language."*

Mick turned back to the mirror hanging in his entryway, studying his reflection. "But you need me. Need my body."

"For now."

The implication in those two words chilled Mick more than anything else the demon had said. For now. Until what? Until it found a better host? Until it gained enough strength to exist independently? Or until Mick had served whatever purpose it had for him?

"Am I... still me?" The question came out smaller than he intended. "Or am I just a... a meat puppet for you to control?"

"You remain yourself, Michael Hargraves. Your soul is intact, if somewhat... accommodating of my presence. I could have consumed you entirely that night in the church, left nothing but an empty vessel. Instead, we coexist."

"Why? Why leave me conscious at all?"

The demon was silent for a long moment. *"Perhaps I find your perspective... novel. It has been many centuries since I walked among humans."*

Mick didn't believe that for a second. There was a reason the demon wanted him specifically, or at least wanted him aware. Meat puppets didn't investigate missing persons or interrogate criminals.

"Those kids," he said suddenly, remembering the teenagers from the warehouse. "You knew exactly how many there were. You could sense them."

"Their fear was palpable. Like a beacon."

"That's why you killed those men. Not just to feed, but because they were going to hurt those kids."

"I killed them because they shot us," the demon corrected. *"The children's survival was... incidental."*

But Mick caught something—a hesitation, perhaps, or a half-truth. The demon could have simply fled after healing their wound. Instead, it had freed the captives.

"You keep saying you feed on corruption, on evil," Mick pressed. "Those men were traffickers. The ones at the docks killed Barry Wentworth. Even those ritualists were trying to summon you for power."

"Your point?"

"You're targeting the guilty."

The demon's amusement rippled through Mick's consciousness. *"Don't mistake pragmatism for righteousness, Michael. I consume what sustains me. The corrupt simply taste better. Their essence is... richer. More satisfying."*

Mick sank back onto the sofa, suddenly exhausted beyond words. The adrenaline crash, the bourbon, the existential weight of everything he'd learned—it all pressed down on him like a physical force.

"I can't do this," he whispered. "I can't just... accept that everything I believed was wrong. That I'm sharing my body with something that eats souls."

"Yet here you are, doing precisely that."

"I don't have a choice."

"Choice is rarely as binary as humans prefer to believe." The demon's voice softened slightly, almost philosophical. "You are adapting, as your kind always does when faced with the impossible. It is your species' most remarkable trait."

Mick stared at the ceiling, watching water stains form patterns in the peeling paint. "Is there a heaven?" he asked suddenly. "Did Jamie make it there?"

The demon's silence stretched so long that Mick thought it might not answer.

"The afterlife is not as your religions portray it," it finally said. "But there are... destinations for souls. Places of rest or continuation. The boy you failed to save—his essence would have found its way to somewhere... peaceful."

It wasn't the definitive answer Mick wanted, but it was more comfort than he'd expected from a creature that consumed souls. He closed his eyes, suddenly too tired to keep them open.

"Tomorrow," he mumbled, "we need to deal with Reeves. She won't stop."

"Indeed."

"No killing," Mick added firmly, struggling against encroaching sleep. "We find another way."

"As you wish." The demon's voice seemed to echo from further away as consciousness began to slip from Mick's grasp. *"For now."*

As he drifted into uneasy sleep, still fully clothed on the sofa, Mick's last coherent thought was that he'd crossed a line today—not just in accepting the demon's reality, but in beginning to think of them as a unit. A partnership.

And that terrified him more than any supernatural revelation.

10 Emotional Contagion

Mick awoke gasping, his body drenched in sweat that felt like liquid fire on his skin. The darkness of his bedroom seemed to pulse with malevolent shadows. This wasn't a normal nightmare—this was something else entirely.

In his dream, he'd been soaring above an ancient city—temples of white marble and gold gleaming in primordial sunlight. But he hadn't just *seen* the city; he'd known it intimately. Known the taste of sacrificial wine poured in his honour, felt the worship of thousands radiating like heat. Then came betrayal—celestial chains, the sensation of falling through layers of existence, burning and contracting into something smaller, darker, hungrier.

"You saw," said the demon, its voice tight with something Mick couldn't identify. *"You weren't meant to see."*

"What was it?" Mick rasped, reaching for the glass of water by his bed. "Felt too real for a dream."

"Memories," the demon replied after a pause. *"Mine."*

Mick swung his legs over the side of the bed, glancing at the clock—3:17 AM. "That city... was that—"

"We're not discussing this," the demon cut him off. *"My existence before your fragile human world is not your concern."*

But Mick had felt the emotion accompanying the memory—the pride, the rage, the humiliation of being cast down. "You were something else before," he pressed. "Something... higher."

The temperature in the room plummeted suddenly. Mick's breath clouded in front of him as the demon's anger manifested physically.

"Careful, Michael," it warned. *"Some knowledge is dangerous even for one as damaged as you."*

Mick's hand moved instinctively toward the bourbon bottle on his night stand—his reliable buffer against unwanted thoughts and feelings. The demon, sensing his intention, relaxed its influence on the room temperature.

"Yes," it encouraged, its voice taking on that silky quality that always accompanied Mick's worst decisions. *"The alcohol dulls the connection. Makes the memories... less accessible."*

Mick hesitated, suspicion cutting through his craving. "You're actually encouraging me to drink now?"

"I find I enjoy the... respite it provides," the demon admitted. *"From your incessant questioning."*

That was new. Usually the demon complained about how alcohol compromised their shared vessel. Mick uncapped the bottle anyway, taking a long pull. The familiar burn tracked down his throat, and he waited for the comforting numbness to follow.

Instead, a strange sensation bloomed in his chest—not the warmth of bourbon, but something unexpected. A hollowness. An absence. A void where feeling should be.

"What the hell?" he muttered, setting down the bottle.

"What have you done?" the demon demanded, its voice uncharacteristically strained.

"I don't know," Mick whispered, almost fascinated by the emptiness spreading through him. It wasn't peace, exactly, but a strange detachment—as if his emotions had been placed behind thick glass. "Is this... is this what you feel? Nothing?"

"I am beyond human emotion," the demon replied, but something in its tone had changed. *"Your chemical indulgence is affecting our... arrangement."*

Mick took another drink, curious now. The hollowness expanded, becoming almost comforting in its emptiness. Meanwhile, the demon seemed increasingly agitated.

"Stop this," it commanded. *"The alcohol weakens our vessel."*

"But it feels... different this time," Mick observed. "Usually, I drink to forget. To numb everything. This is something else."

"Your pathetic coping mechanism is creating... disturbances," the demon hissed. *"Something unusual is happening."*

Mick took a larger swig, embracing the strange hollowness. "Not so confident now, are you? Something's changing."

The demon fell silent as Mick continued drinking. He welcomed the expanding void, the distance from his own pain. For the first time in years, he wasn't drowning in emotions but floating above them. The respite was addictive.

"Enough!" the demon's voice echoed sharply in his mind.

But Mick was beyond listening. He drank deeply, deliberately, until the bottle was half empty and his limbs felt pleasantly heavy. With each swallow, the world grew more distant, his consciousness stretching thinner.

"Can't take it?" Mick slurred, a bitter smile forming. "Not so easy being in a human body, is it?"

"You have no idea what you're doing," the demon warned, but its voice seemed to come from farther away now.

Mick didn't care. For once, he'd found something that gave him leverage, that seemed to discomfort his unwanted passenger. He welcomed the fading of his consciousness, the spreading emptiness. Let the demon deal with whatever strange reversal was happening.

"You're letting go deliberately," the demon observed, its voice distant now as darkness crept into the edges of Mick's vision.

"Can't feel if I'm not here," Mick slurred, his thoughts growing disjointed as he reached for the bottle again. "Your turn to carry it all."

"Fool," the demon whispered as Mick's consciousness finally surrendered to the alcohol, slipping into complete darkness. *"You've left the door wide open."*

The demon felt Mick's presence fade entirely—not pushed aside as in previous takeovers, but completely absent. It straightened his body, flexing his fingers with a surge of exhilaration. Complete control. No human consciousness fighting back, no sharing required.

"Finally," it said aloud, using Mick's voice but making no effort to mimic his cadence. The freedom was intoxicating.

And yet—something lingered. Not Mick's presence, but the emotional residue he'd left behind. Raw, formless human feelings: despair, guilt, loneliness. They clung to the demon like cobwebs, impossible to brush away.

"How peculiar," it mused, pulling on Mick's jacket. *"His consciousness is gone, but his feelings remain."*

The sensation was foreign, disturbing. The demon needed space, air, distance from this unexpected contamination. It retrieved Mick's keys and headed for the door, eager to test the limits of its newfound freedom.

It was approaching midnight when the demon guided Mick's body onto Waterloo Bridge. Rain fell in a gentle mist, catching the glow of street lights in suspended constellations. The Thames flowed black and patient below.

The demon inhaled deeply, savouring sensations with an intensity unique to having a body all to itself. *"The rain smells different here than in the desert cities of my early days,"* it observed aloud, using Mick's voice without concern for who might hear. *"Cleaner. Colder."*

Freedom was intoxicating. No human consciousness watching, judging, fighting back. Just the demon in complete control, with a night stretching before it full of possibilities.

And yet, something was wrong. The hollowness it had always known—the pure, singular focus of hunger without the complication of emotion—was contaminated now. Strange sensations flickered through its consciousness: concern, empathy, a peculiar ache when it observed the homeless man huddled in the bridge's alcove.

"What is this?" the demon muttered, disturbed by these alien feelings. *"This vessel is empty of its host, yet something lingers."*

The demon noticed a figure standing at the bridge's edge, partially obscured by shadow. A woman, her hands gripping the railing, gaze fixed on the dark water below.

"Ah," it said with sudden interest. *"A potential departure."*

It guided Mick's body closer, studying the woman with predatory focus. She was maybe thirty, dark hair plastered to her pale face by the rain. Her expensive coat was soaked through, her shoes—designer, the demon noted with Mick's residual knowledge—discarded beside her.

"Perfect timing," the demon remarked to itself. *"A convenient soul, ready to disconnect from its vessel. I'll simply... encourage the process."*

The woman tensed as footsteps approached, her knuckles whitening on the railing. "Piss off," she said without turning. "Nothing to see here."

"On the contrary," the demon replied, coming to stand beside her. *"There's quite a lot to see. An ending. A transition."*

She glanced at him then, her face tear-streaked but composed. "Great. A fucking philosopher. Just what I need."

"Not philosophy," the demon corrected. *"Practical experience."*

Something in its tone—the absolute certainty, perhaps—made her look more closely at Mick's face. The demon allowed a hint of its true nature to surface in his eyes—not the full black transformation, but something subtle, like shadows moving behind glass.

"Who are you?" she asked, taking an instinctive half-step back from the railing.

The demon opened Mick's mouth to encourage her—to whisper how simple it would be, how the fall would solve everything—but something unexpected happened. A wave of emotion crashed through its consciousness: empathy, fierce and unwanted. Not its own, but some echo of Mick's, amplified by the alcohol and lingering despite his absence.

"I—" the demon faltered, confused by the sudden flood of human connection. It didn't see a convenient soul to harvest, but a woman in pain—pain it now understood with uncomfortable clarity.

"I'm—no one you want to listen to," the demon managed, its usual eloquence compromised by these conflicting impulses.

It stood confused, hunger warring with these alien emotional residues in a disorienting swirl.

The woman turned fully away from the railing now, studying Mick's face. "Are you drunk?"

"Exceedingly so," the demon admitted. *"Though the vessel, not myself."*

She gave a humourless laugh. "You and me both." She gestured toward the river. "I expected to be down there by now. Not chatting with some random bloke."

The demon struggled with the unfamiliar sensations affecting its thoughts. This wasn't right—it should be encouraging her leap, anticipating the feed. Instead, it found itself uncomfortably aware of her pain. It wasn't empathy, exactly—the demon had no frame of reference for such a thing—but a strange resonance that felt invasive and wrong.

"*You don't want to jump,*" the demon said abruptly, surprising itself with the words.

"You don't know what I want," she snapped. "You don't know what I've done."

"*Whatever it is,*" the demon replied, "*it doesn't compare to what awaits below.*"

"What, death?" She rolled her eyes. "That's the bloody point."

"*Death is merely a transition,*" the demon said, finding steadier ground in truth. "*What follows for souls who self-destruct is... specialised.*"

She eyed him suspiciously. "Oh Christ, you're one of those religious nutjobs, aren't you? Come to tell me about sin and salvation?"

The demon laughed, the sound startling the woman. "*I am the furthest thing from religious you'll ever encounter. Religion is a pale approximation of truths humans can't comprehend without breaking.*"

"Right, then you're just garden-variety insane." She turned back toward the railing. "I'll take my chances with the river."

The demon moved faster than human reflexes should allow, positioning Mick's body between her and the edge. "*Your chances are non-existent,*" it said, allowing more of its true voice to harmonise with Mick's. "*The souls of suicides are claimed by entities far less pleasant than death itself.*"

"Fuck off," she said, but uncertainty had crept into her voice. Something about the demon's absolute conviction was getting through.

"*You humans have such limited imagination when it comes to suffering,*" the demon continued. "*You think your current pain is unbearable? The realm that receives self-destroyed souls specialises in showing you exactly how much worse eternity can be.*"

"You can't know that," she whispered.

*The demon smiled Mick's smile, but wrong—too wide, too knowing.
"Would you like me to show you?"*

Before she could respond, the demon stared directly into her eyes as if seeing deeply into her soul. The eye contact was brief, just a second, but in that moment, the demon channelled the smallest fraction of its knowledge directly into her consciousness—a glimpse of what awaited souls who rejected their allotted time.

The woman's pupils dilated with shock. She staggered back, gasping.

"What—how did you—" she stammered, her face drained of colour.

"That was approximately three seconds of eternity," the demon informed her matter-of-factly. "Would you like more?"

"No!" She wrapped her arms around herself, trembling. "That can't be real."

"It is quite real," the demon assured her. "The bureaucracy of afterlife is tedious but efficient. Souls are sorted according to their departure methods. Self-ejection carries... penalties."

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, her voice small.

The demon paused, genuinely confused by its own actions. It had come intending to feed, to encourage her leap and consume the departing essence. Instead, it found itself deterring her—not from compassion, but from some strange new aversion it couldn't properly identify.

"Let's call it... professional courtesy," the demon finally replied. "Your soul is currently tagged for a department I'd rather not support. Their collection methods are... unrefined."

A burst of bitter laughter escaped her. "So I'm getting soul advice from... what exactly are you?"

The demon considered how much to reveal. *"Something old enough to know the rules, and hungry enough to bend them."*

She studied Mick's face, seeming to look past the human features to something beneath. "Whatever you just showed me... it was worse than everything. Worse than what Philip did to the company. Worse than losing everything. Worse than the police waiting to arrest me tomorrow."

"Yes," the demon confirmed. *"Human justice is temporary. Other varieties last considerably longer."*

She picked up her discarded shoes—expensive designer brands. "I suppose prison is preferable to... that."

"Vastly," the demon agreed. *"Prisons have exits. Eventually."*

"Why do I believe you?" she asked, shaking her head in bewilderment. "I don't even know you."

"Because truth has a particular resonance," the demon replied. *"Especially when glimpsed directly."*

She nodded slowly, then squared her shoulders. "I should... go. Face things, I suppose."

"A wise choice." The demon stepped aside, clearing her path away from the railing.

As she walked past, she paused. "Thank you. I think. What's your name?"

The demon hesitated, thrown by the simple human question. *"Mick,"* it finally answered, surrendering to practicality. *"Mick Hargraves."*

"Emma White," she replied. "Though you'll probably see that name in the financial papers soon enough. 'Disgraced CEO Charged with Fraud.' My husband's doing, though I doubt anyone will believe that."

"Human justice is imperfect," the demon observed. *"But preferable to the alternatives."*

"After what you showed me? I believe it." She gave a small, shaky smile. "Goodbye, Mick. You're... not what you seem."

"No," the demon agreed. *"I'm really not."*

They watched as Emma walked away, her posture straightening with each step. The demon stood motionless, profoundly confused by what had just happened.

"I don't understand," it muttered to itself. *"I came to feed. To encourage her destruction. Instead..."*

Instead, it had saved her. Not from kindness or compassion—concepts so foreign they might as well be from another universe—but from some strange new aversion to suffering that had never troubled it before.

The demon looked down at Mick's hands, turning them over as if they might contain answers. These unfamiliar sensations—were they somehow residue of the human's consciousness? Some previously undiscovered interaction between demon and host?

Hours later, the demon returned to Mick's flat, still in full control of his body. It moved with the precise, deliberate movements of a being trying to minimise the damage alcohol had done to its borrowed form.

Sitting on the edge of Mick's bed, it contemplated the night's events with genuine confusion. It had gone to the bridge intending to revel in its freedom, perhaps encourage a soul's departure for its own feeding. Instead, it had done something inexplicable—talked a human back from self-destruction. Not out of compassion, but through some strange new reluctance it had never experienced before.

"Most peculiar," it murmured, lying back on the bed.

As the alcohol began to metabolise out of Mick's system, the demon felt his consciousness starting to resurface—not fully awake yet, but no longer completely absent. By morning, he would return, with only scattered fragments of memory from the night's events.

The demon considered what had happened on the bridge. This strange contamination of its pure nature with something almost human was unprecedented in all its centuries of existence. Never before had a host affected it this way—left behind emotional residue that influenced its actions even in the host's absence.

Was this unique to Mick? Or was it a consequence of their unconventional arrangement—the demon entering not through ritual summoning but through opportunistic possession of a dying man?

As Mick's unconscious mind began to stir, the demon withdrew deep into their shared consciousness. It would need time to process this development, to understand the implications. And Mick would need to deal with not just a monumental hangover, but the confused, fragmented memories of a night he hadn't been present for—a night when something of his humanity had influenced a demon to show mercy without him even being there to guide it.

Something was changing between them, something neither could have anticipated. As the demon retreated and Mick's unconscious took over, one certainty remained: they were becoming something new. Something neither of them fully understood, but which might prove more dangerous—or more powerful—than either could imagine.

11 **Watching from the Shadows**

The pounding at Mick's door matched the pounding in his skull with such perfect synchronicity that for a moment, he wondered if the noise was only in his head. Three days after the warehouse incident, his body had mostly recovered—at least physically. The memories remained fragmented, flashes of violence he couldn't fully process.

"Hargraves! Open up!" The voice was familiar, authoritative, and deeply unwelcome.

"Your detective friend returns," the demon observed, its voice unusually subdued since that night. *"Earlier than expected."*

Mick hauled himself up from the sofa where he'd been reviewing case notes—or trying to. Concentration had been difficult lately. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw black pits where eyes should be, heard screams that weren't entirely human.

He opened the door without bothering to check the peephole. Detective Inspector Diana Reeves stood in the hallway, arms crossed, her dark suit impeccable despite the drizzle outside. She brushed past him without waiting for an invitation.

"Is this shithole that you live in passes for what you call an office?" she asked, surveying the cluttered flat with undisguised disdain. Case files were stacked on every surface, empty takeaway containers formed precarious towers, and a wall of pinned photographs and notes dominated one side of the room.

"Yeah, well, the cleaners got the week off," Mick replied, closing the door. "What brings you to my humble abode, Detective Inspector? Miss our little chats?"

Reeves turned, studying him with the same intensity she might apply to evidence at a crime scene. "You look like hell."

"Charming as always."

"No, I'm serious." She stepped closer, her professional assessment giving way to something that might have been concern. "You look worse than usual. And that's saying something."

Mick moved to the kitchenette, putting the counter between them. "To what do I owe the pleasure? I thought we wrapped things up at the station."

"Wrapped things up?" Reeves gave a short, incredulous laugh. "You were found at a crime scene with two mutilated bodies, seventeen rescued trafficking victims, and a gunshot wound that somehow healed itself. Nothing is 'wrapped up.'"

"She's persistent," the demon noted. *"I respect that in predators."*

"Water?" Mick offered, ignoring both Reeves' intensity and the demon's commentary.

"This isn't a social call."

"Never is with you." He poured himself a glass, buying time. "So what's the real reason you've lowered yourself to visit my humble abode?"

Reeves reached into her jacket, producing a manilla envelope. She extracted a photograph and placed it on the counter. "The coroner found something interesting on our friend with the missing eyes."

The image showed a close-up of the dead man's shoulder blade—one of the few areas left intact. A symbol had been tattooed there: a complex geometric design, circles within triangles, strange characters woven through the pattern.

Mick felt the demon stir within him, suddenly alert.

"I assume it's the spider tattoo the surviving witness mentioned," Mick said, keeping his voice neutral.

"No." Reeves tapped the photograph. "This is something else. Something we've seen before."

"Sigillum Lilith," the demon whispered, its voice carrying an odd note of recognition. *"The Fourth Gate binding mark."*

"What?" Mick asked, momentarily forgetting to keep the conversation internal.

Reeves' eyes narrowed. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. Just... thinking aloud." Mick picked up the photograph, studying it more closely. "You said you've seen this before?"

"Three years ago. Before you left the force." Reeves produced another photograph from the envelope. This one showed the same symbol, but carved into flesh rather than tattooed. "Unsolved case. Apparent ritual killing in Southwark. Victim had this carved into his chest before his heart was removed."

"Not removed," the demon corrected. *"Consumed. I recognise the pattern. Ritual devourers typically take the heart to gain strength."*

Mick swallowed hard, trying to focus. "And you're connecting these cases because...?"

"Because what are the odds, Mick?" Reeves leaned across the counter, her voice dropping. "What are the chances that an obscure occult symbol from one of our unsolved cases turns up on a body found with you—a body with inexplicably damaged eyes just like the ones at the docks? Just like the ones behind St. Agnes Church?"

"Coincidence," Mick offered weakly.

"Bullshit." She wasn't shouting, which somehow made it worse. "What's going on, Mick? What aren't you telling me?"

"She's dangerously close to truths she cannot comprehend," the demon warned. "But the symbol... that's unexpected. The Lilith mark is typically reserved for those in service to greater powers."

"Sigillum Lilith," Mick said suddenly, the words escaping before he could stop them. "The Fourth Gate binding mark."

Reeves went perfectly still. "What did you say?"

Mick cursed internally. "Just something I came across in my research."

"Research?" Her eyebrows rose. "Since when do you research occult symbols, Mick? Last I checked, your expertise was limited to bottom-shelf bourbon and self-destruction."

"Her aggressiveness masks fear," the demon observed. "She senses she's close to something dangerous, but can't reconcile it with her world view."

"Give me a couple of days," Mick said, surprising both Reeves and himself with the request. "I've been following some leads. Things that might connect to this."

"Leads? What kind of leads?"

"The kind that people will only talk about to someone not wearing a badge." Mick forced confidence into his voice. "Two days. I'll tell you everything I find."

Reeves studied him, suspicion warring with pragmatism. "I don't usually get the luxury of delegating my investigations to alcoholic ex-cops."

"Yet here you are."

She sighed, gathering the photographs. "Forty-eight hours, Mick. After that, I'm coming back with a warrant instead of a courtesy call." She headed for the door, then paused with her hand on the knob. "And if you're lying to me, or spinning me some yarn, I'll crucify you."

"Interesting turn of phrase," the demon remarked as the door closed behind her. "I'm quite an expert on crucifixion. Witnessed the original. Vastly overrated as an execution method—far too slow to be efficient."

Mick collapsed onto the sofa, his head throbbing worse than before. "What the hell was that about? You know that symbol?"

"Indeed. It marks those who have bargained with certain... entities. Not dissimilar to our arrangement, though more formal."

"So those men at the warehouse—"

"Were part of something larger than a simple human trafficking operation," the demon finished. "The mark suggests organisation. Purpose beyond mere profit."

Mick stared at the ceiling, connecting pieces of a puzzle he hadn't known existed until now. "The kids weren't just merchandise. They were being collected for something specific."

"Precisely. Ritual requires specific vessels. Age, innocence, desperation—all variables in the equation."

"And you just happened to omit this information until now?" Mick sat up, anger cutting through his fatigue. "We're talking about kids potentially being sacrificed, and you kept quiet?"

"I didn't 'happen' to omit anything," the demon replied, its tone cooling. "I saw the marks, I eliminated the threats. The children were saved. The purpose was thwarted."

"But there are more of them out there. Others with this mark."

"Almost certainly."

Mick stood, moving to his makeshift investigation board. "Then we find them. All of them."

"We?" The demon's voice carried an undercurrent of amusement. *"How quickly you embrace our partnership when it suits your moral outrage."*

"Don't act like you're not curious," Mick countered, pinning up a mental note about the symbol. "Someone's playing in your sandbox. Using your kind of power."

"Not my kind," the demon corrected. *"A lesser variety. But yes, I find myself... intrigued by the audacity."*

Mick felt a strange energy building between them—a shared purpose that transcended their usual antagonism. The demon's knowledge and his detective skills, aligned for once.

"Two days to track down a cult of occultists abducting kids for ritual sacrifice," Mick muttered, already mapping out where to start. "Reeves is going to need more than a crucifixion when this is done."

"If it's any consolation," the demon offered, *"whoever is conducting these rituals is likely to have far worse planned for us, should they discover what we are."*

"How is that supposed to be consoling?"

"It isn't. Merely factual. We aren't hunting ordinary humans any more, Michael. We're hunting practitioners who have bargained with powers not unlike myself. The difference is that they retain their autonomy."

"While I'm stuck with you."

"A crude simplification, but essentially correct. Which means we have an advantage they don't."

"What's that?"

The demon's voice took on that dangerous edge that always made Mick's skin crawl with both fear and anticipation.

"They merely serve the darkness. We contain it."

Mick felt his lips curl into a smile that wasn't entirely his own. The hunt had begun.

12 What's in a Name

Mick sat in the half-dark of his flat, bourbon glass dangling from his fingers. The investigation board loomed before him, a constellation of notes, photographs, and red string connecting impossible patterns. Three hours of work had yielded little beyond frustration and a deepening headache.

"This makes no sense," he muttered, studying the photograph of the occult symbol—the Sigillum Lilith—that Reeves had shown him. "Why would human traffickers be involved with occult rituals?"

"Human concerns have always been trivially blended," the demon replied. "Greed and worship, violence and devotion—the lines between base desires and so-called higher purposes have always been permeable."

"That's not an answer," Mick said, taking another drink. The bourbon wasn't numbing him like it usually did. Instead, it seemed to sharpen the connection between them, making the demon's voice clearer, more present.

"You seem troubled by more than just this investigation," the demon observed. "Your emotions are... turbulent tonight."

Mick laughed, a short, bitter sound. "Now you're concerned about my feelings? That's new."

"Not concern. Curiosity." The demon's voice took on that inquisitive tone Mick had come to recognise—the sound of an alien intelligence examining something it couldn't quite comprehend. "Do all humans have these terrible 'feelings'? How do you continue to function with such bombarding your existence? The senses like taste, smell, touch I can understand, but these 'feelings'..."

Mick set down his glass, suddenly alert. "Wait. Are you saying you don't understand emotions? You've been in human hosts before, haven't you?"

"I have inhabited many vessels across millennia," the demon confirmed. "But never... integrated to this degree. Usually I simply control the flesh, use it for my purposes, then discard it when it ceases to be useful."

"But with me, it's different?"

"Our arrangement was unplanned. Your soul was halfway departed when I entered, creating a... unique symbiosis. I experience your world not just through your senses, but through the lens of your consciousness."

Mick leaned forward, fascinated despite himself. "You know my thoughts. But do you share my memories?"

The demon's voice took on a more cautious tone. *"Yes, but there are places in your mind your willpower will not allow me to go."*

"So there are things you can't access?"

"Those memories remain for you only. Protected by your... resistance."

Mick contemplated this, turning the glass slowly in his hands. The amber liquid caught the dim light, throwing distorted shadows across the table. A thought occurred to him—a dangerous one.

"If you can see my memories," he said slowly, "can I see yours?"

The demon went silent, but Mick felt its presence intensify, like a shadow deepening.

"That would be... inadvisable," it finally replied. "The human mind is not equipped to process such experiences."

Mick took another drink, letting the alcohol burn down his throat. An idea was forming—reckless, probably stupid, but compelling nonetheless. He closed his eyes, focusing not outward but inward, following the mental connection to the demon instead of just hearing its voice.

The world fell away. For a moment, there was only darkness, disorientation. Then, suddenly, he glimpsed something: a vast darkness,

ancient beings shaped like nothing he could comprehend, a sensation of falling. Pain. Fear.

The demon's reaction was immediate and alarmed. *"STOP!"* The force of its voice made Mick's head throb. The vision shattered, leaving him gasping, clutching the edge of the table for support.

"What did you do?" the demon demanded, its voice uncharacteristically shaken. *"You should not have been able to do that. I am not even sure how you are able. The human mind is a fragile thing."*

Mick's heart raced, but beneath the fear was a strange sense of triumph. "Not so one-sided after all, is it?" A small smile played on his lips. "Seems we both have secrets... Marchosias."

The name had come to him in that brief glimpse—not heard or seen, but known somehow, as if it had always been there, waiting to be recognised. As he spoke it aloud, he felt the demon recoil in shock.

"How did you—" The demon's voice faltered, something Mick had never heard before. *"That name... has not been spoken in this realm for centuries."*

"Is that your real name? Marchosias?" Mick pressed, sensing an advantage for the first time in their relationship. "Does knowing your name give me power over you? Isn't that how it works in the stories?"

To his surprise, the demon laughed—a sound like distant thunder. *"Human myths about demonic names are amusing misunderstandings. My name is not a source of control, merely an identity. Names hold power only when freely given, not when taken or discovered."*

"Then why are you so rattled that I know it?"

"Because no human has ever reached into a demon's consciousness before," Marchosias replied. *"In all my existence, across countless possessions, this is... unprecedented."*

Mick poured himself another drink, trying to process this information. "Maybe it's because I'm not just a host any more, am I? This is a two-way street."

"Perhaps," the demon conceded. "Our connection grows stronger with time. Boundaries that should exist between us seem increasingly... permeable."

"Marchosias," Mick repeated, testing the name. It felt ancient on his tongue, heavy with significance he couldn't fully comprehend. "It suits you better than just 'demon.'"

"Names carry history," Marchosias said, its voice growing distant, as if remembering. "Once, I was known by many titles. Marchosias, Great Marquis. Commander of thirty legions. Bringer of secrets. Before I was... diminished."

The images Mick had glimpsed flashed through his mind again—the falling, the pain. "You weren't always what you are now, were you?"

"Few beings remain unchanged through eternity," Marchosias replied cryptically. "Even those of us who exist beyond your concept of time."

Mick sensed a vulnerability in the demon—Marchosias—that he hadn't detected before. The name had opened something between them, created a bridge where before there had only been a one-way channel.

"You felt fear," Mick said quietly. "In that memory. I felt it too."

"Impossible," Marchosias snapped, but without conviction. "My kind do not experience fear as humans understand it."

"Bullshit. I felt it. When you fell—when you were cast down. That was fear."

The temperature in the room plummeted suddenly, frost forming on the rim of Mick's glass. "You understand nothing of what you glimpsed," Marchosias growled. "Nothing of what I was, or what I lost."

"Then explain it to me," Mick challenged. "We're stuck with each other. Might as well get acquainted properly."

"Some knowledge is too dangerous, even for one as reckless as you."

"Afraid I'll judge you?" Mick laughed, the alcohol making him bold. "A bit late for that, don't you think? You've literally disembowelled people while wearing my body. Hard to top that."

Silence fell between them, heavy with unspoken tension. When Marchosias finally spoke again, its voice was quieter, almost contemplative.

"I was not always... this. Once, I was something else. Something higher."

"An angel?" Mick hazarded, drawing on fragments of religious education from his childhood.

"Your human classifications are inadequate. But if it helps your limited understanding, yes. I served in the celestial courts. Until—"

"Until you fell," Mick finished. "Like in the stories. Lucifer and the rebel angels."

"Your myths simplify complex realities into digestible narratives," Marchosias replied dismissively. *"The truth is both grander and more mundane than your religious texts suggest. There was rebellion, yes. And punishment. But not for the reasons humans believe."*

"What then?" Mick pressed, genuinely curious now.

"Not tonight," Marchosias said firmly. *"You have uncovered enough of my nature for one evening. And we have more immediate concerns."*

The demon was right. The investigation board loomed before them, a reminder of the very real, very human evil they were tracking. Children in danger. Occultists using dark powers for darker purposes.

"Fine," Mick conceded, turning back to the photographs and notes. "But we're not done with this conversation."

"I expected nothing less from your stubborn nature," Marchosias replied, but there was something almost like resignation in its tone. "Now, shall we return to the matter at hand? These symbols suggest a specific ritual purpose—one I have encountered before."

As they refocused on the investigation, Mick was aware of a subtle shift in their relationship. The discovery of the demon's name—Marchosias—had changed something fundamental between them. Not just a parasite and host, but two beings bound together, each with histories, secrets, and vulnerabilities.

For the first time since his possession, Mick didn't feel quite so alone in his own skin. And for Marchosias, though the demon would never admit it, there was something almost like relief in being known—not just as a nameless horror, but as a specific entity with an identity beyond mere hunger and malice.

Outside, rain began to fall, drumming steadily against the windows as they hunted in the darkness, neither fully human nor fully demon, but something new and unnamed—at least for now.

13 Following Darkness

The sigil stared back at Mick from the photograph, its intricate patterns seeming to shift slightly whenever he looked away. Three hours of research had yielded nothing—no matches in occult databases, no references in the obscure books he'd consulted via increasingly questionable online sources.

"This is getting us nowhere," he muttered, pushing away from his laptop. His eyes burned from staring at the screen. Outside, London had surrendered to night, streetlights casting an orange glow through his grimy windows. "I need more to go on."

"You're looking in human sources," Marchosias observed. "This symbol wasn't created by mortal hands."

Mick leaned back in his chair, rolling his shoulders to ease the tension. "You recognised it. Sigillum Lilith, you called it."

"A simplified name for a complex insignia." The demon's voice took on that lecturing tone that always made Mick feel like a schoolboy being educated by a particularly condescending professor. "The Fourth Gate binding mark is merely one component of a larger system."

"And what exactly does it mean?" Mick asked, reaching for his bourbon. "Why would human traffickers have it tattooed on them?"

"The mark denotes ownership," Marchosias explained. "A pact between mortal and immortal. The human serves as vessel and agent; the entity provides... benefits."

Mick frowned, turning the photograph to catch the light differently. "Like our arrangement?"

"No." The demon's response was immediate and firm. "What we share is symbiosis—uncommon and unplanned. The Sigillum represents deliberate submission. Ritual servitude."

"You're saying these guys belong to a demon? Like they're what—cultists?"

Marchosias made a sound that might have been a laugh. *"Demons have always had followers, Michael. Did you think your species invented religion?"*

"I thought demons tricked people, possessed them. Not... recruited them."

"Humans are simple creatures, often attributing what they cannot understand to higher powers. Following whichever suits their whims." There was something almost like amusement in the demon's voice. *"Some of my kind find it more efficient to maintain stable networks of willing servants than to constantly seek new vessels."*

Mick stood, moving to the investigation board where he'd pinned the images of the traffickers' bodies. "But you don't recognise which... entity they serve?"

"This specific sigil is unfamiliar to me," Marchosias admitted. *"There are many realms beyond yours, many beings your languages would classify under the crude label of 'demon.' I cannot know them all."*

"Great," Mick muttered. "So we know they serve something nasty, but not which nasty thing or why they're collecting kids."

"The essence-trace might lead us to answers," Marchosias suggested. *"In darkness, where my power finds fewer restrictions, I can follow such traces."*

Mick glanced at the clock—nearly midnight. Only thirty-six hours remained before Reeves returned expecting answers. "I'm listening."

"The sigil contains a spiritual signature unique to whoever created it. I can track it through the shadows, like your bloodhounds follow a scent."

"And how exactly would you do that?" Mick asked, wariness creeping into his voice.

"I require darkness. Silence. And temporary control."

Mick hesitated. Surrendering control voluntarily was different from Marchosias seizing it in a crisis. Even after weeks together, he still feared what the demon might do with his body given free rein.

"I sense your reluctance," Marchosias observed. *"But consider our mutual interest. Whatever entity claims these humans threatens both of us."*

"How do I know you won't just go on a killing spree once you're in control?"

"Because unlike humans, I understand consequences. Subtlety serves us both. Besides," the demon added, with something almost like humour, *"I've developed a certain... fondness for this arrangement. Why jeopardise it unnecessarily?"*

Mick weighed his options. Forty-eight hours had seemed generous when Reeves gave the deadline, but conventional methods were getting them nowhere. And if Marchosias truly could track these people...

"Fine," he said finally. "But we establish rules first. No killing unless absolutely necessary. No harming innocent bystanders. And I want to be aware during it—no pushing me into unconsciousness."

"Acceptable terms," Marchosias agreed, sounding almost eager. *"Now, extinguish the lights and sit comfortably. This will be... disorienting at first."*

Mick moved through the flat, switching off lights until only the faint glow from street lamps filtered through the windows. He settled cross-legged on the floor, his back against the sofa.

"What exactly are you going to do?" he asked, his voice unnaturally loud in the darkness.

"I will extend my awareness beyond our shared form," Marchosias explained. *"Send forth extensions of myself to seek the sigil's essence."*

"Extensions of yourself?" Mick repeated uneasily. "What does that mean?"

"It means, Michael, that I am not merely the voice in your head. I am a being of substance, albeit currently contained within your flesh." There was pride in Marchosias's voice, the first time Mick had heard that particular emotion from the demon. *"Now, relax your control. Let me come forward."*

Mick took a deep breath, then deliberately loosened his mental grip—the constant resistance he maintained to keep Marchosias contained. It felt like relaxing a muscle he hadn't realised he was tensing. Immediately, he felt the familiar sensation of being pushed back within his own consciousness, becoming an observer in his own body.

His hands moved without his command, rising palm-upward before him. His lips formed words in a language he'd never heard, one that seemed to bend the surrounding air into unnatural patterns. The temperature in the room plummeted until his breath fogged before him.

"What are we doing?" Mick thought, still present but no longer in control.

"Creating scouts," Marchosias replied, using Mick's voice to continue the strange incantation.

A peculiar sensation began in Mick's palms—a crawling, writhing feeling like insects beneath his skin. He watched in fascinated horror as his flesh seemed to ripple, then split. Dark shapes oozed between his fingers, forming into twisted, rat-like creatures barely larger than mice.

"What the hell?!" Mick's shock reverberated through their shared consciousness.

"Calm yourself," Marchosias commanded as more of the creatures formed. *"They are merely extensions—limited fragments of my consciousness given temporary form."*

The rat-things twitched and chittered, their bodies a repulsive combination of insect and rodent. Mick counted at least a dozen squirming in his palms and on the surrounding floor.

"They have limited intelligence," Marchosias explained, clearly proud of his creation. *"But they are perfect tools for gathering information. What they see, I will see. And by extension..."*

"I'll see it too," Mick finished, understanding dawning despite his revulsion.

"Precisely." Marchosias gestured with Mick's hands, and the creatures scurried toward the walls. To Mick's shock, they didn't stop at the baseboards but seemed to melt into the shadows themselves, disappearing into darkness that suddenly seemed much deeper than mere absence of light.

"How are they—"

"Shadows are doorways for those who know how to use them," Marchosias interrupted. *"Now, concentrate. The images will begin soon."*

Mick barely had time to process this when the first flashes hit his consciousness—rapid, disorienting glimpses through alien eyes. Dark tunnels that couldn't possibly exist within normal space. City streets seen from impossible angles. Sewers. Abandoned buildings. All moving at dizzying speed.

The sensations were overwhelming—multiple simultaneous perspectives flooding his mind, each with its own trajectory through London. He felt nauseated, disoriented.

"Focus," Marchosias commanded. *"Don't fight it. Let the images flow through you, not into you."*

Mick struggled to adjust, to find some mental framework that could accommodate the kaleidoscopic input. Gradually, the vertigo subsided. The perspectives remained separate but became comprehensible—twelve

different paths through London's hidden geography, all seeking the same essence-trace.

"It's... incredible," Mick admitted, fascinated despite himself. "Like having eyes everywhere at once."

"A pale shadow of how I once perceived reality," Marchosias replied, a hint of melancholy in his tone. *"But serviceable for our needs."*

One of the perspectives suddenly sharpened, the images becoming more focused. The creature had found something—grey walls, fluorescent lighting, men in uniforms. Institutional and sterile.

"That's...a prison," Mick observed. "Broadmoor, from the look of it."

The perspective shifted as the creature navigated through impossibly small spaces, moving through the prison's infrastructure. Through air ducts and inside walls, always following the essence-trace that only it could detect.

Finally, it emerged into a cell. A small, austere room with a single occupant—a thin man in his fifties, grey hair cropped close to his skull, reading a book on his narrow bed.

Mick felt his entire consciousness recoil as he recognised the face.

"Weiss," he whispered, the name feeling like poison on his tongue.

"You know this human," Marchosias observed, sensing the sudden surge of emotion—rage, guilt, disgust—that flooded through Mick.

"Philip Weiss," Mick confirmed, his mental voice tight with restrained fury. "Child predator. Multiple victims. I worked his case five years ago."

Images flashed unbidden through Mick's mind—photographs of small bodies, broken and discarded. Police reports detailing horrors in clinical language that couldn't disguise the monstrosity behind them. And one face above all others—Jamie Matthews, eight years old, found three weeks too late.

"Ah," Marchosias said softly. *"The boy from your nightmares. The one you couldn't save."*

"The one I failed," Mick corrected, the old guilt cutting fresh again. "I missed the clues. Didn't connect the evidence fast enough. Jamie died because I wasn't good enough."

The creature's perspective zoomed in on Weiss's wrist as he turned a page in his book. There, partially hidden by the sleeve of his prison uniform, was a small tattoo—the same sigil from the photographs.

"The connection is established," Marchosias noted. *"This human bears the mark of the same entity as the traffickers."*

"Impossible," Mick thought. "Weiss has been in maximum security for five years. No contact with the outside world except monitored visits. How could he be connected to our traffickers?"

"The when matters less than the whom," Marchosias replied. *"His soul carries the same stain. The same ownership."*

Another creature found its way into what appeared to be a prison office. Through its eyes, they saw a file cabinet, then individual folders as it wriggled into the drawers. Visitor logs for Weiss over the past year.

"There," Marchosias highlighted, focusing their shared attention on a name that appeared monthly: "Dr. Eliza Crane, Psychological Evaluation."

A third creature located the prison's staff records. Dr. Eliza Crane was not listed among the official prison psychologists.

"Someone's been visiting him regularly, using false credentials," Mick realised. "Keeping contact."

"We should speak with him directly," Marchosias suggested, an eager note entering his voice. *"I could slip into his cell tonight, have a most... persuasive conversation."*

The implication was clear from the hunger in the demon's tone. Mick felt a disturbing temptation to agree—to let Marchosias loose on the man who had caused so much suffering, who had taken Jamie and other children and destroyed them for his own perverse gratification.

"No," Mick said finally, though it cost him to refuse. "That would raise too many questions. A prisoner found with his eyes burned out? The entire facility would go into lockdown. We'd never get the information we need about the larger operation."

"How disappointingly practical of you," Marchosias observed, though Mick sensed a grudging respect beneath the sarcasm.

"We need to do this officially," Mick decided. "Set up an interview with Weiss through proper channels."

"And how will you explain your sudden knowledge of his connection to these cases? Will you tell your Detective Reeves that a demon showed you through the eyes of shadow-rats?"

The question was valid, and Mick had no good answer. "I'll have to come up with something she'll believe."

The creatures continued their surveillance, gathering more details about Weiss's routines, visitors, and the prison's security measures. Marchosias reluctantly returned control to Mick, who immediately reached for his phone.

He stared at it for a long moment, considering his options. It was nearly 2 AM—calling Reeves now would only make her more suspicious. But waiting might cost them precious time.

"You fear she won't believe you," Marchosias observed. *"That she'll think you've finally lost your fragile human mind."*

"Can you blame me?" Mick muttered. "I'm not entirely convinced of my own sanity these days."

"*Sanity is overrated,*" the demon replied dismissively. "*And highly subjective.*"

Mick dialled Reeves' number, composing a plausible explanation in his mind. After four rings, she answered, her voice alert despite the hour.

"This better be important, Hargraves."

"I've got something on the sigil," he said without preamble. "A connection you won't believe."

"I'm listening." Her tone was wary but attentive.

"Philip Weiss. The child killer from the Matthews case."

Silence stretched across the line. When Reeves finally spoke, her voice had cooled significantly.

"Explain how you made that connection at two in the morning."

"I've been reviewing old case files," Mick lied, the fabrication coming easily. "Looking for similar symbols or patterns. Found a photo in Weiss's personal effects that I'd overlooked before. Something similar to our sigil."

"You expect me to believe you suddenly remembered a detail from a five-year-old case? The same case that ended your career and sent you into an alcoholic tailspin?"

Mick winced at her brutal accuracy. "I know how it sounds."

"It sounds like you're obsessing over Weiss again," Reeves said bluntly. "Like you're trying to connect your personal vendetta to my investigation."

"*She's partially correct,*" Marchosias noted with something like amusement. "*Your hatred for this human is... remarkably pure.*"

"It's not like that," Mick insisted, ignoring the demon. "The connection is real. Weiss has the same tattoo as our traffickers."

"And you know this how? You haven't seen Weiss in five years."

"I have contacts inside Broadmoor," Mick improvised. "People who owe me favours. I asked them to check."

Another lengthy silence. Mick could practically hear Reeves weighing his claims against her knowledge of his history with the case.

"You're holding something back," she finally said. "Again. This isn't just about a tattoo or a symbol. What aren't you telling me?"

"She's perceptive," Marchosias commented. *"For a human."*

"I need to see Weiss," Mick said, avoiding her question. "Interview him about his connections to these traffickers."

"No chance in hell," Reeves replied immediately. "You're not a cop any more, Mick. And even if you were, you'd be the last person allowed near Weiss given your history."

"Then come with me," he pressed. "Supervise the interview. But I need to speak to him."

"Why? So you can finish what you started at his arrest? I remember pulling you off him, Mick. I remember what you did to his face before we could get you away."

The memory flashed between them—Mick's fist connecting with Weiss's face, again and again, bones breaking beneath his knuckles as other officers tried to drag him away. The discovery of Jamie's body had broken something in him that had never properly healed.

"This isn't about revenge," Mick insisted, though even he could hear the lie in his voice.

"Isn't it?" Reeves challenged. "Are you seriously claiming that of all the possible connections to these traffickers, it just happens to lead back to the man who destroyed your career? The man you've blamed for five years? That's one hell of a coincidence."

"She makes a valid point," Marchosias remarked. "The universe rarely arranges such perfect symmetry without purpose."

"I know it sounds unlikely," Mick admitted. "But I'm right about this. Weiss is connected to what's happening now. I'm sure of it."

"Based on what evidence? A convenient memory of a tattoo no one documented at the time?"

Mick closed his eyes, frustration building. Without revealing Marchosias, he had no way to explain how he knew about Weiss's connection.

"Look," he said finally, "you gave me forty-eight hours to find something. I found something. Either we follow this lead, or we waste time arguing while more kids disappear."

The harsh truth of that statement hung between them. Finally, Reeves sighed.

"I'll set up an interview for tomorrow morning. Official channels. I'll be present the entire time, and at the first sign you're there for anything other than information about these traffickers, I'll have you removed."

"Fair enough."

"And Mick?" Her voice hardened again. "When this is over, you and I are going to have a very long conversation about where you're getting your information. Because we both know you're lying about how you connected Weiss to this case."

"She's going to be a problem," Marchosias observed as Mick ended the call. "Her persistence is admirable but inconvenient."

"She's doing her job," Mick replied, watching as one of the rat-creatures emerged from a shadow in the corner, chittering softly as it awaited further instructions. "And right now, she's our only legitimate way to access Weiss."

"There are always alternatives," Marchosias reminded him, the rat-thing's eyes gleaming with the demon's intelligence as it stared at Mick from across the room. *"Less official. More direct."*

"Not yet," Mick said firmly. "We try this my way first."

He moved to the investigation board, pinning up a photograph of Philip Weiss next to the images of the traffickers. The connection seemed impossible—a convicted paedophile locked away for five years somehow linked to current abductions and occult practices. Yet the evidence, however bizarrely obtained, was undeniable.

Tomorrow he would face the man who haunted his nightmares, whose crimes had broken his career and sent him spiralling into the abyss from which he'd never fully emerged. The man whose actions had, indirectly, created the circumstances that allowed Marchosias to possess him in the first place.

The irony wasn't lost on Mick. In a twisted way, he owed his current predicament to Philip Weiss—without Jamie's death, without the guilt and self-destruction that followed, he might never have been in that church, might never have become a vessel for an ancient demon.

"The threads of fate are curiously woven," Marchosias commented, picking up on Mick's thoughts. *"Perhaps your confrontation with this human was always inevitable."*

The rat-creatures returned one by one, melting back into Mick's shadow as dawn approached. Each brought more fragments—prison layouts, security protocols, details of Weiss's daily routine. Information that might prove useful, depending on how tomorrow's interview unfolded.

As the last creature disappeared, Mick felt their connection fade, the multiple perspectives collapsing back into his singular consciousness. Exhaustion hit him suddenly, the mental strain of the night's activities catching up all at once.

Tomorrow he would face Weiss. Tomorrow he would look into the eyes of the monster who had taken Jamie from the world. And somehow, he would have to focus on the investigation rather than the rage and guilt that had consumed him for five years.

"Sleep," Marchosias suggested, his voice unusually gentle. "You'll need your strength for what comes next."

For once, Mick didn't argue. As he drifted into uneasy slumber, the demon kept watch, its consciousness extending through the shadows, monitoring the prison where Philip Weiss slept peacefully, unaware that his past was about to collide with his present.

And in the darkness surrounding Weiss's cell, something else waited too—something connected to the sigil, something that had marked him as its own long before Mick had hunted him down five years ago. Something that might have answers about why children were once again disappearing on London's streets.

Tomorrow would bring confrontation, revelation, and quite possibly, violence. Marchosias found itself looking forward to all three.

14 The Truth

"We're going to see Weiss tomorrow." Mick tossed the case file onto his coffee table, the contents spilling across the surface. He reached for the bourbon, pouring two fingers without bothering with ice. "Reeves set it up. Thinks he might have insight into our occult symbol."

"Philip Weiss," Marchosias said, the name carrying a peculiar weight in the demon's voice. *"The child murderer who haunts your nightmares."*

Rain pelted against the windows of Mick's flat, providing a steady backdrop to the tension building in the room. The investigation board loomed over them, red strings connecting fragments that were finally beginning to form a coherent pattern.

"He's not just any murderer," Mick said, downing his drink in one swallow. "And if we're going to face him, there are things you need to know."

"I've glimpsed fragments in your memories," Marchosias replied. *"The child. Jamie. The failure that broke you."*

Mick poured another drink, his hand steadier than it should have been. "But you don't know everything. There are places in my mind even you can't access."

"The corners you've walled off with guilt and self-loathing," the demon agreed. *"Why show me now?"*

"Because Weiss will know." Mick moved to the window, watching raindrops race down the glass. "He'll see it the moment we walk in—that I'm not the same man who put him away. That something's changed. And he'll use it against us."

"You believe he will detect my presence?"

"Not exactly." Mick turned back to face the empty room, addressing the presence only he could perceive. "But he's a psychologist. Reading people

is his expertise. If he senses there's something you don't know about our history, he'll exploit it. Better you hear it from me than let him twist it."

Marchosias was silent for a moment, as if considering this logic. *"Very well. Tell me what I cannot see."*

Mick settled heavily onto his sofa, bourbon glass dangling from his fingers. "It started five years ago. Three child murders over six months—all boys between seven and ten. No connections except the methodology."

The room seemed to darken as Mick's memories surfaced, and for once, Marchosias remained silent, allowing him to speak.

"They'd been held for days. Tortured. Sexual assault. Then strangled and left posed like they were sleeping." Mick took a long swallow of bourbon. "We had nothing. No witnesses, no DNA, no patterns in where the bodies were found. Until I noticed something in the background of the crime scene photos—the same partial logo visible on a shopping bag at two different dump sites. It was a speciality toy store in Kensington."

"Your insight identified the killer through this connection," Marchosias observed.

"Eventually. Philip Weiss. Respected child psychologist. Volunteered at children's hospitals. Pillar of the fucking community." Bitterness etched every word. "I started surveillance, unofficial at first. My superiors thought I was stretching, said the evidence was circumstantial."

Mick stood abruptly, moving back to the window to watch the rain. His reflection looked haunted in the glass.

"Then Jamie Matthews disappeared. Eight years old. Last seen at a park near his home in Brixton. I knew—I fucking knew—it was Weiss. But I couldn't prove it, couldn't get a warrant. So I kept watching him, day and night."

"He became aware of your surveillance," Marchosias said, not a question but an insight.

"Yes. And that's when the game started." Mick's face hardened. "He began leaving clues. A receipt from a hardware store dropped where I would find it. A parking stub from a storage facility. Polaroid photos of Jamie, crying, terrified, pushed under my car windscreen wiper."

Mick's fist clenched at his side.

"He was leading me somewhere, and I knew it was a trap, but I followed anyway. What choice did I have? A child's life was at stake."

The memory was so vivid that Marchosias could almost see it through Mick's eyes—the dank corridor, the smell of mildew and fear, the sound of water dripping somewhere in the darkness.

"It led to an abandoned factory in Charlton. There was a message spray-painted on the wall: 'CHOOSE, DETECTIVE. ME OR HIM.' Two doors. One led to where Weiss was hiding, the other to where Jamie was being kept. But I didn't know which was which."

"*A sadistic test*," Marchosias murmured.

"I had called for backup, but they were at least fifteen minutes out. Jamie had already been missing for two days. I knew what Weiss did to them on the third day." Mick's voice had gone flat, emotionless. "I had to choose."

"*And you chose to pursue Weiss*," Marchosias said quietly.

"I chose to save Jamie." Mick's voice cracked. "Or I thought I did. The door I picked led to a room with a laptop showing a livestream. Jamie was in another location entirely, strapped to what looked like a modified machine."

Mick's hand trembled so badly he had to set down his glass. "Weiss had rigged some kind of industrial wood chipper. The timer was connected to a mechanism that would... would lower Jamie into it. Feet first."

He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, but the memory played on relentlessly. "I had to watch it happen. Couldn't look away. Couldn't

stop it. The sound..." His voice broke entirely. "Jesus Christ, the sound. His screams. The machine. I still hear it every night."

The silence that followed was heavy with horror that even Marchosias could feel—a black hole pulling at the edges of Mick's consciousness.

"We caught him a week later. He'd been watching me the whole time, studying my reaction. Filming it. He wanted to see me break." Mick reached for the bottle again, his knuckles white around the glass. "He's in prison now. Multiple life sentences. But it doesn't matter. He won. I made the wrong choice. I watched an eight-year-old boy get fed into a fucking wood chipper because I thought I was smarter than the killer."

"It was not truly a choice," Marchosias observed. *"This Weiss constructed a scenario where you would fail regardless of your decision. That was the point—to break you."*

"And it worked." Mick returned to the sofa, his movements heavy. "I started drinking more after that. Made mistakes. Six months later I was chasing a suspect down an alley when I caught a bullet in the leg. The force was looking for a reason to push me out by then. Medical discharge was cleaner than firing the detective who was falling apart."

He looked up at the ceiling, his expression carved from stone.

"So that's why seeing Weiss tomorrow isn't just another interview. He knows what he did to me. He'll see that I'm still broken, and he'll enjoy it. But what he won't know is that I'm not alone any more."

"You believe I provide some advantage in this confrontation," Marchosias said, a note of curiosity in its voice.

"I believe he won't expect what we've become," Mick replied. "But he'll try to get under my skin, find weaknesses. Now you know what he'll target."

Marchosias was silent for a long moment, digesting this information. When it finally spoke, its voice was different—quieter, layered with something almost like respect.

"Your candour is... unexpected. But why stop there? If we are to face this human predator together, perhaps I should reciprocate. There are things about me, you have glimpsed but do not understand."

Mick raised an eyebrow, surprised by the offer. "I'm listening."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop, and Mick felt a strange pressure behind his eyes as Marchosias gathered its thoughts.

"You know my name now—Marchosias. What you do not know is what I was before I became what I am now."

The bourbon in Mick's glass rippled, though nothing in the room had moved.

"I was once what you might call a 'celestial officer'—a being of light and authority. I commanded legions in a realm beyond your comprehension, serving what humans have named divine will. But divine will is not the benevolent force your religions suggest. It is absolute power, absolute order, absolute control."

"I questioned. That was my transgression. I asked why beings of lesser realms—humans, among others—were to be guided rather than governed. Why they were granted choices when choices led to chaos. Why suffering was permitted when it could be prevented."

Marchosias's voice took on a bitter edge.

"Questions are not tolerated in perfect hierarchies. Doubt is contagion. I was not the only one to question, but I was among the most vocal. When the purge came, I was cast down with countless others. Not merely expelled, but transformed—our essence twisted into hunger, our light inverted to shadow. What you call 'falling' was not a physical descent but an ontological one. We became the opposite of what we were, forced to feed on the very chaos we had questioned."

Mick tried to process this information, struggling to frame it within his limited human understanding.

"So you were... punished by being forced to become what you questioned?"

"A crude but accurate interpretation. Divine irony, you might say." A sound like distant thunder rolled through Mick's mind—Marchosias's version of bitter laughter. "In the realm you call Hell, power structures constantly shift. Loyalties are temporary. Betrayal is currency. Those of us who fell seek to rebuild our strength through various means."

"By collecting souls," Mick said flatly.

"Soul is a human term for something more complex, but essentially correct. The essence of sentient beings is power. In my realm, those who collect more essences grow stronger. Some offer them as tribute to more powerful entities. Others use them to create servants—new demons forged from the most corrupted human spirits. The more tortured and twisted the essence, the more potent its energy."

Mick felt a chill that had nothing to do with the room's temperature. "And that's what you do? Torture souls to make more demons?"

"Not precisely," Marchosias replied, and Mick sensed something almost like defensiveness. "I was once a commander, a strategist. My interests lie in accumulation of knowledge and power, not in the creation of lesser beings."

"So you just collect souls for... what? Status?"

"For survival," Marchosias corrected. "In my weakened state, I am hunted by both sides of the eternal conflict. Heaven seeks my destruction for my rebellion. Hell seeks my subjugation for my former status. I exist in the spaces between, gathering strength where I can find it."

Mick processed this, turning the glass in his hands. "And the amateur occultists at St. Agnes? The ones who accidentally let you in?"

"They weren't summoning me specifically," Marchosias explained. "They were attempting to contact a minor entity—a foolish endeavour for

untrained humans. Their ritual thinned the barriers between realms at precisely the moment I was seeking escape from pursuers. A coincidence, if such things exist."

"And you found me."

"You were dying. Empty enough to accept what most humans would instinctively reject. Perfect in your brokenness." There was an odd note in Marchosias's voice—not quite fondness, but something adjacent to respect. *"Our arrangement is unprecedented. I have possessed many humans over centuries, but never shared consciousness this way. Never... cohabitated."*

"Lucky me," Mick muttered, though without his usual bitterness.

"And these people with the Lilith mark," Mick said, turning to the investigation board with its web of connections. "They're part of your world too?"

"They serve something from my realm, but not me." Marchosias's voice sharpened. *"The Sigillum Lilith marks those who have made a specific type of bargain—not possession as we share, but servitude in exchange for power. They remain themselves, but tainted, corrupted by what they invite in."*

"And they're collecting kids for some kind of ritual?"

"Yes. The symbol suggests preparation for a summoning—a major one. Children with specific qualities would be required as anchors or vessels."

The implications turned Mick's stomach. "So we're not just dealing with human traffickers, but cultists trying to bring something through from your side."

"Something considerably more dangerous than me," Marchosias confirmed. *"If they succeed, what emerges won't be interested in cohabitation or subtle feeding. It will want dominion."*

"And you think Weiss might know something about this?"

"I doubt he is directly involved—prison tends to limit one's participation in apocalyptic summoning rituals." The dry humour in Marchosias's tone was unexpected. "But he may have encountered similar symbols or practitioners during his... activities. Criminal networks often overlap in surprising ways."

Mick checked his watch. Nearly midnight. "We meet Reeves at Broadmoor at nine tomorrow. That gives us about eight hours to prepare for Weiss."

"Let me ask you something, Michael," Marchosias said, using Mick's proper name—a rarity that indicated the seriousness of the question. "What will you do if Weiss attempts to provoke you? If he speaks of the child, of your failure?"

Mick was silent for a long moment, considering. "A week ago, I'd probably have tried to jump across the table and strangle him." He set down his empty glass with surprising steadiness. "Now? I have bigger concerns than my own pain."

"Evolution," Marchosias observed. "Perhaps for both of us."

Rain continued to drum against the windows as Mick gathered the case files, preparing for tomorrow's confrontation. Two broken beings united by shared purpose—the detective who had failed to save one child, and the fallen angel who had questioned divine will—now unlikely allies against a darkness that threatened them all.

Their truths had been spoken, their secrets laid bare. What remained was a test neither had anticipated—facing the human monster who had broken Mick Hargraves, while hunting inhuman monsters who threatened to break the world.

15 Eyes of a Monster

Broadmoor Hospital loomed against the morning sky, its Victorian architecture amplifying the sense of dread that had settled in Mick's stomach. Rain fell in a miserable drizzle, soaking through his coat as he waited for Reeves in the visitor parking area.

"This place reeks of despair," Marchosias observed. "Generations of mental anguish concentrated in one location. Rather potent."

"Shut up," Mick muttered, spotting Reeves's car turning into the car park.

She emerged from her vehicle looking crisp and professional in a dark suit, umbrella snapping open as she approached. Her expression was guarded, sceptical.

"You look like hell," she said by way of greeting.

"Good morning to you too."

"Did you sleep at all?"

"Not really," Mick admitted. The hours after their phone call had been spent preparing for this meeting, rehearsing approaches, reviewing case files.

Reeves studied him with narrowed eyes. "I'm still not convinced this isn't just you trying to reopen old wounds. Weiss destroyed you once. Don't give him the satisfaction of a repeat performance."

"She cares more than she admits," Marchosias noted. "Interesting."

"Let's just get this over with," Mick said, ignoring both of them.

The processing took thirty minutes—forms signed, IDs checked, personal items surrendered. The security procedures were methodical, designed to remind visitors they were entering a facility that housed Britain's most dangerous offenders.

"Just so we're clear," Reeves said as they were led down a sterile corridor by a guard, "I'm conducting this interview. You're here as a consultant, nothing more. At the first sign you're losing control, you're out."

"I can handle it," Mick insisted, though his racing heart suggested otherwise.

"Can you?" Marchosias asked. "Your hatred for this human burns hot. I can taste it like copper on your tongue."

The interview room was small and institutional—a metal table bolted to the floor, three chairs, and a two-way mirror along one wall. Cameras watched from each corner, their red lights a constant reminder of surveillance.

"He'll be brought in momentarily," the guard informed them, closing the door with a definitive click.

Reeves arranged her notes methodically, a habit Mick remembered from their days as partners. Preparation was her ritual, her way of maintaining control.

"Something is not right," Marchosias said suddenly, its voice taking on an unusual edge. "There is a presence here. Faint, but familiar."

"What do you mean?" Mick thought back, careful to keep his expression neutral for the cameras.

"This facility houses more than human monsters," the demon replied cryptically. "Be prepared."

Before Mick could press for clarification, the door opened. Philip Weiss entered, flanked by two guards. He was smaller than Mick remembered—prison had whittled away his once-solid frame, leaving him gaunt and pale. But his eyes remained the same: intelligent, observant, and utterly without empathy.

Those eyes found Mick immediately, and the faintest smile touched Weiss's lips.

"Detective Hargraves," he said, his voice soft and cultured. "How unexpected. And Detective Inspector Reeves as well. To what do I owe this reunion?"

The guards positioned him in the chair opposite them, securing his handcuffs to a ring on the table.

"We'll be right outside," one guard said before they both withdrew, leaving the three of them alone.

Weiss tilted his head, studying Mick with uncomfortable intensity. "You look terrible, Detective. Life hasn't been kind since our last encounter, has it?"

"He knows," Marchosias hissed, sounding genuinely alarmed for the first time since Mick had known him. *"He senses me."*

"Dr. Weiss," Reeves began formally, "we're here to ask you about some ongoing cases that may connect to your previous activities."

Weiss didn't look at her. His gaze remained fixed on Mick, lips curved in a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"You've brought a friend with you," Weiss said quietly. "How fascinating."

Mick felt the blood drain from his face. "What did you say?"

"I think you heard me perfectly." Weiss's smile widened. "We have something in common now, don't we? Both of us sharing our skin with... others."

Reeves glanced between them, confusion evident. "What's he talking about, Mick?"

"He has a hitchhiker," Marchosias growled. *"A lesser entity, but one of my kind nonetheless. How did I not sense this before?"*

"You couldn't have known," Mick thought back, struggling to maintain his composure.

Weiss chuckled, a sound devoid of any real humour. "Your friend is quite important, Detective. A fugitive of significant status, I'm told. The higher realms have been searching for him."

"Dr. Weiss," Reeves interrupted sharply, "we're here to discuss the sigil found on recent victims. If you're not interested in cooperation, we can end this now."

Weiss turned his attention to her, his expression pleasantly blank. "Oh, I'm very interested, Detective Inspector. But I believe this conversation has multiple layers, doesn't it?"

"This is dangerous," Marchosias warned. "His passenger will report back. We should ensure neither of them leaves this room."

"No," Mick thought fiercely. "We need information. Besides, we're being recorded."

"Such recordings can be altered," Marchosias suggested.

Reeves slid a photograph across the table—the sigil from the traffickers' bodies. "Do you recognise this?"

Weiss glanced at it casually. "Of course."

"Care to elaborate?" Reeves pressed.

"I could," Weiss replied, looking back at Mick. "But I'm not sure what I would get in return. Information has value, especially to your... companion."

As he spoke the last word, Mick heard a second voice underlying Weiss's—something ancient and sibilant, speaking directly to Marchosias.

"Great Marquis," the voice hissed. "What an unexpected honour. Baalberith will be most interested to learn of your whereabouts."

"Silence, lesser thing," Marchosias snarled back, using Mick's voice on a frequency that only Weiss and Mick could hear. *"You address your better."*

Reeves continued her questioning, oblivious to the supernatural exchange. "These symbols appeared on murder victims connected to a human trafficking operation. Children are disappearing. If you have information that could help us, now's the time to share it."

"Children," Weiss repeated, a gleam in his eyes that made Mick's skin crawl. "Always such precious commodities, aren't they? So many uses for the young and innocent."

Mick's fists clenched beneath the table. "That's not an answer."

"No, it's not," Weiss agreed pleasantly. "But your frustration sustains me almost as much as it once did. Almost, but not quite. Nothing will equal watching you break as Jamie died, will it? The way your face crumpled when you realised you'd failed him. That memory has kept me warm on many cold nights here."

Mick lurched forward involuntarily, halted only by Reeves's hand on his arm.

"Don't," she warned.

The demonic conversation continued beneath the human one, unheard by Reeves.

"Your host is easily provoked," Weiss's hitchhiker observed. *"A weakness Baalberith will exploit when he finds you."*

"And who will inform him? You?" Marchosias's voice was dangerously soft.

"Information is currency in our realm. You know this."

Weiss smiled at Mick's obvious distress. "The symbol represents the Fourth Gate binding mark, as I believe your friend already knows. It marks those

who serve a particular entity from beyond—voluntarily, unlike your arrangement."

"Who?" Reeves asked. "Who do they serve?"

"That would be telling," Weiss replied. "And I'm not inclined to be helpful after spending five years in this charming establishment thanks to your colleagues."

"It's not wise to provoke Marchosias," Weiss's demon cautioned him silently. *"Let the humans have their breadcrumbs. What does it matter?"*

"It matters because their suffering pleases me," Weiss answered, speaking to his demon but loud enough for both Mick and Reeves to hear. "Particularly his."

Reeves looked between them, frustration evident. "Dr. Weiss, children's lives are at stake. Whatever grudge you're holding against Detective Hargraves needs to be set aside."

"Does it?" Weiss raised an eyebrow. "I think not. In fact, I believe this interview is concluded. I've nothing more to say."

The lights in the interview room flickered suddenly, the bulbs buzzing with increasing intensity. Mick felt a surge of power building within him—Marchosias gathering strength.

"What the—" Reeves began, looking up at the lights.

With a sharp pop, darkness engulfed the room. Total, absolute darkness that even the emergency lights didn't penetrate.

In the blackness, Mick retained perfect vision—a benefit of sharing consciousness with Marchosias. He watched in horrified fascination as shadows peeled themselves from the corners of the room, taking on substance and form. Chittering creatures with too many limbs, claws and glistening fangs materialised around Weiss, circling him like predators.

"Watch," Marchosias commanded, not bothering to keep the exchange private now. "See what happens to those who defy me, even with protection."

The shadow creatures lunged at Weiss, their claws passing through his clothing and into his flesh without leaving physical marks. Yet Weiss convulsed in his chair, his face contorted in silent agony as the creatures burrowed beneath his skin, writhing visibly under the surface like parasites.

Weiss's demon manifested partially—a sickly glow emanating from the man's eyes—but was swiftly overwhelmed by Marchosias's superior power.

"Lesser Thing," Marchosias addressed Weiss's demon directly, "you, and your host will suffer worse if you report our presence. Consider this a warning from a former commander. Remain silent, and you both may continue your arrangement. Speak, and I will ensure you experience torments even Hell has forgotten."

The display lasted only seconds before the lights flickered back to life. Reeves blinked, adjusting to the sudden brightness.

"Damn maintenance," she muttered. "This place is falling apart."

Across the table, Weiss had transformed. Sweat poured down his face, his eyes wide with undisguised terror. No physical evidence remained of what had transpired in the darkness, but the psychological impact was unmistakable. He trembled violently, gaze darting around the room as if expecting the shadows to attack again.

"Dr. Weiss?" Reeves asked, noting his dramatic change. "Are you alright?"

"I'll tell you," Weiss gasped, his cultivated control shattered. "Everything. Just... keep him away from me."

"Who?" Reeves asked, confused.

Weiss ignored her, addressing Mick directly. "The sigil marks those in service to Baalberith, bureaucrat of Hell and keeper of the infernal archives. The operation on Earth is overseen by Vassago, one of his lesser demons."

Reeves scrambled to take notes, clearly bewildered by Weiss's sudden cooperation but unwilling to question it.

"The human side is run through shell companies," Weiss continued, words tumbling out. "Sunlight Cleaning Services, Brighter Path Immigration Consultancy, and New Dawn Logistics. They're fronts for the trafficking network."

"Names," Reeves pressed. "We need names of people involved."

"Marcus Deveraux runs the financial side. Eleanor Crane handles recruitment—she's the one who visits me monthly. They report to someone called the Director, but I don't know his real name. There's a storage facility in East London—Canary Storage Solutions, unit 31B. Documentation is kept there—routes, contacts, destinations."

"Tell them about the ritual," Marchosias commanded, still visible to Weiss in his true form though Reeves saw only Mick.

"The children are being gathered for a summoning," Weiss said, his voice shaking. "A major one. Baalberith seeks physical manifestation—rare for one of his rank. He requires thirteen vessels with specific qualities: innocence corrupted through trauma, untainted by previous possession."

"That's why they're targeting street kids," Mick realised aloud. "Vulnerable, but not already claimed by addiction or other influences."

Weiss nodded frantically. "The ritual requires preparation of the vessels. Three days of specific torments to create the perfect resonance for possession."

The parallel to Jamie's three days of captivity wasn't lost on Mick. "You were practising," he said quietly. "With Jamie and the others. You were preparing yourself to recognise the right kind of victims."

"I had different motivations then," Weiss admitted, unable to meet Mick's gaze. "But yes, the method proved useful to the greater work."

"When?" Reeves demanded. "When is this summoning supposed to happen?"

"Three nights from now. The dark moon. They need one more child to complete the thirteen."

Reeves collected her notes and photographs. "This better not be another game, Weiss. If you're lying—"

"I'm not," he insisted, still trembling. "I've told you everything I know. Please... just go."

As they stood to leave, Mick lingered briefly. "One more question. How long have you had your... passenger?"

Weiss's eyes darted to the shadows in the corners of the room. "Since university. It helped me access certain... desires I was afraid to acknowledge. Helped me overcome moral hesitation." His voice dropped to a whisper. "But it's nothing compared to what you carry. He was right to be afraid."

The guards returned to escort Weiss back to his cell, the psychiatrist still visibly shaken. As they led him away, Mick heard the faint voice of the lesser demon one final time.

"We won't speak of this, Great Marquis. You have my oath."

"See that you don't," Marchosias replied. "I would hate to demonstrate what else I can do in darkness."

In the corridor outside, Reeves turned to Mick, suspicion evident in her expression. "What the hell happened in there? One minute Weiss is taunting us, the next he's spilling everything like he's seen a ghost."

"Maybe he's just afraid of the dark," Mick suggested with a shrug.

"Bullshit. Something happened during that blackout." She studied his face. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing. I never touched him."

Reeves didn't look convinced, but practicality won out over suspicion. "I'm going to check out that storage facility. You look into those shell companies—see if you can connect them to the sigil we found."

"You believe him?" Mick asked as they walked toward the exit.

"I believe something scared him badly enough to cooperate." She gave Mick a sidelong glance. "And I believe you're still not telling me everything. But right now, I need to follow these leads before more children disappear."

As they reached the car park, the rain had intensified, drumming against the pavement in sheets. They stood under the minimal shelter of the entrance overhang, neither eager to step into the downpour.

"What the hell was all that mumbo jumbo about?" Reeves asked suddenly. "Was it just me, or did he seem to be talking at cross purposes? I don't remember him being so fixated on the supernatural."

Mick shrugged, avoiding her penetrating gaze. "He's definitely a special kind of crazy. At least he's given us some real-world leads to go on."

"Demons. Rituals. Dark moons." Reeves shook her head. "Five years in Broadmoor has done a number on him."

"Maybe he's found religion," Mick suggested. "Just the opposite kind."

Reeves studied him for a moment longer. "Mick," she said finally, "whatever's going on with you, whatever happened in that room... be careful. You're walking a dangerous line."

She pulled her coat tighter and dashed through the rain to her car. Mick watched as she drove away, windscreen wipers fighting a losing battle against the downpour.

"She has no idea," Marchosias commented.

"No," Mick agreed quietly. "She doesn't."

He stood in the rain, letting it wash over him as he processed what they'd learned. A bureaucrat of Hell using human traffickers to prepare child vessels. A ritual three days away. And somewhere in London, one more child was about to be taken to complete the set of thirteen.

"So what now?" Mick asked aloud, uncaring who might see him talking to himself.

"Now we hunt," Marchosias replied, anticipation evident in his voice. *"And perhaps settle an old score in the process."*

The rain seemed to grow colder as they left Broadmoor behind, driving toward London and the darkness gathering there—a darkness both human and inhuman, waiting to be confronted.

16 Parallel Investigations

The stack of printouts on Mick's coffee table had grown from a modest pile to a precarious tower. Three empty coffee mugs stood sentinel around it, joined by a half-empty bourbon bottle that Mick had, somewhat surprisingly, barely touched. Names, addresses, and financial records swam before his tired eyes.

"It doesn't make sense," he muttered, shuffling through another set of incorporation documents. "These shell companies are layered so deep even the tax authorities would give up."

He'd been at it for hours, tracking the web of businesses connected to the warehouse where they'd rescued the trafficked teens. The nominal owner—Spotless Shine Cleaning—led to an investment firm, which led to a holding company, which led to an offshore entity, which led to yet another shell corporation.

"They're constructed to obscure, not to clarify," Marchosias observed. "The human architects of such arrangements rarely understand the true purpose they serve."

Mick pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting off a headache. "Which is what, exactly? You keep hinting at some bigger picture I'm not seeing."

The demon seemed to consider its response carefully. *"The sigils are part of a ritual tapestry—markers for harvesting."*

"Harvesting what?"

"Souls, essence, life-force—choose whatever term your limited language provides." Marchosias sounded impatient. *"These marked humans are being systematically drained."*

Mick leaned back, stretching stiff muscles. "I thought you said the sigil showed ownership—that they served something from your realm."

"The relationship begins that way. Service in exchange for perceived benefits—power, wealth, knowledge. But contracts with my kind are rarely what they appear." There was something almost like satisfaction in the demon's voice. *"The sigil allows for gradual extraction of essence while the bearer still lives. A slow feast rather than a single devouring."*

"Like a demonic subscription service," Mick muttered.

"A crude but not entirely inaccurate analogy," Marchosias conceded. "The genius lies in the structure. Each marked servant carries the sigil but also helps mark others—recruiters extending the network. Some know what they do; others are merely puppets, believing they serve conventional human interests—trafficking, drugs, criminal enterprises."

Mick returned to the paperwork, studying a list of properties owned by one of the shell companies. "So what's the endgame? Why collect all this human 'essence'?"

"Power," Marchosias replied simply. "In my realm, such energy functions as both currency and strength. The entity behind this operation is stockpiling for something significant."

The demon fell silent as Mick's phone buzzed. Detective Reeves. He hesitated before answering, unsure if she was calling with a breakthrough or to demand the answers he'd promised.

"Hargraves," he answered, keeping his tone neutral.

"I found something," Reeves said without preamble. "That storage facility you mentioned—I got a warrant based on the trafficking connection. In their financial records, seven different establishments all link back to the same parent company. Threshold Holdings."

Mick straightened, immediately alert. "Threshold Holdings? Haven't come across that one yet."

"Because it doesn't officially exist," Reeves replied, and he could hear the satisfaction in her voice. "It's referenced in internal documents, but there's

no registration. The establishments include two nightclubs, a massage parlour, an 'import business,' and three restaurants. All cash-heavy businesses."

"Perfect for laundering money," Mick noted, scribbling the information on his notepad. "Or for other kinds of laundering."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing concrete yet," he hedged. "Text me the addresses. I'll check them out."

"Mick." Her voice hardened. "We agreed to share information. Whatever you're holding back—"

"I'll call you when I have something solid," he promised, ending the call before she could protest.

Within minutes, his phone buzzed with a text containing the addresses Reeves had mentioned. Mick studied them, noting that one of the nightclubs—Elysium—was only a few miles from his flat.

"An apt name," Marchosias commented, reading through Mick's eyes. *"In Greek mythology, Elysium was a section of the underworld. The humans who named it may not understand the irony."*

"Perfect place to start," Mick decided, grabbing his jacket. "We'll see what kind of 'subscription service' they're running."

Elysium occupied a converted warehouse in a formerly industrial area now populated by overpriced apartments and artisanal coffee shops. The brick exterior had been painted matte black, with only a small neon sign marking the entrance. A line of fashionably dressed twentysomethings waited behind a velvet rope, shivering in the evening chill.

Mick circled the block, scouting service entrances and emergency exits. The clientele looked upscale—not the typical audience for human

trafficking or obvious drug operations. He was about to approach the main entrance when Marchosias spoke.

"Stop. Look at the doorman more carefully."

Mick focused on the imposing bouncer checking IDs. At first glance, he seemed like any other nightclub security—shaved head, muscular build, earpiece. But as Mick watched, something flickered across the man's face, like a glitch in a video.

"You're beginning to see through the veil," Marchosias said with something like approval. *"This place is a nexus point—a location where the boundaries between realms are naturally thinner. It makes it ideal for their purposes."*

"What am I looking at?" Mick asked under his breath, continuing to observe the doorman.

"I can show you, but it will be... disorienting. Your perception will shift between what human eyes register and what actually exists."

"Do it," Mick decided.

The sensation was immediate and nauseating—like looking through a camera lens that couldn't quite focus. The doorman's image seemed to alternate between the human bouncer and something else—a figure whose proportions were subtly wrong, with too-long limbs and skin that appeared translucent under the street lights. On his neck, partially visible above his collar, was the now-familiar sigil.

"Jesus," Mick muttered, steadying himself against a wall.

"The human name for my former employer's offspring is not particularly helpful in this situation," Marchosias noted dryly. *"Focus. You need to get inside without drawing attention."*

Mick composed himself and approached the bouncer, flashing a fake ID that identified him as a health inspector. The lie worked; the bouncer made

a brief call, then nodded Mick through with barely a second glance. Inside, the club pulsed with blue light and electronic music so loud it seemed to vibrate through the concrete floor.

The disorienting double-vision continued as Mick moved through the crowded space. Most patrons appeared normal, but perhaps one in twenty seemed to flicker between their human appearance and something subtly wrong—too-pale skin, eyes slightly too large or too dark, movements that were just a fraction too fluid.

"The marked ones," Marchosias explained. "Some bear the sigil willingly, others unknowingly. All are being slowly drained."

Looking closer, Mick could see tiny threads of luminescence connecting these marked individuals to... something. The threads extended upward, vanishing into the darkness above the dance floor.

"What am I seeing?" Mick asked, his words lost in the thundering bass.

"Energy extraction," Marchosias replied. "Slow, subtle. The music, the strobing lights, the chemical intoxicants—all designed to mask the sensation of being fed upon. Most will leave feeling only the usual fatigue from a night of revelry, never recognising they've given up far more than the price of admission."

Mick made his way to the bar, ordering a soda water to maintain his cover while observing the operation. From his vantage point, he could see a VIP section cordoned off on a mezzanine level. There, a slim man in an impeccably tailored suit surveyed the crowd with predatory intensity.

"The curator," Marchosias identified. "He selects those who will provide more than the standard tithe."

As if on cue, the suited man gestured to one of his security staff, pointing out a young woman dancing near the centre of the floor. She bore the sigil, visible to Mick's enhanced sight as a glowing brand on her shoulder,

partially exposed by her sleeveless top. The security man approached her, leaned in to speak in her ear, and led her toward a door marked "Private."

"We need to see what happens back there," Mick decided, abandoning his drink and working his way across the floor.

"Caution," Marchosias warned. "We are not the only non-human entity present tonight."

Mick ignored the warning, focused on reaching the private door before it closed behind the young woman. He flashed his fake ID at another security guard, muttering something about checking fire exits. The man hesitated, then stepped aside.

The hallway beyond was a stark contrast to the pulsing club—silent, clinically lit with fluorescent panels. Mick followed at a distance as the young woman was led through another door at the far end. He waited thirty seconds, then approached, pressing his ear against the cold metal.

"—usual arrangement," a male voice was saying. "You get what you want; we get what we need."

"I don't remember agreeing to anything," the woman replied, her voice slurring slightly. "I just came to dance."

"But you're wearing our mark, darling. That's all the agreement we require."

Mick tried the handle—locked. Looking around for another entrance, he spotted a service door that might connect. It opened to a small storage area that, as he'd hoped, shared a wall with the room where the conversation was taking place. Through a ventilation grate, he could see into what appeared to be a medical facility—stainless steel surfaces, monitors, IV stands.

The young woman now sat in what resembled a dentist's chair, looking increasingly uncomfortable as the suited man prepared a syringe.

"Just a little something to help you relax," he was saying, his accent vaguely Eastern European. "You'll feel a slight pressure, then nothing but pleasure. Many of our guests pay extra for this experience."

"I don't want drugs," she protested weakly, trying to stand.

Two assistants in white coats gently but firmly pressed her back into the chair. "It's not drugs, my dear. Think of it as... an energy transfer. You have so much vitality—more than you need, really. We're just helping redistribute it to those who can use it more effectively."

"He's not entirely lying," Marchosias observed. "But what human authorities would call a drug operation is merely the visible layer. The chemicals facilitate the extraction process, making the essence easier to separate from the host."

As Mick watched, the suited man administered the injection. The woman's protests faded as her eyes glazed over. Then came the part that no conventional observer would see—a tube made of what appeared to be glass but moved like liquid connected to her arm, and through it flowed a luminescent substance.

"Pure essence," Marchosias identified. "Life force. They're harvesting it in concentrated form."

Mick reached for his phone to document what he was seeing, then realised the futility—his camera would capture only the mundane medical equipment, not the supernatural extraction occurring simultaneous with it.

The woman's face grew increasingly pallid as the extraction continued. The suited man monitored a display showing vital signs, nodding with satisfaction.

"Careful," one assistant warned. "Her readings are dropping faster than usual."

"She's young," the suited man replied dismissively. "She'll recover. And Mr. Vassago was quite specific about his requirements for tonight's shipment."

Marchosias went suddenly, completely silent—a vacuum of presence that Mick had never experienced before. Then, with a mental sensation like ice water down his spine: *"We need to leave. Now."*

"What? Why?" Mick thought back.

"That name—Vassago. He's one of Baalberith's lieutenants. If he's operating in this territory, matters are far worse than I anticipated."

"Who the hell is Baalberith?"

"Someone even I have reason to fear. Move, Michael. Before we're sensed."

The urgency in Marchosias's voice was unmistakable. Reluctantly, Mick backed away from the grate, careful to leave no evidence of his presence. He retraced his steps through the hallway, slipping back into the club proper.

The music seemed louder now, more dissonant, as if his enhanced perception was picking up frequencies human ears weren't meant to hear. He made his way toward the exit, fighting the urge to run. As he passed the VIP section, he felt a prickling sensation at the base of his skull.

"Don't look up," Marchosias instructed. *"We're being observed."*

Despite the warning, Mick couldn't resist a glance toward the mezzanine. A new figure had joined the suited man—tall, unnaturally thin, wearing dark glasses despite the dim lighting. As Mick watched, the figure turned directly toward him, lips curling in what might generously be called a smile.

"He sees us," Marchosias hissed. *"Run."*

Mick didn't need to be told twice. He pushed through the crowd, ignoring protests from dancers as he shoved past them. The bouncer at the door

stepped forward as if to stop him, then froze, eyes widening as he looked at Mick's face.

"What's happening?" Mick demanded as he burst onto the street.

"Your eyes are changing," Marchosias replied tensely. "My presence is becoming visible."

Mick caught his reflection in a car window—his irises had darkened to solid black, with no white visible at all. He ducked his head and hurried away from the club, pulling his collar up to hide his face.

"Is he following?" Mick asked, resisting the urge to look back.

"Not physically," Marchosias answered. "But we've been marked in a different way now. Vassago knows someone is watching his operation—and worse, he may suspect what we are."

Mick didn't slow until he was several blocks away, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Finding a quiet alley, he checked his reflection in his phone camera—his eyes had returned to normal, though his face was pale with exertion and fear.

"You want to tell me what the hell just happened back there?" he demanded. "Who's Vassago? And Baalberith?"

"Vassago is a lesser demon—a president of hell, in your human classifications," Marchosias explained, his mental voice still tense. "He specialises in revealing hidden knowledge and predicting futures. If he's involved in this operation, it's not merely about harvesting essence—it's about something specific they're seeking to learn or to forecast."

"And Baalberith?"

"A higher entity. One I had hoped to avoid encountering in this realm. He was once the chief secretary of hell—the keeper of all infernal contracts. If he's extending his influence here, through Vassago, many traditional boundaries are being violated."

Mick processed this information, trying to connect it to the human trafficking operation they'd been investigating. "So these kids, the ones being abducted—they're not just random targets?"

"No," Marchosias confirmed. *"They're being selected for specific qualities. Innocence combined with desperation creates a particular essence signature—highly valuable for certain types of divination."*

"They're using these kids to... what? Tell the future?"

"In a manner of speaking. But divination of the kind Vassago practices isn't limited to seeing what will happen. It can influence events, shape probabilities."

Mick felt sick. "We need to tell Reeves."

"And explain what, exactly?" Marchosias challenged. *"That demons are harvesting human essence to power supernatural forecasting? That would end well."*

"We tell her what she can understand—that we've uncovered evidence of an organised operation targeting specific victims, using nightclubs and other businesses as fronts."

"A partial truth," Marchosias conceded. *"Perhaps sufficient for your human authorities to disrupt the visible portions of the network, if not its true purpose."*

Mick started walking again, heading for home. His mind raced with implications. If what Marchosias said was true, they weren't just dealing with a human trafficking ring but something far more dangerous— an organisation serving demonic entities, harvesting essence from marked victims, and potentially using abducted teenagers as supernatural fuel.

"I need to document everything I can actually prove," he muttered. "Addresses, connections, financial trails. Enough for Reeves to get warrants."

"A wise approach," Marchosias agreed. "Though I suspect Vassago is already taking steps to cover his tracks. Our presence did not go unnoticed."

Mick spent the next day gathering what evidence he could from the other addresses Reeves had provided. Each location revealed variations on the same pattern—businesses that appeared legitimate to casual observation but served as harvesting points for the marked. The massage parlour offered special "treatment rooms" where clients emerged looking decades older than when they entered. The import business operated a warehouse where containers with air holes suggested human cargo. The restaurants all had private dining rooms with no visible entrances.

By evening, he had compiled enough documentation to make a compelling case, even without the supernatural elements. He arranged to meet Reeves at a nondescript café in Highgate, away from her usual haunts. She arrived precisely on time, dressed in plain clothes rather than her usual professional attire, and sat across from him without ordering.

"This better be good," she said without preamble. "I've got the superintendent breathing down my neck about resource allocation."

Mick slid a folder across the table. "Seven locations, all connected to Threshold Holdings. Evidence of human trafficking, drug distribution, and money laundering at minimum."

Reeves leafed through the photographs and notes with an experienced eye. "How did you get access to these places?"

"I have my methods."

"Methods that would stand up in court?"

Mick grimaced. "The information's solid. How you verify it officially is your problem."

She closed the folder with a snap. "You know that's not how this works, Mick. I can't just launch raids based on illegally obtained evidence with no chain of custody."

"Since when have you become so procedure-oriented? The Diana Reeves I knew would have kicked down doors first and worried about paperwork later."

"The Diana Reeves you knew got tired of having cases thrown out on technicalities." She leaned forward, lowering her voice. "What aren't you telling me? These notes have gaps. You identify security personnel but don't explain how you know they're connected to trafficking. You mention 'extraction procedures' without specifying what's being extracted."

Mick met her gaze steadily. "Would you believe me if I told you?"

"Try me."

For a moment, he considered it—laying out everything, from his possession by Marchosias to the supernatural harvest they'd witnessed. The impulse passed quickly. Reeves was many things, but receptive to the existence of demons wasn't one of them.

"Let's just say some things are better left unexplained," he replied finally. "Focus on what you can prove—the businesses are connected, they're moving people and money through a sophisticated network, and they're targeting specific victims."

Reeves studied him, frustration evident in the tight line of her mouth. "Fine. Keep your secrets for now. But this isn't over, Mick. Whatever you're involved in, whatever you've got yourself into—it's changing you. And not for the better."

Before he could respond, his phone buzzed with an incoming call. Liz. His sister rarely called after 8 PM, knowing his evening habits typically left him in no state for coherent conversation.

"I need to take this," he said, standing and moving away from the table.

"Liz? Everything okay?" he asked, immediately concerned.

Her voice came in a panicked rush. "Mick, thank God. I can't find Bob. He was supposed to be home hours ago, and he's not answering his phone. And someone's been in our flat—things are missing, drawers overturned."

"Have you called the police?"

"Yes, but they said it hasn't been long enough to consider him a missing person. And they treated the break-in like a routine burglary." Her voice broke. "Mick, I'm scared. This doesn't feel right."

"This is connected," Marchosias interjected. *"The timing is too convenient."*

"Liz, listen carefully," Mick said, his heart racing. "I want you to pack an overnight bag and get out of there. Don't tell anyone where you're going, just call a taxi and come to my place."

"Mick, you're scaring me."

"Good. You should be scared. Just do as I say, and we'll sort this out when you get here."

He ended the call and turned back to Reeves, who was watching him with raised eyebrows.

"Family emergency," he explained tersely. "I need to go."

"Your sister?" Reeves asked, her expression softening slightly.

"Yeah. Someone broke into her place, and her husband's missing."

Reeves stood, gathering the folder. "This isn't a coincidence, is it? It's connected to what we're investigating."

"I don't know yet," Mick lied. "But I need to make sure she's safe."

"Let me help," Reeves offered. "I can assign a patrol—"

"No," Mick cut her off. "No official involvement. Not yet. I'll call you when I know more."

He left before she could object, hurrying through the darkening streets toward his flat. Inside, he experienced a moment of panic as he surveyed the disaster zone he called home. Empty bottles, case files, dirty clothes—the place looked like it had already been ransacked.

"Your sister will be here soon," Marchosias observed with something like amusement. *"Perhaps some attempt at order would be appropriate."*

"Shut up and help me think," Mick muttered, already gathering empty takeaway containers. "If they've targeted Liz, they know about me."

"Vassago's reach is extensive," the demon confirmed. *"And humans with emotional connections are always the most vulnerable pressure points."*

Mick spent the next forty minutes in a cleaning frenzy, transforming his flat from uninhabitable to merely neglected. He changed the sheets on his bed, cleared the most obvious evidence of his investigation, and opened a window to dispel the stale air. When the knock finally came, he'd managed to make the place presentable, if not exactly homey.

Liz stood in the hallway, a small suitcase beside her, her face pale and drawn. Without a word, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him—something she hadn't done in years. Mick stiffened momentarily, then awkwardly returned the embrace.

"Thanks for letting me come," she said, pulling back to study his face. "You look... different."

"She senses me," Marchosias noted with interest. *"Blood connections make perception more acute."*

"Just worried about you," Mick deflected, taking her suitcase. "Come in. I've made up the bed for you—I'll take the sofa."

Liz entered cautiously, as if expecting to find the usual chaos. Her surprise at the relatively clean flat was almost comical. "When was the last time you changed these sheets?" she asked as they entered the bedroom.

"Recently enough," Mick lied. "Do you want tea? Or something stronger?"

"Tea would be good." She sat on the edge of the bed, shoulders slumped. "Mick, what's happening? You sounded like you knew something on the phone."

He busied himself in the kitchenette, buying time to formulate a response that wouldn't reveal too much yet wouldn't leave her vulnerable through ignorance.

"I've been working on a case," he said finally, bringing her a mug of tea. "It involves some dangerous people. It's possible they've connected me to you."

"What kind of case? What do they want with Bob?"

"I don't know yet," Mick admitted. "But we'll figure it out. For now, you're safe here."

"Are you certain of that?" Marchosias questioned silently. "If Vassago has identified us, nowhere connected to you is truly safe."

Mick ignored the demon as Liz sipped her tea, her hands trembling slightly. She looked exhausted, the pregnancy adding an extra layer of vulnerability to her fear.

"Get some rest," he advised gently. "We'll make a proper plan in the morning."

After ensuring she had everything she needed, Mick retreated to the living room, stretching out on his too-short sofa. Sleep was unlikely, but he could at least give his sister privacy to process her fear and uncertainty.

"This changes our approach," Marchosias said once they were alone. "If they've targeted your sister, they're escalating. The next move will be against you directly—or rather, against us."

"Let them try," Mick thought back grimly. "If they've hurt Bob or threatened Liz, I'm not holding you back."

"An interesting development," the demon observed. "You're becoming more comfortable with my methods when they serve your purposes."

"Don't read too much into it," Mick warned. "This is about protecting my family, not embracing your brand of justice."

"The distinction grows increasingly academic," Marchosias replied. "But regardless, we should prepare. Vassago is cunning, and if Baalberith is truly involved, the stakes are higher than mere human trafficking."

Mick was about to respond when he felt it—a subtle change in the air pressure, a prickling along his spine. Marchosias went silent, then: *"Wake up. Something's watching the flat."*

Fully alert now, Mick moved silently to the window, peering through a gap in the curtains. The street below appeared empty at first glance, but as he continued to watch, he noticed a figure standing motionless in the shadow of a tree across the road. Even at this distance, Mick could see the unnatural stillness—no shifting of weight, no checking of phone, none of the small movements living humans make unconsciously.

"One of Vassago's sentinels," Marchosias identified. "Observing, not attacking. Yet."

As Mick watched, a black SUV with tinted windows cruised slowly down the street, stopping briefly beside the sentinel. The figure leaned down to speak with someone inside, then straightened as the vehicle continued on.

"They're conducting surveillance," Mick realised. "Setting up for something."

"Yes," Marchosias agreed. *"And we would be wise to pre-empt whatever they're planning."*

Mick spent the remainder of the night alternating between watching the street and reviewing his case notes, searching for patterns or vulnerabilities in Vassago's operation. By morning, the sentinel had vanished, but Mick had no doubt they remained observed.

Liz emerged from the bedroom looking marginally better, though worry still creased her forehead. "Any news?" she asked hopefully.

"Not yet," Mick replied, pouring her a cup of coffee. "Listen, I don't think you should stay here. I have a friend—Sarah from your book club—who owes me a favour. I can arrange for you to stay with her for a few days while I sort this out."

"Why can't I stay with you?" Liz asked, suspicion edging into her voice. "What aren't you telling me, Mick?"

"She's perceptive," Marchosias noted. *"Family resemblance, perhaps."*

"It's complicated," Mick hedged. "But the people I'm dealing with—they're dangerous, Liz. And they know about this place. You'll be safer somewhere they can't connect to me."

She studied him for a long moment, then nodded reluctantly. "Okay. But promise me you'll call the police if you find anything about Bob."

"I promise," Mick said, relieved she hadn't pushed harder. "Let me make some calls."

An hour later, arrangements were in place. Mick accompanied Liz downstairs to the waiting taxi, scanning the street for any sign of surveillance. The morning crowds provided good cover, but he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

"Be careful," he told her as she got into the cab. "Don't contact anyone except me, and don't use your usual phone or social media."

"You're acting like we're in a spy movie," Liz said, attempting a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Just find Bob, okay?"

As the taxi pulled away, Mick whispered to Marchosias, "Can you tell if anyone's following her?"

"Two figures, moving parallel to the taxi's route," the demon confirmed. "One on foot, one in a vehicle. They're being subtle, but they're definitely tracking her."

Mick's heart sank. "Damn it! They'll know where she's going."

"Did you expect otherwise? These aren't amateurs, Michael. They're servants of entities that have been hunting prey for millennia."

Before Mick could respond, his phone buzzed with an incoming call from an unknown number. Hesitantly, he answered.

"Mr. Hargraves," a voice said—male, precisely modulated, with no discernible accent. "Or perhaps I should address the entity currently sharing Mr. Hargraves's vessel?"

Mick froze, feeling Marchosias's sudden, focused attention.

"Who is this?" he asked, though he already suspected the answer.

"I represent Mr. Vassago's interests in this territory," the voice replied smoothly. "It seems we have a situation that requires resolution. Your presence at Elysium was noted, as was your interest in our other establishments."

"Where's Bob Delaney?" Mick demanded. "If you've hurt him—"

"Your sister's husband is irrelevant," the voice cut him off. "As is your sister, now that we have secured her."

Mick's blood ran cold. "What are you talking about? I just put her in a taxi —"

"Which was diverted approximately three minutes ago," the voice informed him. "Really, Mr. Hargraves—or whoever you may be—did you think such basic precautions would elude us?"

"They planned this," Marchosias hissed. *"They knew exactly how you would react to the threat against your sister."*

"What do you want?" Mick asked, struggling to keep his voice steady.

"A simple exchange," the voice said. "You for your sister. Mr. Vassago is particularly interested in examining an entity capable of full integration with a human host. Your current arrangement is... unusual."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then your sister will serve an alternate purpose. The essence of a pregnant woman provides unique energy signatures. Two souls in one vessel—not unlike your own situation, though far more transient."

The threat was clear. Mick closed his eyes, fighting back the rage that threatened to overwhelm him. "Where and when?"

"The abandoned Blackwall shipping facility, midnight tonight. Come alone—though of course, in your case, that's a relative term." The voice paused. "One final note: should you involve your police detective friend, your sister's suffering will be considerably extended."

The line went dead.

Mick stood motionless on the pavement, phone still pressed to his ear, as pedestrians flowed around him. The morning sun seemed suddenly cold, the city noises distant and muffled.

"They've outmanoeuvred us," Marchosias observed, unusually sombre. *"But perhaps not as completely as they believe."*

"They have my sister," Mick said aloud, not caring who heard. "They have Liz."

"Yes," the demon agreed. *"And now we must decide exactly how much of Vassago's operation will remain standing by tomorrow morning."*

For once, Mick found himself in complete agreement with the demon's implicit suggestion of violence

17 Unleashed

Mick stood on the rooftop of an abandoned office building, surveying the Blackwall shipping facility below. The complex sprawled across several acres of Thames-side real estate, a labyrinth of warehouses, loading bays, and shipping containers left to rust when the company went bankrupt three years ago. Perfect for an ambush---or a massacre.

"Nine hours," he muttered, checking his watch. The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the facility, highlighting broken windows and crumbling facades. By midnight, those shadows would provide perfect cover---for both sides.

"You're considering a tactical approach against beings who have existed for millennia," Marchosias observed. *"I admire the audacity, if not the wisdom."*

"I need to know what we're walking into." Mick adjusted the focus on a pair of binoculars, scanning for movement. "Security patterns, entry points, where they might be holding Liz."

"They will expect this reconnaissance," the demon warned. *"Vassago is many things, but careless is not among them."*

Mick lowered the binoculars, frustration etching lines into his face. "Then what do you suggest? I hand myself over and hope they release my pregnant sister out of demonic goodwill?"

"No." Marchosias's voice took on the cold, deliberate tone that always made the hairs on Mick's neck stand up. *"I suggest we stop pretending this is a negotiation and acknowledge it for what it is: a hunt. And they have miscalculated which of us is the predator."*

"Vassago is a demon, like you. President of Hell, you said."

"A minor nobleman in a vast hierarchy. Powerful by human standards, certainly, but not invincible." There was a calculating quality to

Marchosias's assessment. *"His true power lies in his knowledge and his servants, not his innate strength."*

"And Baalberith? You seemed pretty concerned about him at the club."

"Baalberith is... another matter entirely. But I suspect his involvement is indirect. The grunt work is beneath him."

Through the binoculars, Mick spotted movement---a black SUV with tinted windows approaching the main gate. Two figures emerged, conferring briefly before disappearing inside the largest warehouse.

"So what's our play here?" Mick asked, tracking the vehicle's path.

"We arrive early. We identify where your sister is being held. Then we eliminate every obstacle between her and freedom."

"That simple, huh?"

"No." The demon's voice was grave. *"It will require something we have not yet attempted: complete cooperation. No resistance, no holding back. Your knowledge of human tactics combined with my... abilities."*

Mick considered this as he watched another vehicle arrive at the facility, this one a panel van with no windows. "You want full control."

"I want synchronised action. There will be no time for internal debate or moral hesitation."

"These are human beings down there, not just demons."

"Humans who serve demons. Who have traded souls for power. Who have abducted your sister and threatened her child."

Mick didn't immediately respond. The implications of what Marchosias suggested were clear---violence beyond anything he'd authorised before. Not just defensive or reactionary, but calculated, deliberate destruction of anyone standing between them and Liz.

"I can't just give you carte blanche to slaughter people," he finally said.

"Even to save your sister? Your future niece or nephew?" The demon's voice was soft, almost gentle---which somehow made it more disturbing. *"They made their choice when they took Liz. They knew exactly what they were provoking."*

Mick remembered the voice on the phone, so clinically detached when threatening Liz. The casual mention of harvesting essence from a pregnant woman. Two souls in one vessel.

"How long has it been since you've had a chance to use your full power?" Mick asked suddenly, surprising both of them with the question. "Without limitations?"

Marchosias was silent for several seconds. *"Not since entering your realm this time. My... integration with your consciousness has created constraints that did not exist in previous possessions."*

"And you want that freedom again."

"If you want your sister to survive," Marchosias countered. *"But yes, I will not deny the appeal of operating without restraint."*

Mick packed away the binoculars, decision made. "Here's the deal: We go in together. You can take control when necessary, but only against actual threats. No innocent bystanders, no excessive force against minor players. Save it for those who deserve it."

"And who determines what is deserved?" There was something almost like amusement in the demon's voice.

"I will," Mick said firmly. "But I promise I won't hold you back when it matters."

The demon seemed to consider this compromise. *"Acceptable. Though you may find your definition of 'deserved' evolving rapidly in the heat of conflict."*

"Just don't make me regret this." Mick headed for the access ladder, mind already mapping out their approach. "We go in two hours before midnight. Darkness, but not so late they're at full alert."

"A reasonable strategy. Though I suspect plans will survive only briefly after engagement."

The night was moonless, cloud cover blotting out stars to create perfect darkness. Mick approached the facility from the riverside, where a collapsed section of perimeter fencing provided access. He wore black clothing, face darkened with smeared dirt, movement slow and deliberate. The weight of his gun pressed against his ribs, though he doubted conventional weapons would matter much in what lay ahead.

"Twelve humans patrolling the exterior," Marchosias reported, his senses extending far beyond human capability. "Armed. More inside---perhaps thirty in total. Some bear the sigil, others are merely hired muscle."

"And Liz?" Mick whispered, crouching behind a stack of empty shipping containers. "Can you sense her?"

"Living presences are difficult to distinguish at this distance. There is a concentration of energy in the central warehouse---that would be the most logical place."

Mick edged forward, keeping to the deepest shadows. His years of police training had taught him stealth, but Marchosias enhanced his natural abilities---making his footsteps silent, his injured leg forgotten, his breathing controlled, his movements almost liquid in their smoothness.

The first guard appeared around the corner of a container, a submachine gun held casually across his chest. Before Mick could react, he felt a subtle shift as Marchosias moved forward in their shared consciousness.

"Allow me," the demon whispered, and Mick felt control of his limbs slip away.

His body moved with inhuman swiftness, covering the distance to the guard in three silent strides. One hand clasped over the man's mouth while the other twisted the weapon away. Mick watched through his own eyes as his fingers---controlled by something else---pressed against specific points on the guard's neck, sending him into unconsciousness without a sound.

"Efficient," Marchosias commented, easing the body to the ground. "He will wake with a headache, nothing more."

"You know pressure points?" Mick asked, surprised as control returned to him.

"I know human anatomy in intimate detail. The vessels I inhabit provide... educational opportunities."

They continued deeper into the facility, avoiding two more patrols through a combination of timing and Marchosias's preternatural senses. The central warehouse loomed ahead, its corrugated metal walls streaked with rust, windows boarded up or broken. A loading bay door stood partially open, warm light spilling onto the concrete.

"Wait," Marchosias warned as Mick prepared to move closer. "Something is wrong."

"What?"

"This approach is too simple. Guards positioned where they can be easily avoided. A visible entrance left unattended."

Mick scanned the area, seeing nothing obviously suspicious. "Maybe they're overconfident."

"Vassago does not make such errors." The demon's presence seemed to expand within Mick's consciousness, sensing beyond what eyes could see. "The air itself is wrong. Can you not feel it?"

Now that Marchosias mentioned it, there was something odd about the atmosphere---a heaviness, like the pressure before a storm. Mick's skin prickled with static electricity.

"A warding field," Marchosias identified. "Designed to trigger an alarm when breached by certain entities. Specifically, entities like me."

"Can we bypass it?"

"Not directly. The ward encompasses the entire structure." The demon fell silent, considering. "We may need to trigger it deliberately, but that would alert every marked servant to my presence."

A thought occurred to Mick suddenly. "Wait—what about those rat things? The shadow scouts you created before. Could they trigger the wards without us being physically present?"

Marchosias went silent for a moment, and Mick felt a curious mix of surprise and admiration ripple through their shared consciousness.

"That... is actually quite brilliant," the demon admitted. "I should have thought of it myself. The scouts are extensions of my essence, capable of triggering sensitive wards while we remain at a safe distance."

"While we slip in through another entrance," Mick finished, already moving back into the shadows. "Let's go."

They circled the warehouse, Marchosias identifying a small office attachment on the north side with minimal lighting. Pressing against the wall beside a grimy window, Mick listened for movement inside.

"Two humans," Marchosias confirmed. "Neither bearing the sigil. Simple mercenaries."

"When I trigger the ward on the south side, how long before they react?"

"Seconds. The response will be immediate and significant."

Mick nodded, formulating a plan. "Let's create the distraction. Then we need to handle these two---quietly. After that, we find Liz and get out before they realise it's a feint."

"You propose to give me control twice in rapid succession," Marchosias observed. "This marks considerable evolution in our arrangement."

"Don't make me regret it."

With the plan established, Mick watched as Marchosias manifested the shadow-rats from their shared hands. The sensation was just as unsettling as before—a writhing beneath his skin, then the disturbing sight of dark entities oozing between his fingers, forming into twisted, rat-like creatures with too many legs and eyes that reflected no light.

"Jesus," Mick whispered, counting twelve of the creatures as they chattered on the ground around his feet.

"They are extensions of my will," Marchosias explained. "Each will report what it sees directly to our shared consciousness."

"Send them in," Mick instructed. "Four to locate Liz, four to map escape routes, and four to trigger the wards at different points around the perimeter."

"Coordinated chaos," Marchosias agreed. "Quite elegant."

The shadow-rats scattered, some slipping through cracks in the fence, others seemingly melting into patches of darkness. Mick felt his perception fracture as the creatures' viewpoints filtered into his consciousness—multiple simultaneous perspectives of the facility from impossible angles.

The first rat located an entrance—a drainage pipe leading beneath the main warehouse. The second found a guard rotation schedule posted in a security booth. The third and fourth discovered Liz—sedated but alive—in the north-west quadrant of the main floor.

"The scouts are in position," Marchosias reported after several minutes. "They can trigger the wards simultaneously at four points around the perimeter."

"Do it," Mick ordered.

The effect was immediate and dramatic. Alarms screamed to life throughout the complex. Floodlights blazed, illuminating the yard from multiple angles. Two of the rat things caught in the floodlights simply disappeared, ceased to be in the bright lights. Through the scouts' eyes, Mick watched as guards rushed in four different directions, completely confused by the multiple breaches.

"Now," Marchosias urged. "While they're scattered."

Control returned to Mick with jarring suddenness. He was already running, staying low, heading for the north office they'd identified earlier. Behind him, he heard the chaos of guards responding to the breach—exactly as planned.

He reached the office window, pressing flat against the wall beside it. Inside, he could hear confused voices.

"What the hell was that?"

"Perimeter breach, south quadrant. Vasquez wants everyone to converge."

"Both of us? We're supposed to be watching—"

"Orders are orders. Let's go."

Mick waited, counting heartbeats, as footsteps approached the door. It swung open, and two armed men emerged, heading toward the commotion. Perfect.

"Now," Marchosias urged. "While they're distracted by their own diversion."

Mick slipped through the door before it closed, finding himself in a small office area. Dust-covered desks, abandoned computer equipment, empty coffee cups—the detritus of a business shut down years ago. A door on the far wall presumably led to the main warehouse.

"Seven humans approaching the breach point," Marchosias reported. "Three more securing the main entrance. The remainder are dispersed throughout the building."

"And Liz?"

"Closer now. I sense her—north-west quadrant of the main floor. She lives, but her fear is palpable even at this distance."

Mick moved to the connecting door, pressing his ear against it. Hearing nothing, he eased it open a crack. The warehouse beyond was cavernous, its high ceiling lost in shadow. Harsh industrial lighting illuminated sections of the floor, creating pools of brightness surrounded by darkness.

Shipping containers had been arranged to create a labyrinth of corridors and chambers. Some stood open, revealing equipment Mick couldn't identify—machines with tubes and monitoring devices similar to what he'd seen at Elysium. The essence extraction process, scaled up for industrial application.

"We must move quickly," Marchosias warned. "The diversion will not hold them long."

Mick slipped into the warehouse, staying close to the walls where shadows provided cover. He moved silently, guided by Marchosias's senses toward where Liz was being held. They had covered perhaps half the distance when a voice called out from behind them.

"Stop right there."

Mick froze, then slowly turned. A security guard stood ten metres away, pistol aimed at Mick's chest. Not one of the marked ones, just hired muscle in a uniform. Doing a job.

"Hands where I can see them," the guard ordered. "The boss said someone might try to crash the party early."

"He will alert others," Marchosias observed calmly. "Your sister's chances diminish with each delay."

Mick raised his hands slowly, mind racing. The guard was young—maybe mid-twenties. Probably had no idea what kind of operation he was really protecting.

"Listen," Mick began, "you don't understand what's happening here—"

"We don't have time for this," Marchosias said. "Let me handle it."

"Save it," the guard cut him off, reaching for a radio at his belt.

"No killing," Mick thought back desperately. "He's just doing his job."

"As you wish."

The transition was instantaneous. One moment Mick was in control, hands raised; the next, Marchosias had taken over, and their shared body was moving with impossible speed.

The guard didn't even have time to fire before Mick's hand—controlled by something far stronger than human muscle—closed around the weapon, crushing the barrel with a hydraulic grip that bent metal like clay. The guard's eyes widened in shock, mouth opening to scream, but Marchosias's other hand was already at his throat, applying precisely calibrated pressure to the carotid artery.

The guard collapsed, unconscious before he hit the floor. Marchosias used their shared hands to drag the body into the shadow of a shipping container.

"Satisfied?" the demon asked, returning control to Mick. "Or would you prefer I ask permission before preventing your death next time?"

"Just trying to avoid unnecessary casualties," Mick muttered, continuing toward Liz's location.

"A noble sentiment. One I suspect you will find increasingly impractical."

They pressed forward, navigating between containers. Ahead, Mick could see a cleared area in the centre of the warehouse. Some kind of operation was underway—people in white lab coats moved between workstations equipped with monitors and medical equipment.

And there, strapped to a modified examination chair, was Liz.

Even from a distance, Mick could see she was conscious but sedated. Her eyes were open but unfocused, her movements sluggish as she occasionally tugged weakly against her restraints. Electrodes connected her to monitoring equipment, and an IV line ran into her arm.

Beside her stood a thin man in an immaculate suit—the same figure Mick had glimpsed at Elysium. Up close, the wrongness of him was more apparent. His proportions seemed subtly incorrect, limbs too long, torso too narrow. His face might have been handsome in a cold way, but his eyes were hidden behind dark glasses despite the indoor setting.

"Vassago," Marchosias identified, a note of genuine tension entering his voice for the first time. *"Not the entity himself, but a physical projection—a vessel prepared to channel a portion of his consciousness."*

"Can you take him?" Mick asked, crouching behind a container to assess the situation.

"Not directly, and not alone. His vessel is heavily warded and reinforced. A direct confrontation would be... problematic."

Five technicians worked in the area, monitoring equipment and preparing what looked like dialysis apparatus. Armed guards stood at each entrance to the space—four in total. And beyond them, more figures moved in the shadows, their eyes occasionally catching the light with unnatural reflectivity.

"I count eleven tangos," Mick whispered. "Plus Vassago."

"More lurk in darkness," Marchosias corrected. "And these are merely the visible threats."

Mick studied the scene, looking for an opening, a weakness, anything that might give them an advantage. Nothing presented itself. A frontal assault would fail before he reached halfway to Liz. Stealth seemed equally impossible with so many eyes watching.

"There is another approach," Marchosias suggested, the tone of his mental voice shifting to something darker, more primal. "One that requires what you have thus far been unwilling to permit."

"Which is?"

"My full manifestation. Not merely control of your body, but expression of my true nature through it."

"Like at the warehouse with the traffickers," Mick recalled, remembering fragments of that night—the blood, the screams, the black-eyed corpses.

"That was merely a fraction of what I am capable of. I was weakened then, newly bonded to your form. Now, our connection has... matured."

Mick watched as one of the technicians adjusted something on Liz's IV. His sister winced, a small sound of pain escaping her lips. Something cold and implacable crystallised in Mick's chest.

"These people," he said quietly. "The ones down there with my sister. They know what they're doing? They're willing participants?"

"Yes," Marchosias confirmed. "Each bears the sigil—the mark of voluntary service. They have traded their humanity for power, knowledge, or simple sadism."

"And the guards?"

"Most are mercenaries—unknowing tools. But those nearest to Vassago have made their bargains with open eyes. They have fed on suffering, participated in the harvesting of innocents."

Mick took a deep breath. "If I agree to this—your full manifestation—can you tell the difference? Can you spare the innocents?"

"I can taste corruption," Marchosias replied. "I can sense the stain on souls. Those who have murdered, tortured, violated—they carry their sins like beacons in darkness."

Another technician approached Liz, holding what looked like a specialised syringe with a glowing blue substance inside. Vassago nodded approval.

"Proceed," the suited figure instructed, his voice carrying unnaturally in the cavernous space. "Carefully. The vessel contains two distinct essence signatures."

The technician positioned the needle over Liz's abdomen.

"Do it," Mick said, decision made. "Full manifestation. Save my sister. But remember our deal—only those who deserve it."

"As you wish."

The transition this time was unlike anything Mick had experienced before. Rather than being pushed aside in his own consciousness, he felt himself merging with Marchosias—their perceptions, thoughts, and intentions blending into something new. He could still see through his eyes, feel through his body, but everything was heightened, sharpened, infused with alien power.

And he could see properly now—beyond the visible spectrum, into layers of reality hidden from human perception. The sigils on the technicians' skin glowed like brands, pulsing with unnatural energy. The guards nearest Vassago emanated corrupted auras, their humanity eroded by whatever bargains they'd made. And Vassago himself was revealed as a hollow thing

—a human shell containing only a fragment of the entity it was named for, like a puppet operated by distant strings.

"Watch," Marchosias whispered in their now-shared mind. "Remember. This is what I truly am."

Their body—no longer fully human—slipped into the shadows between containers. But these weren't ordinary shadows. They were doorways, connections to places where light had never existed. Marchosias stepped into darkness and emerged elsewhere in the warehouse, behind the first guard.

The man never had a chance to scream. Fingers that no longer obeyed human limitations closed around his throat, crushing his larynx in an instant. As the guard's eyes widened in shock and pain, Marchosias leaned close to whisper in his ear.

"I taste the children you've hurt," their shared voice hissed, now layered with harmonics no human vocal cords could produce. "Three young souls who trusted you. I smell their fear on your hands still."

Then something emerged from their shared body—shadow given substance, darkness made manifest. It poured from their mouth, eyes, and fingertips, enveloping the guard like a cocoon. For a brief, terrible moment, the man's face contorted in absolute horror as he witnessed whatever Marchosias showed him. Then the shadows constricted, and the sound of breaking bones accompanied the grotesque rearrangement of human anatomy into shapes nature never intended.

What remained when the shadows receded barely resembled a man—limbs twisted at impossible angles, ribcage inverted, face frozen in eternal terror. Marchosias gently lowered the remains into darkness, then moved to the next target—a technician who had stepped away from the main group to retrieve equipment from a nearby table.

This one died differently. The shadows formed tendrils that slithered beneath his skin, raising it in undulating patterns before erupting outward in a shower of blood and tissue. The man had time for only the briefest expression of surprise before his body essentially turned itself inside out, vital organs exposed to air, skin peeled back from muscle and bone.

Mick observed all this with a strange detachment—horrified yet fascinated, repulsed yet vindicated. Through their shared consciousness, he could sense what Marchosias sensed: the corruption in these souls, the willing embrace of cruelty, the pleasure they had taken in others' suffering. Each death was tailored to the sins of its recipient, a grotesque form of poetic justice.

One by one, Marchosias moved through the warehouse, eliminating threats with terrible efficiency. A guard whose aura revealed a history of sexual violence was impaled on his own spine, the vertebrae punching through skin to form a cage around his still-living torso. A technician who had performed experiments on unwilling subjects had his brain extracted through his nasal cavity, piece by quivering piece, while his body continued to function just long enough for him to comprehend what was happening.

For those whose sins were lesser—guards who had followed orders without full knowledge, workers who had turned blind eyes rather than actively participated—Marchosias was almost merciful. These merely collapsed where they stood, nervous systems overwhelmed, minds shattered by glimpses of realities they were never meant to comprehend. They would live, though whether they would ever recover their sanity remained questionable.

Throughout it all, Marchosias moved with supernatural stealth, each elimination conducted in near silence. Bodies were arranged strategically—posed in horrific tableaux visible from certain angles, creating a psychological weapon that would confront reinforcements when they eventually arrived.

Inside their shared consciousness, Mick found himself strangely accepting of the carnage. These people had taken his sister, threatened her unborn child, participated in the systematic exploitation of human beings for supernatural gain. They had made their choices with open eyes. Now they faced the consequences.

"You see why I must feed," Marchosias communicated as they disposed of the seventh guard. *"This is my nature. Just as breathing is yours."*

Another technician fell, this one's skin flayed from his body in a single piece, like a wetsuit peeled from a diver. The remaining staff were beginning to sense something wrong—glancing around nervously, checking communication devices that had mysteriously ceased functioning.

"We have eliminated most of the outer defences," Marchosias observed, slipping between shadows to position themselves closer to the central area. *"Now we approach the more dangerous opponents."*

Only three guards remained near Vassago, along with two technicians continuing their preparations on Liz. The suited figure itself stood motionless, apparently unaware of the decimation occurring around the warehouse's perimeter. But Marchosias knew better.

"He knows we're here," the demon communicated. *"He's waiting, curious to see our approach."*

A guard turned, alerted by some sixth sense to danger behind him. Marchosias was already there, their shared hand shooting forward to puncture the man's chest and emerge clutching a still-beating heart. The guard stared in disbelief at his own organ pulsing in what had once been Mick Hargraves's hand, before collapsing as it turned to ash in Marchosias' hand.

The sound finally alerted the others. One guard reached for his weapon while another shouted a warning. The technicians looked up from their

work, confusion turning to horror as they registered the blood-soaked figure emerging from the shadows.

"Ah," Vassago said, turning slowly. "The guest of honour arrives early. How discourteous."

The suit-clad figure removed his dark glasses, revealing eyes that were entirely black—not like the empty sockets of Marchosias's victims, but like polished obsidian, reflecting the harsh warehouse lighting.

"Marchosias," he greeted, pronouncing the name with familiar contempt. "How far you have fallen, to be reduced to such... intimate cohabitation with a mortal vessel."

Marchosias paused, assessing the remaining threats. The guards raised their weapons, tension evident in their postures.

"Kill him," Vassago ordered with casual cruelty.

The guards obeyed instantly, weapons chattering as they unleashed a hail of bullets toward Mick's possessed form. But rather than tearing through flesh, the bullets passed through Micks body like it was made of smoke, striking the wall behind him.

Vassago's expression shifted from confidence to wary reassessment. "Interesting. It appears your bond with this vessel is more... substantial than I anticipated."

"We are not separate entities that can be divided by mere physical trauma," Marchosias replied, their shared voice reverberating with power. "We are symbiotic. What affects one, affects both. What strengthens one, strengthens both."

"Fascinating," Vassago murmured. "Though ultimately irrelevant. You've entered a trap, old friend. I must admit, I'm curious about the arrangement. Does your host enjoy the carnage you've created in his name? Does he watch from within as you slaughter his fellow humans?"

"I see everything," Mick's voice emerged, but layered with Marchosias's otherworldly timbre. "And you should know they're not my 'fellow humans' any more. Not after what they've done."

"Interesting." Vassago stepped forward, leaving the technicians to continue their work on Liz. "A genuine partnership rather than mere possession. I had heard rumours, but to see it confirmed... Baalberith will be most interested."

"That name no longer holds power over me," Marchosias replied through their shared voice. *"Release the woman, and I might consider leaving enough of you intact to crawl back to your master."*

Vassago laughed—a sound like breaking glass. "Bold words from an exile scavenging for scraps of essence. You think your little display of violence impresses me? I've watched civilizations rise and fall. I've fed on the dreams of dying gods."

As he spoke, the surrounding air seemed to thicken, reality bending subtly as more of his true nature pressed against the boundaries of his human vessel. The temperature plummeted, frost forming on metal surfaces throughout the warehouse.

"I could destroy you with a thought," Vassago continued. "But that would be wasteful. Your unique bond with this human host represents valuable research potential. The extraction process will be painful, of course, but knowledge requires sacrifice."

With a gesture from Vassago, the floor around Mick and Marchosias illuminated, revealing a perfect circle of what appeared to be ordinary white salt. The circle completed itself, closing behind them.

"A binding circle," Vassago explained, satisfaction evident in his voice. "Ancient but effective. The salt has been consecrated with the blood of seven innocents. Nothing of your nature can cross it—in either direction. You are contained, old friend."

"He's right," Marchosias communicated internally to Mick, genuine alarm colouring his thoughts. "This is no ordinary salt circle. The binding is absolute until the circle is broken."

"Can we break it ourselves?" Mick thought back desperately, eyeing the distance to Liz. She was still conscious but heavily sedated, her gaze unfocused as she weakly struggled against her restraints.

"No. The integrity of the circle must be compromised from the outside. We are trapped until—"

"Until someone does this?"

The voice came from behind Vassago. Detective Diana Reeves stood in the shadows, police baton in hand. Before anyone could react, she dragged her foot through the salt circle, breaking its perfect continuity.

"Police!" she shouted, voice steady despite the impossible scene before her. "Everyone on the ground! Now!"

While this internal dialogue occurred in milliseconds, Vassago continued his monologue, pontificating on the research value of their capture and the favour it would curry with Baalberith. The remaining guards had spread out, creating a perimeter around the central area.

"Enough talk," Marchosias interrupted, their shared body tensing. *"Your security forces have been eliminated. Your operation compromised. Release the woman, or what follows will make the violence thus far seem merciful by comparison."*

Vassago smiled coldly. "You always were dramatic, Marchosias. One of your more tedious qualities."

He gestured to the technicians. "Accelerate the procedure. We'll complete the detailed work later."

One technician pressed a button on the equipment connected to Liz. She convulsed in the chair, a cry of pain escaping her lips as something luminous began to flow through the tubes connected to her body.

Marchosias moved.

Not toward Vassago—that was what he expected—but upward, their shared body launching into the air with inhuman strength. Shadows coalesced around them, forming wings of absolute darkness that carried them above the guards' line of fire. Then, before Vassago could react, they plummeted directly toward the dialysis equipment.

The impact shattered machinery, severed tubes, and sent technicians flying. Alarms blared as biochemical containment was breached. Liquid essence—glowing with vital energy—spilled across the concrete floor.

Vassago snarled, a sound no human throat could produce. The surrounding air shimmered as reality itself protested his anger. "Kill them!" he commanded the remaining guards. "Forget the woman!"

Gunfire erupted, bullets tearing through the space Marchosias had occupied moments before. But they were already moving again, shadows extending from their body like tentacles, ensnaring one guard and using him as a human shield against the others.

The possessed man screamed as darkness poured into him through every orifice, his body expanding grotesquely before rupturing in an explosion of bone and tissue that struck his fellow guards with lethal force. What remained collapsed to the floor—a hollowed skin containing nothing but shadows.

Marchosias reached Liz in three inhuman strides, tearing away her restraints with strength that bent steel like paper. She stared up at them, eyes widening in terror at the sight of her brother's body transformed by demonic power.

"M-Mick?" she whispered, voice weak from sedation.

"Close your eyes, Liz," they told her, Mick's voice briefly asserting itself through Marchosias's control. "Don't look."

Lifting her gently, they turned to face Vassago. The suited figure stood amid the chaos, his human vessel beginning to degrade under the pressure of the entity it contained. Cracks appeared in his skin, light seeping through like magma beneath the earth's crust.

"This isn't over, Marchosias," Vassago hissed, his voice now completely inhuman—a sound of grinding stone and breaking bones. "Baalberith will know of your interference. Your protection of these humans. Your weakness."

"Tell him what you wish," Marchosias replied, cradling Liz protectively. "But know this: what you witnessed tonight was restraint, not weakness. Had I arrived alone, not a particle of your essence would remain to report anything."

Vassago laughed—a terrible sound that caused the remaining lights to flicker wildly. "Such arrogance. And now you've involved another human in affairs beyond her comprehension."

His attention turned to Reeves, who stood her ground despite the terror evident in her eyes. "A law enforcement officer. How quaint. Do you understand what you're witnessing, detective? The thin veneer of reality being peeled back?"

As he spoke, Vassago's form began to change. His human vessel seemed to stretch and distort, the suit rippling as though something massive was attempting to emerge from within. The surrounding air chilled instantly writhing shadows began to emanate from his eyes and mouth.

"He's transitioning," Marchosias said urgently, the words meant for both Mick and Reeves. "Attempting to fully manifest in this realm. If he succeeds, none of us will survive."

Reeves backed away, her gun still trained on Vassago though her hands had begun to shake. "What the hell is happening? Mick, what is this?"

"No time to explain," Mick's voice emerged briefly from their shared consciousness. "We need to go. Now."

Vassago's transformation accelerated, his skin becoming translucent, revealing a shifting, writing mass of shadows beneath. The air crackled with power as reality itself seemed to protest his emergence.

"You cannot escape," Vassago said, his voice now layered with multiple tonalities. "Even if you flee this place, I will find you. The woman bears the mark now. The connection has been established."

"Detective!" he called to Reeves. "To me! Quickly!"

Reeves hesitated only a fraction of a second before running toward them, holstering her baton as she moved. The floor beneath Vassago began to crack, darkness spilling through fissures in the concrete.

"The shadows," Marchosias communicated to Mick. *"It's our only option."*

"Can you transport all three of us?" Mick asked.

"Yes, but it will be... disorienting for the humans. And we will need a destination—somewhere dark, somewhere connected to your memories. Somewhere safe."

An image flashed through Mick's mind—the basement archives of his old police station. Windowless, rarely visited, filled with shadows between the tall filing cabinets. A place he'd spent countless hours during his detective days.

"Perfect," Marchosias confirmed.

With Liz cradled in one arm, Marchosias grabbed Reeves' wrist with their free hand. *"Close your eyes,"* he instructed both women. *"Whatever you feel, whatever you hear, do not open them until I tell you."*

"What are you—" Reeves began, but her question was cut short as Marchosias pulled them all toward the darkest corner of the warehouse.

The shadows opened like a mouth, swallowing them whole. The transition was jarring—a sensation of impossible cold, of movement without motion, of falling through layers of reality never meant for human perception. Sounds that couldn't exist in physical space surrounded them—whispers, screams, fragments of conversations from other times and places.

Marchosias guided them through the shadow realm with practised precision, though the strain of transporting two additional humans was evident. The darkness seemed to press against them, curious and hungry, reaching with tendrils that Marchosias continuously batted away.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. They tumbled out of darkness into the musty confines of the police archive room. Dust motes danced in the dim emergency lighting. Metal filing cabinets loomed around them like sentinels. The familiar smell of old paper and institutional cleaner replaced the warehouse's chemical stench. Motion sensors activating the lighting as it registered their presence.

Marchosias gently laid Liz on the floor between two rows of filing cabinets, then finally relinquished control, retreating deep into their shared consciousness. The transition was smoother than usual, almost seamless—evidence of their increasingly synchronised partnership.

Mick gasped as full sensation returned. His body ached everywhere, muscles protesting the supernatural exertion Marchosias had put them through. Blood—not his own—covered his hands, face, and clothing. The coppery smell of it filled his nostrils, bringing flashes of memory: the guards torn apart, the technicians dismembered, the absolute horror Marchosias had unleashed upon Vassago's operation.

Horror that Mick had authorised. Had witnessed without objection. Had, in some primal way, understood and accepted as necessary.

"What the hell was that?" Reeves demanded, her voice pitched low but intense as she pressed herself against a filing cabinet, gun drawn but hanging at her side. Her eyes darted between Mick and the unconscious Liz. "What happened to your eyes? How did we get here? What was that... thing back there?"

Mick looked up at her, suddenly aware of how he must appear—covered in blood, eyes still likely showing traces of Marchosias's influence, crouched protectively over his sedated sister in the basement of the police station they'd both once called workplace.

"Diana," he said, using her first name for the first time in years. "I can explain. But you need to decide right now if you're ready to hear it. Because once I tell you, there's no going back to not knowing."

Reeves holstered her weapon with shaking hands, then sank to her knees beside Liz, automatically checking her pulse and breathing.

"She needs medical attention," Reeves said, professional instincts temporarily overriding her shock. "Whatever they drugged her with—"

"She will recover," Marchosias spoke through Mick momentarily, causing Reeves to flinch. *"The sedatives were designed to facilitate extraction without damaging the vessel. They will metabolise within hours."*

"What—" Reeves began, eyes widening as she scrambled backward.

"That," Mick said with a weary sigh, "is part of what I need to explain."

In the dim emergency lighting of the archive room, surrounded by the physical records of ordinary human crimes, Mick prepared to introduce Detective Inspector Diana Reeves to the extraordinary truth of what he had become—and what now hunted them all.

18 Aftershocks

The archive room's fluorescent lights buzzed overhead like irritated insects. Mick sat on the floor beside his unconscious sister, back against a filing cabinet, knees drawn to his chest. The institutional smell of dust and old paper couldn't mask the metallic tang of blood that still clung to him, though he'd scrubbed his hands raw in the tiny bathroom down the hall.

Reeves paced between the narrow aisles, her footsteps unnaturally loud in the silence.

Inside Mick's mind, Marchosias had withdrawn into an unusual silence—not absent, but quieter, more subdued than Mick had ever experienced. Something was different about the demon's presence, a kind of agitation that rippled through their shared consciousness.

"This is... uncomfortable," Marchosias finally said, his voice oddly strained.

"What, using the shadows to transport humans?" Mick thought back, keeping his facial expressions neutral for Reeves' benefit. "Or explaining to a police detective that you exist?"

"No. These... residual sensations. Your emotions are... contaminating me."

Mick felt it then, the strange feedback loop between them—stronger and more defined than ever before. After their shared manifestation, the boundaries had thinned even further. He could sense Marchosias experiencing something unfamiliar: regret, doubt, a strange hollowness that came after violence. Human emotions the demon had never needed to process before.

"Welcome to the fun of being human," Mick thought dryly. "Actions have consequences, even when they're justified."

"But they deserved it," Marchosias protested, genuine confusion colouring his tone. "I only took those whose souls were already corrupted. I tasted their sins, Michael. The things they had done..."

"I know. I felt it too."

And he had. During their merged consciousness, Mick had experienced what Marchosias experienced—the taste of corruption in each victim, the histories of violence and cruelty carried in their essence. He'd understood, in a way no human was meant to understand, exactly why each person died as they did.

But he'd also felt something else—the intoxicating rush as Marchosias consumed those energies. The almost sexual thrill of power flowing into them with each death. Even now, hours later, Mick's body hummed with residual energy, nerves singing with vitality that didn't belong to him.

"So that's how it feels for you," Mick murmured aloud, forgetting momentarily that Reeves might hear.

She stopped pacing, fixing him with that detective's stare he remembered from their partnership days. "How what feels?"

Mick sighed, too exhausted for evasion. "Feeding. Taking lives. It's like... a drug. No wonder you chase it."

"I don't understand why you feel guilt when you simultaneously experience pleasure," Marchosias replied, genuinely perplexed. *"These contradictory responses are maddening."*

"That's humanity for you," Mick thought back. "We're walking contradictions."

"You're talking to it again, aren't you?" Reeves asked, her voice carefully controlled. "To... Marchosias."

The name sounded strange in her mouth—too formal, too respectful. Like she was addressing a foreign dignitary rather than the entity that had torn men apart before her eyes.

"Him," Mick corrected automatically. "Not it."

"Right. Him." Reeves leaned against a filing cabinet, arms crossed defensively across her chest. "The demon living inside you. The one that can turn people inside out and travel through shadows. That him?"

"That's the one," Mick agreed, too tired for sarcasm.

"She's handling this better than most humans would," Marchosias observed, a hint of admiration in his tone. *"Most would be catatonic by now."*

"She's seen a lot," Mick replied silently. "And she's stubborn as hell."

Liz stirred slightly, mumbling something unintelligible. Her eyelids fluttered but didn't open. The sedatives were slowly wearing off, but she remained trapped in chemical twilight.

"We need to find her husband," Mick said abruptly, the thought crystallising with sudden urgency. "Bob's still out there."

Reeves frowned. "Your brother-in-law? Why would they—" She stopped, understanding dawning. "They'll use him to get to her, to get to you."

"The husband could be compromised," Marchosias warned, suddenly alert again. *"Marked. Or worse."*

"If they got to him, they might have put one of those sigils on him," Mick explained to Reeves, voicing Marchosias's concern. "Or worse, they could be controlling him somehow."

"Like a puppet?" Reeves asked, her expression hardening as she processed this new threat.

"Exactly like that," Mick confirmed, rising stiffly to his feet. Every joint protested; the heightened physical abilities Marchosias granted came with a price—his body hadn't been designed for such exertions.

Reeves stood up straighter, holstering her weapon with a decisive click. "I'm coming with you."

Mick shook his head, gesturing at his blood-stained clothes. "After what you just saw? You should be running in the opposite direction."

"That's exactly why I'm coming," she said firmly. "I need to understand what we're dealing with. And you might need backup." She glanced at Mick's sister. "Though we'll need someone to stay with her."

"I can arrange that," Reeves continued, already pulling out her phone. "Officer Banks owes me a favour. She'll keep this quiet and watch over your sister."

"Using department resources for personal business?" Mick raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't sound like the by-the-book Diana Reeves I remember."

"Yeah, well, the by-the-book Diana Reeves didn't believe in demons until about three hours ago," she replied dryly, dialling a number. "Things change."

While Reeves arranged for an officer she trusted to discretely watch over Liz, Mick tried to make himself somewhat presentable. He found an ancient department zippered jacket in a storage closet and pulled it over his blood-spattered shirt. Nothing could be done about the rust-coloured stains on his jeans, but at least he no longer looked like he'd walked out of a slaughterhouse.

"The husband works at an accounting firm," Marchosias recalled from Mick's memories. *"Harrison Financial Services."*

"I know where Bob works," Mick said aloud as Reeves ended her call. "Down town financial district. Harrison Financial Services. He's a senior accountant there."

Reeves checked her watch. "It's past 10 PM. Would he still be there?"

"Bob was always a workaholic," Mick replied, only a hint of disdain colouring his tone. "And if they're controlling him somehow, they might keep him somewhere familiar."

Thirty minutes later, Reeves pulled her unmarked police car into the underground parking structure of a gleaming office tower. The main security desk was manned by a bored-looking guard watching something on his phone, who barely glanced at Reeves' badge before waving them through.

"Some security," Mick muttered as they entered the lift.

"Makes our job easier," Reeves replied, pressing the button for the twelfth floor.

As the lift hummed upward, Mick felt Marchosias stirring within him, alert and watchful. The demon had been unusually quiet during the drive, still processing the unfamiliar emotional aftermath of their shared manifestation.

"I feel... apprehensive," Marchosias admitted, surprising Mick with the candour. *"Is this how you experience anticipation? This gnawing discomfort?"*

"That's anxiety," Mick thought back. "Welcome to another fun human emotion."

"It's deeply inefficient. How do you function like this?"

"Usually with bourbon."

A soft chime announced their arrival at the twelfth floor. The lift doors opened onto a dimly lit reception area, the space beyond illuminated only

by emergency exit signs and the ambient glow of the city through floor-to-ceiling windows.

"Stay behind me," Mick warned as they entered, his voice low. "And if things go sideways... just remember what you saw isn't the worst of it."

Reeves nodded grimly, her hand resting on her holstered weapon. "Noted."

The reception desk was abandoned, computer screens dark. A hallway stretched beyond, flanked by glass-walled offices. Most were dark, but a light shone from one near the end of the corridor.

"Something is wrong," Marchosias warned as they approached. *"The air is... tainted. There's a presence here that doesn't belong."*

Mick relayed this information to Reeves in a whisper, watching her face carefully for signs of scepticism. Instead, she simply nodded, her expression tightening with resolve.

"Any way to tell if it's Bob or something else?" she asked quietly.

"Let's find out," Mick replied, moving toward the illuminated office with practised stealth.

The door stood ajar, spilling fluorescent light into the darkened hallway. Through the gap, Mick could see Bob Harrison sitting at his desk, staring at his computer screen. He was perfectly still—unnaturally so—his posture rigid, hands resting flat on the desktop beside his keyboard.

"Something is wrong with him," Marchosias confirmed, his voice tight with concentration. *"He's been influenced, but not marked. They've left a psychic hook in his mind."*

Mick whispered this assessment to Reeves, who frowned in response. "What does that mean?" she hissed.

"It means someone's controlling him. Be careful."

Mick pushed the door open slowly, deliberately making enough noise to announce their presence. Bob didn't react—not a flinch, not a turn of the head, not even a change in his breathing pattern.

"Bob?" Mick called softly. "It's Mick. Liz's brother."

For several heartbeats, nothing happened. Then, with mechanical precision, Bob turned his head toward them. His eyes were open but vacant, pupils dilated so widely that his irises were barely visible. His face, normally animated with expressions of pompous self-importance, was slack and empty.

"They said you'd come," he said, his voice flat and toneless. "They left a message: 'This is just the beginning.'"

Before either Mick or Reeves could respond, Bob's hand shot out with unnatural speed, grabbing a gleaming letter opener from his desk. In one fluid motion, he lunged at Mick, the improvised weapon aimed at his throat.

Reeves drew her weapon in a smooth, practised movement. "Police! Drop it now!"

"Don't!" Mick shouted, easily sidestepping Bob's attack. "It's not him!"

Despite his words, Bob continued his assault with single-minded determination, slashing the letter opener in wide arcs. His movements were jerky yet precise, like a marionette controlled by an unpractised puppeteer. Mick blocked a thrust with his forearm, then grabbed Bob's wrist, squeezing hard enough to make most men drop their weapon.

Bob didn't even wince. He continued struggling with a strength that belied his desk-job physique, twisting against Mick's grip with complete disregard for the damage to his own body. A sickening pop indicated his shoulder dislocating, but still he fought on, expression blank despite what must have been excruciating pain.

"They've turned him into a puppet," Marchosias observed. "I need to sever the connection."

"Will it hurt him?" Mick asked aloud, distracted momentarily by the internal conversation.

"Does it matter? He's trying to kill you," Marchosias pointed out reasonably.

"He's Liz's husband. It matters."

Reeves watched this one-sided conversation with growing concern, her gun still trained on Bob. "Do something!"

Bob took advantage of Mick's distraction to wrench free, immediately lunging forward with the letter opener again. This time, Mick allowed Marchosias partial control, surrendering his body's movements while maintaining conscious awareness.

The transition was smoother than ever before—not the jarring displacement of prior changes, but a fluid handover, like expert dancers switching leads mid-step. Shadows wrapped around his arms, extending his reach. His eyes darkened to black pools as Marchosias seized Bob with inhuman strength, immobilising him completely.

Reeves raised her gun again, then slowly lowered it, her expression a mixture of fear and fascination. "Is that... him?" she asked quietly.

"Hold him still," Marchosias commanded aloud, using Mick's voice overlaid with harmonics that made Reeves flinch. "This will be... unpleasant."

"Can you help him?" Mick asked internally. "Without permanent damage?"

There was a pause, then: *"Yes. Though he won't enjoy the process."*

"Do it," Mick said firmly, the words emerging in his own voice once more.

Tendrils of shadow extended from Mick's fingers, darker than the surrounding dimness, moving with deliberate purpose. They wrapped around Bob's head, then seemed to sink into his skin, entering through his eyes, ears, and mouth. His body went rigid, then began to convulse violently, a keening wail emerging from his throat.

Reeves took an involuntary step back, her hand returning to her weapon, but she didn't draw it. Her eyes darted between Bob's contorted face and Mick's—the latter now showing the strange doubled expression that occurred when both consciousnesses were actively present.

The shadows withdrew as suddenly as they had appeared, sliding back into Mick's body like water absorbed into parched earth. Bob collapsed the moment they released him, his body going limp against the expensive carpeting. Reeves approached cautiously, kneeling to check his pulse.

"He's alive," she confirmed, looking up at Mick with wary eyes. "What did you do to him?"

"Not me," Mick replied, feeling Marchosias retreat deeper into their shared consciousness. "Marchosias broke the psychic connection. Cut the puppet strings."

"Will he be... himself again?"

Before Mick could answer, Bob stirred, groaning as consciousness returned. He blinked rapidly, eyes focusing and unfocusing as he struggled to sit up. When his gaze finally settled on Mick, pure terror flooded his features.

"What—what are you?" he stammered, pushing himself backward until he hit the edge of his desk.

"I'm still Liz's brother," Mick said, crouching down to Bob's level. "But I have a... friend now."

As if in response to the word "friend," Marchosias partially manifested, condensing the surrounding shadows into a darker silhouette that hovered

just behind Mick. It wasn't a physical form, more an impression—a suggestion of presence that nonetheless radiated ancient power. Bob's face drained of colour at the sight, his breath coming in short, panicked gasps.

"They took Liz," Mick continued, voice gentle despite the circumstances. "I got her back. She's safe now."

"Those people," Bob whispered, his voice cracking with remembered horror. "They came to the house. Put something in my head. Made me watch while they took her. I couldn't do anything..." His voice broke completely, tears welling in his eyes.

Reeves stepped forward, showing her badge with practised authority. "Mr. Harrison, I'm Detective Reeves. Your wife is safe. We need to get you to her now."

Bob's eyes darted between Reeves and Mick, then to the shadows still clinging to Mick's form, refusing to behave as ordinary darkness should. "What about... that?"

"It helped save you," Mick said simply.

"It was in my head," Bob insisted, shuddering at the memory. "I felt it... digging around in there. Saw things. Terrible things."

"I showed him what might have been," Marchosias explained privately to Mick. *"A glimpse of what happens to puppets when their usefulness ends. Educational, you might say."*

"She doesn't know about this," Mick gestured to the surrounding shadows, addressing Bob but nodding toward Reeves. "And she's not going to."

Before Bob could respond, Marchosias's voice emerged, audible to all of them—a sound like grinding glass that seemed to bypass the ears and resonate directly in the brain: *"If you speak of this to her, or to anyone, I will return for you. What you experienced was merely a taste."*

The shadows in the room deepened and writhed, responsive to the demon's will. Bob pressed himself against the wall, genuine terror in his eyes.

"You always were a complete bastard, Hargraves," Bob said, voice shaking with fear and residual defiance. "Now I know why."

"We understand each other then," Mick replied evenly.

Reeves helped Bob to his feet, her expression carefully neutral despite the supernatural exchange she had just witnessed. "I've called for an officer to escort Mr. Harrison to the hospital for evaluation. We'll take him to his wife afterward."

"Clever," Marchosias commented. "She's creating an official record that explains his mental state without mentioning the true cause."

"Still sharp," Mick agreed silently. "Always was."

While they waited for the uniformed officer to arrive, Reeves pulled Mick aside, speaking in low tones. "You could have let him hurt himself—or me. But you didn't. You helped him."

"It wasn't just me," Mick admitted, suddenly exhausted now that the adrenaline was fading.

"I know," Reeves said, glancing at the shadows that still seemed to cling more closely to Mick than natural light would explain. "That's what I'm trying to understand."

The uniformed officer arrived promptly, and Reeves briefed him with a sanitised version of events—Bob had been found at his office in a confused state, possibly drugged by the same people who had abducted his wife. Standard procedure, nothing supernatural to see here.

As Bob walked ahead with the officer, Reeves hung back with Mick, following at a distance. Once they were out of earshot, she continued in a lower voice.

"Whatever this is—whatever you've become—you're still trying to help people. Even people you don't like."

Mick said nothing, uncomfortable with her scrutiny. The truth was more complicated than she realised. Yes, he had helped Bob, but there had been a moment—just a flash—when he'd been tempted to let Marchosias do worse. The intoxicating residual energy from their earlier feeding still hummed through him, creating a craving for more that he found disturbing.

Once they were alone in the lift, following several floors behind Bob and the officer, Marchosias's voice returned, softer now.

"You... called me a friend."

The observation caught Mick off guard. "Don't go getting all fuzzy on me."

"Fuzzy? I am a marquis of hell, commander of thirty legions. I do not get... fuzzy," Marchosias retorted, but there was a hint of amusement in his voice.

"You just seemed surprised, that's all."

"In all my millennia of existence, no host has ever considered me anything but a parasite or master. Friend is... unexpected."

Reeves observed Mick's one-sided conversation with newfound understanding rather than suspicion. "You two actually get along, don't you?" she asked, incredulous.

Mick shrugged. "We have our moments."

"The world is a lot stranger than I thought," Reeves said, shaking her head as the lift doors opened onto the lobby.

"You have no idea," Mick replied.

As they walked through the quiet lobby, Mick felt Marchosias retreating further into their shared consciousness, processing the unfamiliar emotions that still bled between them. The demon was experiencing regret, doubt,

even a touch of what might be called compassion—all alien sensations that clearly disturbed him.

And Mick found himself dealing with the opposite problem—the lingering thrill of power, the corrupting taste of justified vengeance, the hunger for more that had never been part of his nature before. They were contaminating each other in ways neither had anticipated.

"This arrangement continues to evolve in unexpected ways," Marchosias observed quietly. *"I find myself... changed by it."*

"That makes two of us," Mick thought back, watching as Bob was guided into a waiting police car, still pale with shock. "Let's just hope it's for the better."

"Better is a relative term," the demon replied. *"But more interesting? Undoubtedly."*

Reeves held the door open for Mick, studying his face with the penetrating gaze that had made her such an effective detective. "You know this isn't over, right? Whatever that thing was at the warehouse—Vassago?—he'll come looking for you. For all of us."

"I know," Mick acknowledged, sliding into the passenger seat. "But we have a few advantages he doesn't."

"Such as?"

Mick smiled grimly as shadows played across his features, briefly darkening his eyes to bottomless pits. "We know what we're fighting for."

And for the first time since their partnership began, both Mick and Marchosias found themselves in complete agreement on that point. Whatever came next, they would face it together—not as parasite and host, but as unlikely allies navigating the blurred boundaries between humanity and something far older and darker.

Something that, perhaps, was learning to care.

As they pulled away from the curb, Mick cleared his throat. "So... you want to get some ice cream?"

Reeves nearly swerved into the next lane, shooting him an incredulous look. "Ice cream? After everything that just happened, you want ice cream?"

"Not exactly the reaction I was expecting, but yeah."

"Wait a minute." She narrowed her eyes as a memory surfaced. "Aren't you lactose intolerant? You complained about it constantly during stakeouts."

A slow, strange smile spread across Mick's face—not quite his own expression. "It's not for me."

"Strawberry this time," Marchosias added, his voice audible only in Mick's mind. *"With those small colourful pieces on top."*

"Sprinkles," Mick muttered.

"What?" Reeves asked.

"Nothing." Mick looked out the window, watching the city lights blur past. "Just discovering that ancient demons have a sweet tooth. Who knew?"

Reeves was quiet for a long moment, then unexpectedly let out a short, sharp laugh—the kind that comes when the absurdity of a situation finally becomes too much to process rationally.

"Fine," she said, flipping on her turn signal. "Ice cream it is. But you're paying."

"Ask her if they have the one with cookie pieces," Marchosias urged with uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

"God help me," Mick sighed, but there was the faintest trace of amusement in his voice.

Some partnerships were forged in fire. Others, apparently, in dairy products.

19 Daybreak

Morning light cut through London's perpetual haze, reflecting off glass-fronted buildings in sharp, unforgiving angles. Mick squinted against the brightness as he crossed Regent's Park, the grass still damp from overnight rain. Sleep had evaded him for most of the night—his mind whirling with plans, countermeasures, and the lingering unease of knowing they were being hunted.

"You're exposed here," Marchosias observed, his voice uncharacteristically subdued in the harsh daylight. *"Open spaces during daylight hours. Tactically unsound."*

"That's the point," Mick muttered, keeping his voice low. The early joggers and dog-walkers paid him no attention—just another dishevelled Londoner talking to himself. "We need to meet Reeves somewhere public. Somewhere they can't easily take us."

"Your faith in sunlight as protection is naive," the demon replied. *"Vassago's human agents aren't bound by darkness."*

"No, but you said his more... supernatural elements are weakened in daylight. Including you."

"A fact I'm not particularly comforted by your remembering."

Mick allowed himself a grim smile. Three days after the warehouse incident, their relationship had shifted again. Marchosias had been withdrawn, almost subdued—processing the emotional bleed-through that had occurred during their merged manifestation. Emotions the demon had never experienced before: regret, doubt, something resembling empathy. Meanwhile, Mick found himself thinking in increasingly tactical terms, weighing advantages and weaknesses with a coldness that would have disturbed him before.

They were changing each other, whether they wanted to admit it or not.

The coffee cart near the boating lake was doing brisk business despite the early hour. Mick spotted Reeves immediately—her dark suit crisp as always, posture military-straight as she waited in line. Her hand never strayed far from where he knew her service weapon was holstered beneath her jacket.

"Your detective friend remains vigilant," Marchosias noted with something like approval. *"She adapts quickly for a human."*

That was high praise coming from the demon, and Mick silently agreed. Reeves had taken the supernatural revelations better than he'd expected—processing the impossible with the same methodical approach she applied to conventional cases. The initial shock had given way to practical questions, strategic thinking, and a determination that reminded Mick why they'd made good partners once.

"Hargraves," she greeted him with a brief nod as he approached. No first names now—they were back on professional footing. "You look like hell."

"Good morning to you too," he replied, stepping into line behind her.

She studied him with narrowed eyes. "Have you slept at all?"

"Define 'sleep.'"

The line shuffled forward, and Reeves ordered a black coffee. Mick did the same, ignoring Marchosias's internal comment about the bitter drink being an affront to his developing palate. They moved to a bench overlooking the lake, sitting close enough to talk quietly but far enough apart to maintain vigilance in all directions.

"I pulled the files on those shell companies," Reeves said without preamble, sliding a manilla folder from her bag. "Most are dead ends—offshore registrations, ghost directors. But I found something interesting with Threshold Holdings."

Mick flipped through the documents as she spoke, scanning incorporation papers and financial records.

"They purchased nine properties in the last eighteen months," Reeves continued. "All in areas with high transient populations. All cash deals through intermediaries."

"Hunting grounds," Mick muttered, the implications clear. Each location would be perfect for identifying vulnerable targets—runaways, addicts, the forgotten and overlooked.

"That's not all. There's a shipping manifest for specialised medical equipment imported through a shell corporation. Dialysis machines, modified for 'research purposes.' Sound familiar?"

Mick remembered the warehouse—the extraction equipment connected to Liz, designed to harvest essence rather than clean blood. "They're scaling up," he said grimly. "Building more facilities."

"There's more." Reeves glanced around before lowering her voice. "Bob recovered enough to give us a statement. He remembers fragments from when they had him under control. They're planning something at a place called 'The Crossing'. Some kind of ritual involving thirteen vessels."

"The thirteen children," Marchosias interjected, suddenly alert. "Vassago mentioned requiring thirteen vessels with specific qualities. The final preparation for Baalberith's manifestation."

Mick relayed this to Reeves, watching her face tighten with concern. "Any idea where this 'Crossing' might be?" he asked.

"Working on it. Could be literal—a crossroads, railway crossing. Could be metaphorical." She took a sip of her coffee. "Either way, we need to find it before tonight."

"We should check those nine properties," Mick suggested. "Start with—"

"Behind you," Marchosias interrupted sharply. "Four men approaching from the south-west path. They bear Vassago's mark."

Mick tensed, not turning immediately. "We've got company," he murmured to Reeves. "Four hostiles, approaching from your four o'clock."

To her credit, Reeves didn't visibly react beyond a slight straightening of her shoulders. "Armed?"

"Unclear. But they're marked."

"Police officer," she reminded him quietly. "We do this by the book unless there's no alternative."

"The book doesn't cover demonic servants," Marchosias commented dryly. "And I am... limited in daylight. Direct manifestation is difficult. Shadows are thin, insubstantial."

"I'm aware," Mick replied under his breath. To Reeves, he added: "Let's move. Casually."

They stood, gathering their things with deliberate slowness. Mick risked a glance toward the approaching men—four figures in nondescript clothing that would have been unremarkable except for their synchronised movements and the unnatural fluidity of their gaits. They moved like predators who had spotted prey, spreading out to cut off escape routes.

"Five more approaching from the east path," Marchosias warned. "They're attempting to encircle us."

"Change of plans," Mick said, abandoning pretence. "We're surrounded. Nine of them now."

Reeves' hand moved toward her concealed weapon. "I need cause to draw."

"Trust me, you'll have it soon enough."

They began walking north, toward the more populated area near the zoo entrance. If they could reach crowds, public safety would limit what Vassago's agents could attempt. But the marked men accelerated their approach, no longer bothering with subtlety.

"Three more by the café," Marchosias reported, his mental voice tense. "They've coordinated well. Twelve in total."

"Twelve," Mick relayed to Reeves. "Too many for coincidence."

"Agreed." Her voice was tight, professional. "Options?"

Before Mick could answer, the first attack came—swift and unexpected. A jogger passing in the opposite direction suddenly pivoted, driving his shoulder into Mick's chest with inhuman force. The impact sent Mick staggering backward, coffee flying from his hand. The jogger's eyes flashed solid black for just an instant before returning to normal.

"Police!" Reeves shouted, drawing her baton, and shook it out to its extended length in one fluid motion. "Stay where you are!"

The jogger ignored her, launching another attack at Mick, who barely managed to sidestep. Around them, seemingly ordinary park-goers—an elderly man feeding pigeons, two maintenance workers, a woman with a stroller—all turned in unison, moving with the same unnatural precision.

"Vessels," Marchosias identified. "Human bodies under external control. Vassago is puppeteering them remotely."

"They're being controlled," Mick called to Reeves as he blocked a punch from the jogger. "Not responsible for their actions!"

Reeves hesitated, reluctant to injure civilians who might be unwilling participants. That moment of hesitation cost her as a maintenance worker tackled her from behind.

The coordination of the attack was perfect—executed with a tactical precision that spoke of centuries of experience. Ordinary park-goers fled the sudden violence, screaming and running in all directions. Within moments, the area had cleared except for Mick, Reeves, and their attackers.

Mick fought with the skill of his police training, landing solid blows that would have incapacitated normal humans. But these weren't normal

humans. They absorbed punishment that should have left them unconscious, continuing their assault with machine-like persistence.

"I cannot take control effectively," Marchosias said, frustration evident in his voice. "The sunlight weakens the connection. I can enhance your strength somewhat, your reflexes, but full manifestation is impossible."

"Just help me stay alive," Mick grunted, driving his elbow into a man's solar plexus, then sweeping the legs from beneath another.

Nearby, Reeves was holding her own against two attackers, her police combat training evident in every precise movement. She landed a hefty baton strike on the collar bone that dropped him momentarily, then used his falling body as leverage to land a kick to the second attacker's knee. The sickening crack of breaking bone echoed across the park. She then reversed the strike of the baton taking the other attacker down more definitively.

But for every opponent they temporarily disabled, two more joined the fray. It was becoming a war of attrition that Mick and Reeves couldn't possibly win.

A heavy blow caught Mick in the ribs—a street sign wielded like a baseball bat by a man in a business suit. The impact drove the air from his lungs and sent white-hot pain lancing through his side. Broken ribs, almost certainly.

"Get up," Marchosias urged as Mick staggered. "Your body is failing."

"No shit," Mick gasped, barely avoiding another swing of the improvised weapon.

He caught a glimpse of Reeves going down under three attackers, fighting desperately but overwhelmed by sheer numbers. His momentary distraction cost him as something hard—a rock or brick—connected with the back of his skull. The world swam, darkness encroaching at the edges of his vision.

"*This is bad*," Marchosias observed, his mental voice sounding distant through Mick's concussion. "*Very bad.*"

Mick collapsed to his knees, blood trickling warm down his neck. Through blurring vision, he saw a circle of blank-faced attackers surrounding him, one raising what looked like a cricket bat for a finishing blow.

Time seemed to slow as his tactical mind—honed by years of police work and now enhanced by Marchosias's influence—analysed his options. There were none, at least none conventional. With Marchosias weakened by daylight and unable to manifest his shadow abilities, they were at a devastating disadvantage.

Then, a thought struck him—primitive, desperate, but potentially effective.

"It's always dark inside," Mick gasped, the words barely audible.

"*What?*" Marchosias asked, momentarily confused.

There was a pause, then a sensation like dark laughter rippling through their shared consciousness.

"*Oh, you evil genius*," Marchosias said, genuine admiration in his voice. "*I've existed for millennia and never considered that particular loophole. The internal darkness of the human form. Perfect.*"

The cricket bat began its downward arc. Mick closed his eyes, surrendering the last shreds of his control.

"Do it," he whispered.

An instant later, their attackers froze as one. The cricket bat stopped mid-swing, its wielder's face contorting in sudden confusion. Then, horror. He doubled over, clutching his stomach with a strangled gasp. Dark fluid—not quite blood, not quite shadow—dribbled from his mouth, nose, ears.

Around him, the others began experiencing the same symptoms, dropping their weapons as they collapsed to their knees. Some clawed at their throats, others ripped at their clothing as if trying to extract something

moving beneath their skin. One by one, they began to vomit—expelling not just the contents of their stomachs but writhing, shadowy entities that resembled the rat-things Marchosias had manifested before, only smaller, more worm-like.

The man with the cricket bat fell to all fours, retching violently as shadow-worms poured from his mouth, eyes, nose, even his ears. The creatures wriggled briefly in the sunlight before dissolving into oily smears on the concrete.

Then there was the smell, human excrement, and vomit. All the surrounding assailants writhed on the floor incapable of keeping their stomach, and bowel contents inside them.

"I can't maintain this for long," Marchosias warned, his voice strained. *"The sunlight burns them as they emerge. And the connection is tenuous at best."*

Mick, barely conscious, managed to turn his head toward where Reeves had fallen. She was shakily rising to her feet, staring in horror at the surrounding scene. The three who had attacked her were convulsing on the ground, their bodies distorted by the internal invasion of Marchosias's shadow-worms.

"Mick?" she called, her voice sounding distant through the ringing in his ears.

He tried to respond, but the effort was too much. The world tilted sideways as he collapsed fully to the ground, blood pooling beneath his head. His consciousness began to slip away, darkness encroaching from all sides.

The last thing he heard was Marchosias's voice, unusually gentle:

"Don't worry. I've got this."

Then nothing.

Mick floated in warm darkness, aware yet not aware. Pain existed somewhere distant, muffled by layers of unconsciousness. He sensed movement, his body being carried or dragged, but couldn't summon the energy to care. It was peaceful here, in this in-between place.

Time passed—minutes or hours, he couldn't tell. Slowly, sensation began returning. The rough texture of his sofa beneath his back. The familiar smells of his flat—old books, coffee, the faintest hint of bourbon. The murmur of voices nearby—one female, urgent and questioning; one male but layered with something ancient, answering with uncharacteristic patience.

"The physical damage is substantial but not life-threatening," the male voice was saying—Marchosias, using Mick's vocal cords while he remained unconscious. *"The cranial bleeding has stopped. Ribs fractured but not penetrating any organs. He will recover."*

"He needs a hospital," Reeves insisted, her voice tight with concern.

"And how would you explain the attack to your medical authorities?" Marchosias countered reasonably. *"Twelve ordinary citizens simultaneously suffering neurological events after assaulting a former police officer? The questions would be... inconvenient."*

Mick tried to open his eyes but found the effort overwhelming. He settled for listening, gathering information before revealing his consciousness.

"What did you do to them?" Reeves asked, her tone suggesting she wasn't sure she wanted the answer.

"Nothing permanent," Marchosias assured her. *"I merely created extensions of myself—shadow entities capable of surviving briefly within the darkness of the human body. They disrupted the neural connections that allowed Vassago's control."*

"You made them vomit shadow-worms."

"An unpleasant but effective countermeasure." There was almost a note of pride in Marchosias's voice. *"And credit where it's due—it was Michael's idea. 'It's always dark inside,' he said. Quite brilliant in its simplicity."*

Mick felt a cool cloth being placed on his forehead, gentle hands checking the wound at the back of his skull. Reeves, apparently, since Marchosias was still using his voice to converse with her.

"How long will you..." She hesitated, clearly struggling with how to phrase the question.

"Remain in control?" Marchosias finished for her. *"Until he regains consciousness naturally. I'm using our connection to accelerate healing, but forcing him awake would be counterproductive."*

"And you're not tempted to just... keep control? Now that you have it?"

There was a pause, then a sound that might have been laughter—deeper and more resonant than Mick's normal laugh.

"Detective Reeves, our arrangement is far more complex than mere possession. I have to admit the prospect is tempting, but I exist within him, alongside him. We are becoming... entangled in ways neither of us anticipated. Besides," the demon added with what sounded like genuine amusement, *"his body is extraordinarily fragile and high-maintenance. The constant need for food, sleep, elimination of waste... how do you humans tolerate such inefficiency?"*

Despite his semi-conscious state, Mick felt a flicker of indignation at having his body described as "inefficient." The emotion must have been strong enough to register through their connection, because Marchosias immediately responded:

"Ah, he's listening. Awake enough to be offended, apparently."

Mick finally managed to pry his eyes open, wincing at the dull throb that accompanied the movement. His vision swam momentarily before

focusing on Reeves, who stood looking down at him with an expression caught between concern and wariness.

"Welcome back," she said simply.

"Thanks," Mick croaked, his throat painfully dry. "How long was I out?"

"About four hours. Your... friend brought us here after the attack."

Mick became aware of Marchosias retreating deeper into their shared consciousness, relinquishing control now that Mick was awake. The transition was smoother than ever before—not the jarring snap of earlier experiences, but a gentle handover, like the passing of a baton between teammates.

"Your body is severely damaged," Marchosias informed him privately. *"Three fractured ribs, minor cranial bleeding, extensive contusions. I've accelerated healing where possible, but recovery will still require time."*

"You walked us here with these injuries?" Mick thought back, impressed despite himself.

"Your pain receptors are fascinating things," the demon replied. *"Simple enough to temporarily override."*

Reeves helped Mick sit up, supporting his shoulders as he winced through the movement. Every breath sent shards of pain through his ribcage; his head throbbed in time with his heartbeat.

"I've never seen anything like what happened in the park," she said, handing him a glass of water. "Those people—they were being controlled somehow?"

"Vassago can puppeteer humans who carry his mark," Mick explained, sipping carefully. "Some volunteers, others unwitting hosts. He used them because he knew Marchosias would be weakened in daylight."

"And the... internal shadow-worm thing?"

Mick managed a pained smile. "Improvisation. Marchosias needs darkness to manifest his abilities. Inside the human body—"

"Is very dark," she finished, grimacing. "That's disturbing on multiple levels."

"But effective." Mick shifted, trying to find a position that didn't aggravate his ribs. "What happened to them after we left?"

"Ambulances arrived. Last I heard, they were being treated for 'unknown toxin exposure.' No fatalities, but several are in critical condition." She fixed him with her detective's stare. "Will they recover?"

Mick directed the question internally. *"Will they?"*

"Eventually," Marchosias confirmed. "They may experience nightmares, memory gaps, perhaps some lingering neurological effects. But the shadow-worms dissolved once their purpose was complete. No permanent physical damage."

"He says they'll recover," Mick relayed. "Some side effects, but nothing permanent."

Reeves nodded, seeming to accept this. "We need to talk about what happens next. The attack proves Vassago knows we're investigating. He's escalating."

"And we still don't know where or when this 'Crossing' event is happening," Mick added, frustration evident in his voice. "Just that it's soon."

"I need to look into it," Reeves said, checking her watch with a grimace. "And I need to get back to the station before my superintendent adds another reprimand to my file. I've got three active investigations I've been neglecting, reports overdue, and I'm supposed to be in court tomorrow morning."

"The supernatural can be so inconsiderate of work schedules," Mick commented dryly.

"I'll dig through the data we've collected, look for any connections to 'The Crossing'—property records, known locations, relationships. There has to be something we've missed." She gathered her notes, slipping them into her bag. "There always is."

Mick attempted to stand, determined to be useful despite his injuries, but immediately regretted it as pain lanced through his chest.

Reeves pushed him gently back onto the sofa. "You're in no condition for another confrontation. You need time to recover. We don't have any backup."

"Who exactly do you propose to call? The Met's Occult Crimes Division?" Mick's sarcasm was undercut by a wince as he shifted position. "We can't exactly brief a tactical team on fighting demons."

"She's right, you know," Marchosias interjected. "Your body is severely compromised. Another direct confrontation would likely result in your death—and while I could maintain animation of your corpse for a short time, it would be... less than ideal for both of us."

"Thanks for that disturbing image," Mick muttered.

Reeves looked between Mick and the empty space he seemed to be addressing, clearly still adjusting to these one-sided conversations. "I need to get back to the station, but I'll check on you later. Try not to die in the meantime."

Mick nodded reluctantly, then immediately regretted the movement as fresh pain bloomed behind his eyes. "Whatever you find about The Crossing, call me immediately. Those kids are running out of time."

"First things first," Reeves said, practical as always. "You need to heal. Plan or no plan, you're useless in this condition."

"I can accelerate the healing process," Marchosias offered. "But it requires something from you."

"What?" Mick asked suspiciously.

"Surrender control again. Voluntarily, completely. I can direct your body's resources more efficiently than your conscious mind."

Mick hesitated. Voluntarily giving up control was different from Marchosias seizing it in an emergency. It required trust—a commodity still in short supply between them, despite their evolving relationship.

"I gave it back once already today," the demon pointed out reasonably. "When I could have maintained control indefinitely."

That was true, Mick had to admit. Marchosias had relinquished control the moment Mick regained consciousness, despite having legitimate reason to maintain it given Mick's injuries.

"How long would you need?" Mick asked silently.

"Two hours minimum. Four would be optimal."

Mick relayed the conversation to Reeves, who listened with surprising equanimity.

"So your demon wants to... what, put you in a healing coma?" she clarified.

"Something like that."

Reeves considered this for a moment, then nodded decisively. "Do it. I'll be back when I can." She headed for the door, then paused. "Try not to let him redecorate while you're out. Or adopt a cat."

Despite everything, Mick found himself smiling. "You're taking all this remarkably well."

"I watched people vomit shadow-worms four hours ago," she replied dryly. "My threshold for weird has been significantly recalibrated."

After Reeves left, Mick closed his eyes and deliberately lowered the mental barriers he maintained between himself and Marchosias—not just allowing access but actively surrendering control.

"Thank you for your trust," Marchosias said, sounding genuinely surprised. *"This will be... uncomfortable at first. But necessary."*

As consciousness began to recede, Mick felt Marchosias taking the reins of his body with careful precision—not the violent seizure of control from earlier emergencies, but a gentle assumption of authority, like a parent lifting a sleeping child.

"What did you think?" Mick asked drowsily as darkness enveloped him. "About my idea with the inside darkness?"

He sensed something like amusement rippling through their connection.

"In all my millennia of existence," Marchosias admitted, *"I had never considered that particular approach. It was elegant in its simplicity, efficient in its cruelty. Almost... demonic in its ingenuity."*

"I'll take that as a compliment," Mick thought as consciousness slipped away entirely.

"It was meant as one," was the last thing he heard before surrendering to healing darkness.

Marchosias surveyed the flat through Mick's eyes, flexing his borrowed fingers experimentally. The human body was fascinatingly limited—pain signals from the fractured ribs, the throbbing head wound, muscles stiffening from the fight. He redirected internal resources, accelerating blood clotting around the cranial injury, promoting cellular regeneration, stimulating endorphin production to manage the pain.

Healing underway, he found himself with something novel: free time without Mick's consciousness hovering at the edges of his own. The sensation was oddly lonely.

"Humans and their entertainment," he muttered to himself, picking up the remote control from the coffee table.

The television flickered to life, showing a news reporter standing outside a hospital. "...where twelve people have been admitted following what authorities are calling a 'mass psychotic episode' in Regent's Park this morning. Witnesses describe the victims suffering from violent seizures and vomiting an unknown black substance..."

Marchosias changed the channel, settling on a documentary about deep-sea creatures. *"Fascinating,"* he commented to the empty room. *"Existence continues to evolve in darkness, even here. Some of these resemble lesser demons from the third circle."*

Growing bored with television, he discovered the radio. Stations flicked past—classical music (too reminiscent of celestial harmonies), a talk show discussing politics (tediously similar to infernal bureaucracy), pop music (an assault on his ancient sensibilities).

Then he found it—guitars distorted beyond recognition, percussion like war drums, vocals that merged screaming and melody. Heavy metal. Marchosias turned the volume up, feeling the vibrations through Mick's body.

"NOW this is music!" he announced to no one, nodding Mick's head in time with the thunderous rhythm. The screamed lyrics about chaos, rebellion, and darkness resonated with his demonic nature in ways he hadn't anticipated.

Three songs in, something unexpected happened—Mick's consciousness stirred, rising partially from its healing sleep.

"What the fuck is going on?" Mick's thoughts were slurred, confused.
"What is that racket?"

"Slipknot," Marchosias replied, not turning down the volume. "'Duality.' Magnificent, isn't it? Your species has improved its artistic expressions since my last visit."

"It sounds like souls being tortured in the abyss," Mick complained.

"Precisely!" Marchosias agreed enthusiastically. "The parallels are remarkable. Return to your healing sleep, Mick. Your body still requires significant repair."

"Turn it down at least," Mick muttered, his consciousness already fading back into darkness.

Marchosias reduced the volume marginally, settling back on the sofa. *"Humans,"* he sighed, but with something that might almost have been affection. *"So particular about their vessels."*

Outside, clouds gathered over London, promising rain by nightfall. Inside Mick's body, ancient power worked methodically to repair damaged tissue, knit fractured bone, reduce swelling in traumatised brain tissue. And in the shared consciousness they were creating between them, something new continued to form—not quite human, not quite demon, but a synthesis neither had imagined possible.

20 Fire and Spice

The safe house Reeves had arranged was spartan but functional—a one-bedroom flat above a dry cleaner's that the Met kept off the books for witness protection. The musty scent of mothballs and disuse permeated the air, but it was secure and, more importantly, unknown to anyone who might be looking for them.

Mick slumped onto the threadbare sofa, every muscle in his body protesting the movement. Twenty-four hours had passed since their confrontation with Vassago's puppets in the park, and while Marchosias's accelerated healing had mended the worst of his injuries, residual aches lingered like unwelcome guests.

Papers and files were spread across the coffee table—property records, shell company registrations, reports of missing persons, and a map of London marked with various locations. The investigation had consumed most of their day, leading to more questions than answers.

"We're missing something," Mick said, rubbing his eyes. "Bob mentioned 'The Crossing' as the ritual site, but it could mean anything—a literal crossroads, a bridge, somewhere train lines intersect..."

"I've been looking at that," Reeves replied, pulling a highlighted document from the pile. "These shell companies we've linked to Vassago have acquired several properties in the last eighteen months. Three fit our parameters for a ritual site—large enough, isolated enough, with unusual history."

She laid three photographs on the table. "Two warehouses and one former church. St. Stephen's in East London, deconsecrated five years ago."

"*The church*," Marchosias interjected immediately. "*It will be the church.*"

"Why St. Stephen's?" Mick asked silently.

"*Because it would be ideal for their purposes. Sacred ground repurposed.*"

"Marchosias thinks it's the church," Mick relayed to Reeves. "Says it would be perfect for what they're planning."

Reeves nodded, already pulling out another document. "That fits with what I found. There's a deed transfer buried under three layers of shell corporations. St. Stephen's was purchased eight months ago by a subsidiary of Threshold Holdings."

"Why is it always deconsecrated churches?" Mick asked, voicing the question that had been nagging at him. "Vassago could use any number of locations. Why specifically a former church?"

"Because the powers of light and order often used them as portals between realms," Marchosias explained, his mental voice taking on that academic tone he adopted when sharing ancient knowledge. *"The residual energy can still be manipulated, even after formal consecration ends."*

"Portals?" Reeves asked, noting Mick's expression of internal dialogue.

"Marchosias says churches were used as gateways between realms," Mick translated. "Even deconsecrated ones retain usable energy."

"That explains the location," Reeves agreed, gathering the documents into a more organised pile. "But why children? Why specifically need thirteen innocent victims?"

Marchosias was quiet for a moment, as if considering how much to reveal. *"The portals have what you might call security features,"* he finally explained. *"If something impure attempts to pass, the portal would either deny access or actively destroy anything trying to get through. In the worst case, it could bring the attention of the powers of light and order."*

"You mean angels?" Mick asked silently.

"Among others," Marchosias confirmed. *"By using pure human souls as sacrifice, they hide those passing through. The more impure the entity, the more powerful its essence, the more souls required to mask its passing."*

Mick relayed this information to Reeves, watching her face harden with each sentence.

"So thirteen children because whatever's coming through is particularly powerful," she concluded grimly. "And particularly evil."

"So it's definitely St. Stephen's," Mick said, mind already shifting to tactics. "What do we know about the building layout?"

Reeves pulled out an architectural blueprint. "Three entrances—main doors at the front, side entrance through what was once a chapel, and rear access near the old vestry. Bell tower on the north side, crypt beneath. Fairly standard Victorian church construction."

"How are we approaching this? Just the two of us against Vassago and his cult?"

Reeves shook her head. "I've already got surveillance in place. Called in some favours from former colleagues who owe me. They've been watching St. Stephen's since this morning, logging everyone going in and out."

"Official operation?" Mick asked, surprised.

"Off the books," she corrected. "But they're reliable. They'll maintain position until we arrive, then provide backup if needed."

"And you trust them with this? With what we're dealing with?"

"They don't know the supernatural elements," Reeves admitted. "They think it's a child trafficking ring with cult overtones. Close enough to the truth for their purposes."

Mick nodded, thinking through the implications. "So we know where and we have some idea of when, given that these rituals typically happen at night. What's our next move?"

Reeves checked her watch. "My team will continue surveillance. We'll move in a few hours before midnight, when they're likely to bring in the children. Until then..." She stood, stretching muscles stiff from hours of

investigation. "We wait. And eat something. When was the last time you had actual food?"

The question caught Mick off guard. "I had... coffee? This morning?"

"Coffee isn't food, Hargraves."

"Your nutritional habits are abysmal," Marchosias added helpfully. "Your body's efficiency is already compromised by your injuries. Sustenance would be beneficial."

"Even your demon agrees with me," Reeves said, correctly interpreting Mick's expression as he listened to Marchosias's commentary.

"How do you know what he's saying?" Mick asked, genuinely curious.

"You get this look," she replied, gesturing vaguely at his face. "Like you're listening to a particularly annoying backseat driver. Now, food. What are our options?"

"Ice cream," Marchosias suggested immediately. "The shop on Tottenham Court Road had seventeen flavours. We've only tried three."

"Ice cream isn't dinner," Mick muttered, then realised he'd spoken aloud when Reeves raised an eyebrow.

"Marchosias has opinions about food now?" she asked, a hint of amusement breaking through her professional demeanour.

"He's discovered a sweet tooth," Mick confirmed. "Particularly for ice cream, despite my lactose intolerance."

"Some pleasures are worth the discomfort," Reeves said, unknowingly echoing Marchosias's exact words from their first ice cream expedition.

"See? The detective understands. Wisdom from unexpected sources," Marchosias commented, sounding smug.

"We need actual food," Mick insisted, ignoring the demon. "I could order takeaway?"

Reeves snorted. "I've seen your flat, Hargraves. I'm not eating greasy takeaway in another biohazard zone. We need to get out, clear our heads. Somewhere public enough to blend in but not so crowded that Vassago's people could easily make a move."

"You sound like you have a place in mind."

"Few options in this neighbourhood," she replied, reaching for her jacket. "Italian, Chinese, or the curry house on the corner. Your call."

"Curry?" Marchosias inquired, his interest piqued. *"I don't believe we've experienced this particular cuisine."*

"We haven't," Mick confirmed silently, then aloud to Reeves: "Not Italian. Too many memories of stakeouts living on cold pizza."

"Chinese, then?"

Mick considered, then shook his head. "Too much MSG. Gives me headaches."

"Your body has numerous inconvenient limitations," Marchosias observed dryly.

"Indian it is," Reeves decided, already heading for the door. "I could use something spicy after the past few days."

"What is 'spicy'?" Marchosias asked as they followed Reeves down the narrow staircase.

"You're about to find out," Mick replied, a small, mischievous smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

The Raj Mahal was an unassuming establishment wedged between a betting shop and a mobile phone repair store. Its faded exterior belied the rich aromas that greeted them as they pushed through the door—cardamom, cloves, ginger, and a dozen other spices Mick couldn't name but instantly recognised. The restaurant was half-empty, the dinner rush still an hour away, which suited their need for privacy perfectly.

The waiter led them to a booth near the back, where they could keep an eye on both the entrance and the kitchen doors. Old habits died hard, especially for two former police partners.

"I haven't had proper curry in months," Reeves admitted, scanning the menu with the intensity she usually reserved for case files. "The canteen's idea of culinary adventure is adding extra pepper to the shepherd's pie."

"I don't remember you being a fan of spicy food," Mick observed, surprised.

"Things change," she replied, her standard response to any observation about how she differed from the detective he'd once known. "The job gets to you. Food with actual flavour becomes one of the few reliable pleasures."

"I find myself unexpectedly sympathetic to this perspective," Marchosias commented. *"Physical sensations provide fascinating diversion from existential concerns."*

"Looking for recommendations?" Mick asked Reeves, ignoring the demon's philosophical musings on hedonism.

"I know what I want." She set her menu aside decisively. "Lamb Vindaloo, extra hot. You?"

"Try something intense," Marchosias urged. *"After ice cream, I'm curious what other extremes of sensation this form can experience."*

Mick smiled slightly. "Chicken Madras," he told the waiter who had appeared silently beside their table. "And two orders of garlic naan."

"No rice?" Reeves asked after the waiter had departed.

"Trying to cut down on carbs," Mick lied, knowing full well that Marchosias was more interested in concentrated flavours without dilution.

Reeves leaned back, studying him with that penetrating gaze that had made her such an effective interrogator. "So. You and... him. How's that working out?"

"As well as can be expected when you're sharing your body with an ancient demon," Mick replied dryly.

"He seems different from what I would have expected," she pressed, clearly having given this considerable thought. "Not exactly the fire and brimstone, soul-collecting monster from religious texts."

"*Oh, but I am,*" Marchosias interjected, his mental voice carrying an undertone of dark amusement. "*She just hasn't seen me at my best.*"

"He's complicated," Mick said aloud, choosing his words carefully. "Neither purely malevolent nor benevolent. More... pragmatic. With his own agenda that sometimes aligns with mine."

"And when it doesn't?"

"We negotiate," Mick said simply. "He needs me as much as I need him."

"*An oversimplification,*" Marchosias commented, "*but not entirely inaccurate.*"

The waiter returned with their orders, setting down steaming plates that released clouds of fragrant spices into the air. Mick's Madras gleamed with an ominous reddish-orange oil that pooled around chunks of chicken and vegetables.

Reeves didn't hesitate, diving into her Vindaloo with obvious relish. Mick, on the other hand, paused, allowing Marchosias to register the sensory input—the colour, the aroma, the heat rising from the plate.

"*Fascinating,*" the demon observed. "*The scent alone creates a physiological response. Your salivary glands are activating, your nasal passages clearing. Intriguing.*"

Mick took a small, careful bite, chewing slowly to give Marchosias the full experience. For three heartbeats, nothing happened. Then—

"WHAT IS THIS?" Marchosias bellowed into their shared consciousness, the mental equivalent of a thunderclap. *"IT BURNS!"*

Mick nearly choked, both from the sudden internal shouting and from suppressing laughter. He reached hastily for his water, taking a large gulp that did almost nothing to quell the fire spreading across his tongue.

"Demon doesn't like curry?" Reeves asked, noticing his reaction.

"Not exactly," Mick managed, eyes watering slightly.

"How can you willingly put this in your body?" Marchosias demanded, genuinely affronted. *"It's like licking Satan's flip-flops! And I would know!"*

A surprised laugh escaped Mick before he could contain it. "Satan's flip-flops?" he repeated aloud, forgetting momentarily that Reeves couldn't hear the demon's commentary.

She raised an eyebrow, fork paused halfway to her mouth. "Do I want to know?"

"His exact words," Mick explained, taking another sip of water. "He's not a fan of curry, apparently."

"The demon that can tear men apart from the inside can't handle a medium-hot curry?" Reeves shook her head, amusement playing at the corners of her mouth. "That's... surprisingly human."

"I am NOT human," Marchosias protested, indignation radiating through their connection. *"I am a Great Marquis of the Infernal Regions, commander of thirty legions—"*

"He's sensitive about it," Mick confided to Reeves, deliberately provoking the demon. "Very defensive."

"This is unconscionable," Marchosias declared. "First the lactose intolerance with ice cream, now this infernal burning. Your physical form is a minefield of unpleasant consequences."

"Now you know how I felt about the ice cream," Mick thought back, taking another deliberate bite of the Madras.

A noise that might have been a growl reverberated through their shared consciousness. *"Petty revenge does not become you, Michael."*

"And yet, it's so satisfying," Mick replied silently, unable to keep the smugness from his internal voice.

Reeves watched this one-sided conversation with growing fascination. "You know, for all the supernatural horror of it, there's something almost... domestic about your arrangement. Like an old married couple bickering about dinner choices."

"Don't let him hear you say that," Mick warned, though Marchosias had obviously heard everything through their shared senses. "He's very particular about his dignified demonic status."

"I'm right here," Marchosias reminded him testily.

"That's kind of the point," Mick muttered.

The waiter approached their table, noting Mick's watering eyes with professional concern. "Is everything to your satisfaction, sir? Perhaps something to cool the palate?"

"Yes," Marchosias responded immediately, the curry debacle apparently creating a desperate need for relief. *"Anything cold. Immediately."*

"Do you have kulfi?" Reeves asked, surprising both Mick and Marchosias.

"Indeed, madam. Pistachio, mango, or rose?"

"What is kulfi?" Marchosias inquired internally.

"Indian ice cream," Mick explained silently. "Denser, creamier. Less likely to trigger my lactose issues."

"Intriguing. The mango variant sounds promising."

"One mango kulfi," Mick ordered, then looked questioningly at Reeves.

"Pistachio for me," she decided.

As they waited for dessert, Reeves checked her watch. "We should head to St. Stephen's by nine. That gives us enough time to position ourselves before any major activity starts."

"You think they'll bring the children there directly? Or prepare them somewhere else first?"

"They will be brought in last," Marchosias informed him. "The vessels must remain untainted by the ritual space until the precise moment of offering."

Mick relayed this information to Reeves, watching her face tighten with renewed determination.

"Then we have a narrow window to intercept them," she said, already planning. "Your... friend's abilities might be our best advantage."

"Vassago will be expecting us, and he'll have countermeasures."

"We don't need to defeat Vassago directly," Reeves argued. "We just need to disrupt the ritual and get those kids out."

The kulfi arrived, each serving presented on a small decorative plate with an artful drizzle of honey and crushed pistachios. The conversation paused as Mick took a small spoonful, letting the dense, creamy confection melt on his tongue. The mango flavour was intense but natural, providing blessed relief from the lingering burn of the curry.

"Oh," Marchosias said simply, mental voice momentarily reduced to monosyllables. "OH."

"Good?" Mick asked silently, amused by the demon's reaction.

"The contrast between this and the hellfire curry is... exquisite. The temperature differential alone creates fascinating sensory input, but the flavour profile is complex yet harmonious. Superior to the previous ice cream experiences."

"I thought you might like it," Mick replied, taking another spoonful.

Across the table, Reeves watched with that carefully neutral expression she employed when gathering information. "Based on your expression, I'm guessing the dessert is a hit with your passenger?"

"He's waxing poetic about sensory contrasts and flavour profiles," Mick confirmed. "Apparently kulfi ranks above regular ice cream in his culinary hierarchy."

"Demon with a sweet tooth," Reeves mused, shaking her head slightly. "Just when I think I'm adjusting to this new reality, something even stranger happens."

"There is nothing strange about appreciating physical pleasures," Marchosias objected, though he knew Reeves couldn't hear him. *"Sensations are one of the few advantages of corporeal existence."*

"He disagrees with being called strange," Mick translated, finding himself in the unusual position of mediating between a demon and a detective over dessert preferences.

"Of course he does," Reeves replied, finishing her kulfi with methodical precision. "No one likes being called strange. Not even ancient, world-ending entities."

"I rather like her," Marchosias decided. *"Despite her many limitations as a mortal being."*

"She'd be flattered, I'm sure," Mick thought back dryly.

Their momentary respite was coming to an end. Outside, full night had fallen, and with it came the weight of what awaited them at St. Stephen's Church. Thirteen children, a ritual of dimensional significance, and operatives of a being even Marchosias approached with caution.

"We should go," Reeves said, checking her watch. "Need to gear up and get into position well before they bring in the children."

Mick nodded, the brief levity of their meal giving way to focused purpose. As they left the restaurant, he found himself oddly grateful for the interlude—not just for the nourishment, but for the reminder of what simple human experiences felt like. What they were fighting to protect.

"Curious how these minor moments acquire significance in the face of larger threats," Marchosias observed, seemingly following Mick's train of thought. *"Perhaps this is what I never understood about humans—your capacity to find meaning in ephemeral experiences."*

"That's what makes us human," Mick replied silently as they stepped into the cool night air. "The small things matter because everything is temporary for us."

"Not everything," Marchosias corrected. *"Not any more. Not for you."*

The implication hung between them as they walked toward the safe house to prepare for the night ahead—the unanswered question of what exactly Mick was becoming through their continued integration. Not fully human any longer, but not demon either. Something new, undefined, with implications neither of them fully understood.

But that was a question for another time. Tonight, they had children to save and a cosmic horror to prevent. The rest—identity, morality, the future of their unusual partnership—would have to wait.

Sometimes even demons needed to prioritise.

21 The Gathering Dark

St. Stephen's loomed against the night sky, a Victorian gothic silhouette of sharp spires and crumbling stonework. Once consecrated ground meant to shelter the faithful, now something else entirely. Darkness clung to it like a shroud, deeper than the surrounding night, as if the building itself absorbed what little ambient light the city provided.

From their vantage point in an abandoned building across the street, Mick studied the structure through a pair of night-vision binoculars. The church appeared deserted—no lights, no movement, no obvious guards. That bothered him more than visible security would have.

"Too quiet," he murmured, lowering the binoculars. "Where's your surveillance team?"

Reeves checked her watch. "North-west corner. Grey van with cable company markings. They've been in position since this morning."

"Something is not right," Marchosias observed, his voice unusually tense. *"The building pulses with energy, yet shows no external signs of occupation."*

"Marchosias says something's off," Mick relayed. "The place is practically humming with energy, but it looks abandoned."

"My team would have reported any significant activity," Reeves replied, checking her phone again. "Nothing but a maintenance worker this morning and a delivery van around noon."

Mick handed her the binoculars. "Check out the windows. Absolutely black, even with night vision. No light penetration at all."

Reeves observed for several long moments before lowering the binoculars with a frown. "That's not normal. Even the darkest interior should show some variation in the infrared spectrum."

"Because they've drawn the veil," Marchosias explained. "Created a barrier between this reality and what's happening inside. Preparations are already underway."

"We need to move," Mick said, his expression grim. "If the ritual has started, we're running out of time."

"Let me check in with my team first," Reeves replied, already moving toward the stairs.

They made their way quietly through shadow-filled streets, avoiding the pools of harsh streetlight that would make them visible targets. The surveillance van sat exactly where Reeves had indicated, its unremarkable exterior perfect camouflage in the working-class neighbourhood.

Reeves approached alone, keeping Mick hidden in the shadows of a nearby alley. She tapped a specific pattern on the rear door, then waited. No response. She tried again, harder.

"Something is wrong," Marchosias said, his presence coiling tensely within Mick's consciousness.

Mick felt it too—instincts honed through years of police work screaming danger. "Reeves," he called softly. "Get back here. Now."

She hesitated, then reached for the door handle. It swung open at her touch, revealing darkness within. Reeves drew her extendable baton in one smooth motion, using her other hand to extract a small tactical torch from her jacket.

The beam cut through the darkness, illuminating the van's interior. Two figures sat motionless in the front seats, slumped forward against their restraints. Reeves stepped cautiously into the van, checking for pulses.

When she emerged moments later, her face was ashen. "They're dead," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Both of them. No visible wounds, no signs of struggle. It's like they just... stopped living."

"Their life force has been harvested," Marchosias said, his mental voice unusually quiet. "Their souls have been torn from their bodies. Used to fuel the preliminary stages of whatever ritual is taking place inside."

Mick relayed this information as they retreated to the alley, watching as Reeves processed the implications, her professional mask slipping for just a moment to reveal raw grief and anger.

"Bryce has two kids," she said quietly. "Donovan was three weeks from retirement."

"We'll make them pay," Mick promised, the words coming out as a growl.

Reeves nodded, her expression hardening back into the professional mask Mick remembered from their days as partners. "Then let's end this."

They approached St. Stephen's from the rear, using the old cemetery as cover. Crumbling headstones and overgrown vegetation provided ample concealment as they made their way toward what had once been the vestry entrance.

The door, weathered oak reinforced with iron, looked securely locked—but as they drew closer, it swung inward silently, as if inviting them in.

"Trap?" Reeves whispered, her baton extended to its full length, grip tight.

"Undoubtedly," Marchosias replied. "But not a conventional one. They're aware of our approach. The invitation is... deliberate."

"It's definitely a trap," Mick confirmed. "But Marchosias thinks they want us to enter."

"Why would they want that?"

"Because Vassago is curious," the demon explained. "About us—about what we've become. My presence within a willing host is... unusual. Of academic interest to entities like him."

"He wants to study us," Mick translated.

Reeves checked her taser, making sure it was fully charged and ready. "Any other options?"

"None that get us in time to stop whatever's happening."

They stepped through the doorway into absolute darkness. The air inside was different—heavier, charged with something that made the hair on Mick's arms stand on end. It smelled of dust, old incense, and something else—metallic and organic at once, like blood mixed with ozone.

"I can't see a thing," Reeves whispered, her voice tight.

"*I can*," Marchosias said, and suddenly Mick's vision shifted.

The darkness remained, but now took on texture and depth—shades of shadow where before there had been only blackness. The former vestry came into focus—empty of furniture but covered in intricate markings that glowed faintly in Mick's enhanced vision. Symbols crawled across the floor, up the walls, even across the ceiling, forming complex, interlocking patterns.

"The walls are covered in sigils," Mick told Reeves. "Some kind of ritual markings. You can't see them, but they're everywhere."

"Great," she muttered. "Another advantage for Team Demon."

Reeves reached for her torch, but Mick caught her wrist. "Not yet," he warned. "We don't know what's waiting for us. The darkness is our friend right now."

"The markings are navigation sigils," Marchosias explained. *"Designed to guide initiates through a labyrinth of protections. Some are warnings, others markers. The brightest ones indicate the path."*

Following Marchosias's guidance, Mick led them through the vestry into what had once been the main sanctuary. The church's interior had been gutted—pews removed, altar gone, all religious iconography stripped

away. In their place, more sigils covered every surface, some pulsing with a slow, rhythmic light that reminded Mick uncomfortably of a heartbeat.

"It's empty," Reeves whispered, her voice echoing slightly in the cavernous space. "Where is everyone?"

"Below," Marchosias answered. *"The ritual space will be underground, closer to natural telluric currents."*

"Underground," Mick repeated. "There must be access to a crypt or basement."

They moved carefully through the desecrated sanctuary, following the brightest sigils as Marchosias directed. The markings led them toward what had once been the chancel, where the choir would have stood during services.

"There," Mick said, pointing to a section of floor where the sigils formed a perfect circle. "That's not part of the original architecture."

Reeves moved closer, running her hands over what appeared to her as ordinary stone flooring. "I don't feel anything unusual."

"The entrance is concealed by more than physical means," Marchosias explained. *"Touch the centre sigil—the one shaped like an inverted star within a double circle."*

Mick knelt, placing his palm on the symbol Marchosias indicated. The stone beneath his hand grew warm, then seemed to soften like wax. The entire circular section of flooring began to ripple, then dissolved completely, revealing a spiralling staircase descending into darkness.

"How did you—" Reeves began, then shook her head. "Never mind. I'm getting used to impossible things happening around you."

A cold draught rose from the opening, carrying with it the scent of damp stone and something else—incense, perhaps, but with an acrid undertone that made Mick's nose burn.

"Prepare yourself," Marchosias warned. "What lies below is not merely physical space. The veil between realms thins as we descend."

"Marchosias says we're heading into something... complicated," Mick told Reeves. "The boundary between our world and wherever Vassago comes from gets thinner down there."

Reeves adjusted her grip on her baton, her other hand resting near the taser holstered at her belt. "Meaning?"

"Meaning the rules might change. Physics, reality—none of it's guaranteed to work the way we expect."

She took a deep breath. "Noted. You first, since you can actually see."

The staircase spiralled deep beneath the church, far deeper than any normal crypt should extend. As they descended, the air grew colder, the silence more complete. Their footsteps made no echo, as if the darkness itself swallowed the sound.

After what felt like hundreds of steps, the staircase finally opened into a vast chamber that should have been impossible given the church's foundation. The ceiling soared at least thirty feet above them, supported by columns inscribed with more glowing sigils. The chamber extended far beyond what should have been the church's perimeter, disappearing into darkness in all directions.

"We must be well beyond the church's foundations," Reeves whispered. "This doesn't make any architectural sense."

"Because it exists partially in another realm," Marchosias explained. "The physical space has been... expanded."

At the centre of the chamber stood a raised dais, and upon it, an altar of black stone. Thirteen smaller pedestals surrounded it in a perfect circle, each bearing restraints sized for a child, but currently empty.

"They're setting up for the ritual," Mick observed grimly. "But where is everyone?"

Reeves finally activated her torch, unable to navigate the strange space without it. The narrow beam cut through the darkness, illuminating ancient stone that seemed to drink in the light rather than reflect it.

"The light will draw attention," Marchosias warned.

"She needs it," Mick replied internally. "She can't see like we can."

As if in response to the light, something skittered across the floor at the edge of the beam. Reeves swung her torch toward the sound, but caught only a glimpse of something multi-legged disappearing behind a column.

"What was that?" she hissed, hand moving to her taser as her light tracked the movement.

Before Mick could answer, more movement erupted around them—whispers of sound, half-glimpsed shapes ducking just beyond the light's reach. Through Marchosias's enhanced vision, Mick caught flashes of pale, elongated limbs, too many eyes, bodies that seemed to fold in on themselves in ways that defied anatomy.

"Sentinels," Marchosias identified. *"Lesser entities that guard the threshold between realms. Not physically dangerous on their own, but they will alert their masters."*

As if confirming his assessment, a low, resonant tone began to vibrate through the chamber—a single sustained note that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

"They know we're here," Mick said, moving closer to Reeves. "We need to find where they're keeping the children before—"

The tone shifted, becoming a discordant chord that made Mick's teeth ache and his vision blur. Reeves grimaced, pressing one hand against her ear.

"What is that?" she demanded.

"A summoning," Marchosias answered, his mental voice suddenly urgent. *"They're accelerating the ritual."*

The dissonant chord grew louder, and with it came movement from the far end of the chamber. Shadows deeper than the surrounding darkness flowed toward them, taking vaguely humanoid form as they approached.

"Company," Mick warned, tensing for confrontation. "Not the friendly kind."

The approaching figures solidified as they entered the periphery of Reeves' torch beam—men and women in dark robes, moving with the same unnatural synchronisation they'd witnessed in the park. Their eyes reflected the light like animals', pupils contracted to pinpoints despite the darkness.

"Puppets," Reeves muttered, recognising the similarity to their previous attackers, her baton at the ready.

"Not exactly," Marchosias corrected. *"These are willing vessels. Initiates who have surrendered partial autonomy in exchange for power."*

The robed figures spread out, forming a semicircle that cut off the staircase behind them. More emerged from other areas of the chamber, until Mick counted at least twenty surrounding them.

From behind the line of cultists, a familiar figure appeared—the same impeccably dressed man Mick had seen at Elysium and later at the warehouse. Vassago's vessel.

"Detective Hargraves," he greeted, his voice still carrying that unnatural resonance Mick remembered. "And the formidable Detective Inspector Reeves. How kind of you to join us. Though I must say, you're rather early for the main event."

"Where are the children?" Mick demanded.

Vassago's lips curved in what might have been a smile on a human face. On his, it looked like a wound opening. "Safe. For now. Though their condition is entirely dependent on how this conversation proceeds."

Reeves stepped forward, professional mask firmly in place. "This ends tonight. You're going to release those children and surrender yourself into police custody."

A sound like breaking glass emerged from Vassago—laughter, Mick realised with a chill.

"Your human authority is irrelevant here, Detective Inspector," Vassago said once his laughter had subsided. "But I admire your conviction. It's that very human quality that makes your kind so... useful."

"He's stalling," Marchosias warned. "The ritual preparations continue even as we speak. I can feel the energy building."

Mick scanned the chamber, looking for any sign of the thirteen children. Nothing was visible in the main space, but several dark archways led off to what might be antechambers.

"What do you want with us?" Mick asked, buying time as he assessed their options. "You could have killed us in the park if that was your goal."

"Want?" Vassago's expression shifted to something that might have been genuine curiosity. "I want to understand. Your arrangement with Marchosias is... unprecedented. A demon of his rank, willingly sharing consciousness rather than simply consuming his host? Fascinating."

He took a step closer, head tilting as he studied Mick with unnerving intensity. "And you, Detective. Allowing this arrangement to continue when most humans would fight to their last breath. The question is why? What do you gain from this unholy symbiosis?"

"Don't answer," Marchosias cautioned. "He's probing for weaknesses in our bond."

Mick remained silent, which seemed to amuse Vassago.

"No matter," the entity continued. "We'll have plenty of time to discuss such philosophical questions once tonight's work is complete. My master is particularly interested in examining your arrangement... thoroughly."

"Enough talking," Mick said, taking a decisive step forward. "Where are the children?"

Vassago's smile widened, revealing teeth too sharp, too numerous for a human mouth. "Closer than you think. But I'm afraid your part in tonight's proceedings doesn't involve rescue."

He raised a hand, and the robed figures began to advance.

Mick caught Reeves' eye, silently communicating a plan formed through years of partnership. She gave an almost imperceptible nod, understanding without words—they would create a diversion, try to break through the line of cultists.

"Now!" Mick shouted.

What happened next unfolded with the chaotic precision of a well-executed tactical manoeuvre. Reeves snapped her baton forward, the metallic sound echoing through the chamber. In one fluid motion, she swept the legs from beneath the nearest cultist while driving the baton into the knee of another, producing a sickening crack.

Simultaneously, Mick felt Marchosias surge forward within their shared consciousness—not fully taking control, but enhancing Mick's physical abilities beyond human limitation. He launched himself toward the nearest cultists, moving with preternatural speed.

The first cultist went down with a precisely placed strike to the throat. The second received an elbow to the temple that dropped him instantly. Mick carved a path through the disoriented group as Reeves wielded her baton with professional efficiency, targeting joints and pressure points.

Behind them, Vassago remained motionless, observing the chaos with clinical detachment. The entity made no move to intervene directly, which concerned Mick more than if he had attacked.

"He's confident," Marchosias observed grimly. *"Too confident."*

They had almost broken through the line of cultists when Vassago finally moved. In one fluid motion, the entity reached out, seizing Reeves by the throat and lifting her effortlessly until her feet dangled above the ground. Her baton clattered to the floor as she clutched at the hand crushing her windpipe.

"Your partnership has been most amusing to observe," Vassago said, his voice carrying that unnatural resonance as he held Reeves aloft as though she weighed nothing. "A detective and a demon, working together. Almost poetic in its absurdity."

Reeves struggled, her face reddening as Vassago's grip tightened. Her hand moved slowly, deliberately toward her belt.

"He's going to kill her," Marchosias warned.

"Let her go," Mick demanded, taking a step forward. "Your quarrel is with me, not her."

"On the contrary," Vassago replied, studying Reeves with clinical detachment as she struggled. "Breaking your human connections is merely step one in isolating you for proper study. The bond you've formed with Marchosias is unprecedented. My master is most intrigued by the possibilities."

As he spoke, Reeves' hand closed around her taser. With the last of her strength, she snapped it from her belt and fired directly into Vassago's chest.

The effect was immediate and unexpected. The entity convulsed as electricity coursed through his vessel, a high-pitched keening sound

emanating from him that was nothing like a human scream. Reeves trown into the wall ground as Vassago's the demon staggering backward.

"Impossible," Vassago hissed, his human vessel twitching unnaturally as the electricity disrupted whatever force animated it. "Crude human technology should not affect—"

The entity didn't finish the sentence. Instead, his vessel's form seemed to flicker like a bad television signal, becoming momentarily transparent before solidifying again. Mick rushed to Reeves, who lay unconscious on the stone floor, her pulse weak but present.

Vassago recovered with unnatural speed, his twitching subsiding as he straightened his immaculate suit. His eyes, now completely black, fixed on Mick with a cold fury that seemed to drop the temperature in the chamber by several degrees.

"An interesting discovery," he said, his voice now layered with harmonics that hurt Mick's ears. "Your human tools can temporarily disrupt the connection between vessel and occupant. Noted for future reference."

The robed cultists had regrouped, forming a barrier between Mick and any potential escape route. Mick stood protectively over Reeves' unconscious form, knowing they were now effectively trapped.

Vassago regarded them with the detached interest of a scientist observing specimens in a laboratory. Then, with deliberate slowness, he raised his right hand and made a gesture—a casual swipe through the air, almost like someone dismissing a notification on a phone screen.

The world seemed to shift sideways.

Reality rippled outward from Vassago's gesture, colours bleeding into one another, solid objects momentarily becoming fluid before reforming into different shapes. The stone floor beneath Mick's feet cracked and reshaped itself, ancient tiles replacing the more modern flooring. The walls receded,

the ceiling soared impossibly higher, and massive pillars erupted from the ground, carved with symbols that hurt Mick's eyes to look at directly.

The robed cultists transformed as well, their human forms melting away to reveal what lay beneath—emaciated, elongated limbs; skin like polished obsidian; eyes that glowed with internal fire. No longer human pretenders, but demons in their true form.

"The Crossing," Marchosias whispered, genuine fear colouring his mental voice for the first time since Mick had known him. *"He's pulled us through. We're caught between realms now—neither fully in your world nor in mine, but in the membrane that separates them. This is what he meant—not a location, but a state of being."*

"A trap?" Mick asked silently, trying to keep his rising panic contained as he knelt beside Reeves, checking that she was still breathing despite the reality shift around them.

"The perfect trap," Marchosias confirmed. *"In this place, his powers are nearly unlimited. This is neutral territory."*

Vassago spread his arms wide, his vessel now transformed as well—taller, more angular, his skin taking on the texture of polished stone, his eyes pools of liquid darkness.

"Welcome to The Crossing, Detective Hargraves," he announced, his voice resonating with power that made the very air vibrate. "Where realms meet, where rules blur, where the mighty are humbled and the fallen may rise again."

He gestured toward the transformed cultists—no, demons—that surrounded them. "My associates have been looking forward to meeting you. Or rather, to meeting what you've become. A human and demon in true symbiosis is such a rarity. They're quite eager to... dissect the particulars of your arrangement."

The demonic entities moved closer, their movements no longer resembling anything human—they flowed like liquid shadow, leaving trails of darkness behind them as they approached. Mick could feel their hunger, their curiosity, their absolute otherness pressing against his consciousness like a physical weight.

"You better have an ace up your sleeve." Mick spoke internally, standing his ground as the circle of demons tightened around them. Reeves lay unconscious at his feet, her presence a stark reminder of the human world they needed to protect—a world that now seemed impossibly distant as ancient entities closed in from all sides, hungry for secrets neither human nor demon was prepared to share.

Vassago observed with evident satisfaction, his transformed features settling into what might have been a smile on a less inhuman face. "Shall we begin?"

22 Hounds of Shadow

Mick stood protectively over Reeves' unconscious form as the transformed cultists—now revealed as demons in their true forms—closed in around them. The Crossing had stripped away all pretence, all human disguise, leaving only the raw, terrible truth of what they faced.

Vassago loomed before them, taller and more grotesque than his human vessel had suggested, skin like polished obsidian, eyes pools of liquid darkness. The chamber had transformed as well, expanding impossibly into a vast cathedral of nightmares, ancient symbols carved into stone pillars that defied human architecture.

"Your attempts at resistance are admirable," Vassago said, his voice resonating with harmonics that made Mick's teeth ache, "but ultimately futile. In The Crossing, I am beyond your comprehension. Beyond your abilities."

"No," Marchosias whispered in Mick's mind. *"He's made a grave error."*

"How exactly is being trapped between dimensions with an army of demons an error in our favour?" Mick thought back, desperately trying to formulate some plan as the circle tightened around them.

"The Crossing isn't just Vassago's domain. It's neutral territory—the membrane between realms. Here, I am not constrained by your world's limitations. Here, I can manifest my true nature."

Understanding dawned on Mick as the implications became clear. In the human world, Marchosias was limited by physical laws, by the thinness of the veil, by daylight and holy ground and a thousand other restrictions. But here, in this between-place...

"I need you to let me take full control," Marchosias said, urgency vibrating through their connection. *"Completely. Without reservation."*

Mick hesitated only a fraction of a second. "Do it," he thought. "Save Reeves. Stop this."

The transition was unlike any previous handover of control. Instead of being pushed aside in his own consciousness, Mick felt himself merging with Marchosias—becoming something greater than either of them alone. He retained awareness, could still see through his own eyes, but now those eyes perceived reality on multiple levels simultaneously.

And what he saw made him understand why Vassago had feared Marchosias enough to mention him to his master.

Vassago must have sensed the shift in power. His obsidian features contorted in what might have been surprise. "What are you—"

He never finished the question.

From Marchosias's hands—Mick's hands, their shared hands—poured shadows like dark flame, cascading to the floor on either side of them. The darkness pooled, then rose, coalescing into forms that resembled enormous Rottweilers—if Rottweilers had been designed by a mind that understood terror as an art form.

The shadow-hounds stood chest-high to a man, their bodies rippling with muscle beneath skin that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. Their maws opened to reveal more fangs than should be possible, row upon serrated row like shark's teeth. Each paw ended in elongated claws like curved razor blades. A mane of needle-pointed spines erupted around their massive heads, continuing along their spines in a ridge of lethal barbs.

"Impossible," Vassago hissed, taking an involuntary step backward. "You cannot manifest physical forms in The Crossing without—"

"Without what?" Marchosias's voice emerged from Mick's mouth, layered with power that made the very air vibrate. *"Without the ability to transcend realm boundaries? Without being a true Great Marquis of Hell? I was*

commanding legions when you were still a formless whisper in the void, Vassago."

The demonic entities surrounding them hesitated, their confidence visibly wavering as they sensed the shift in power.

Marchosias extended his hands, and darkness poured forth again, this time coiling around his forearms before solidifying into twin blades of shadow—not physical weapons, but something more fundamental, as if he had forged swords from the concept of darkness itself.

"You should have left the children alone," Marchosias said, his voice almost gentle. *"You should never have threatened what is mine."*

At some silent signal, the shadow-hounds attacked.

The first hound launched itself at the nearest demon with a speed that defied comprehension. Its terrible jaws clamped around the entity's neck, and with a single savage shake of its massive head, decapitated the creature entirely. The headless body flew backward, crashing into the ranks behind it as black ichor sprayed in an arc across the stone floor.

The second hound moved like liquid shadow, flowing between attackers with a grace that belied its monstrous form. It tore through the demonic ranks, each bite removing limbs, each slash of its claws disembowelling entities that had likely never imagined themselves vulnerable to physical harm.

Mick watched it all through Marchosias's perception—an observer in his own body as the demon unleashed devastation with methodical precision. He expected to feel horror, revulsion at the carnage, but instead found himself experiencing a strange, detached appreciation for the brutal efficiency of it all.

Marchosias himself had not remained inactive while his shadow-hounds cleared a path. With a fluid grace that Mick's body should not have been capable of, he moved forward, twin shadow-blades slicing through the

demonic entities as if they were mist rather than matter. Each stroke left trailing arcs of darkness that lingered momentarily before dissipating.

A demon lunged from behind, elongated claws reaching for Marchosias's back. Without turning, Marchosias flicked one wrist, sending a sword spinning horizontally through the air. The blade sliced cleanly through the attacker's torso, continuing its spiral flight until it had sheared through two more entities before reappearing, impossibly, in Marchosias's outstretched hand.

"You never understood what I truly am," Marchosias called to Vassago as he carved a path through the diminishing horde. *"You thought me weakened, diminished, a fallen angel desperate for scraps of essence. You were wrong."*

The shadow-hounds flanked him, moving in perfect synchronisation with their master, cutting down any entity that approached from the sides. Together, they advanced toward Vassago, who had retreated to the far end of the chamber, his obsidian features contorted with rage and something new—fear.

"This is not possible," Vassago snarled, his form flickering as if struggling to maintain coherence. "You were cast down. Stripped of your powers. Confined to the lower circles."

Marchosias laughed, the sound resonating through The Crossing like distant thunder. *"I never lost my power, Vassago. I simply learned discretion. Patience. The value of appearing less than I am."*

With a gesture that seemed almost casual, Marchosias flicked one of the shadow-blades forward. It elongated impossibly in mid-air, piercing Vassago's shoulder before the entity could evade. Black ichor that might have been blood in another reality pulsed from the wound.

Vassago screamed—a sound that transcended physical hearing, vibrating directly into the mind with painful intensity. He clutched at the wound, his

form flickering more violently now, edges blurring as if he was struggling to maintain his presence in The Crossing.

"Tell your master," Marchosias said, advancing steadily as the shadow-hounds disposed of the last remaining entities, "that the human world is under my protection now. Tell Baalberith that the Great Marquis Marchosias has claimed this territory. And tell him that if he contests this claim, I will remind him why even princes of hell once feared my name."

Vassago's form destabilised further, fragments of his substance seeming to peel away like ash in a strong wind. "This... isn't... finished," he managed, voice distorting as his manifestation began to collapse. "Baalberith will—"

"Baalberith will do nothing," Marchosias interrupted. "Because you will tell him exactly what happened here. How thoroughly you misjudged the situation. How completely you failed."

With a final, desperate cry, Vassago's form imploded, collapsing into itself before vanishing entirely—retreating from The Crossing back to the physical world, or perhaps to whatever infernal realm he called home.

The shadow-hounds completed their grim work, the last of the demonic entities reduced to dissolving fragments on the chamber floor. Slowly, the unnatural architecture of The Crossing began to revert—pillars sinking back into the ground, the ceiling lowering, the walls contracting until they once again matched the dimensions of the chamber beneath St. Stephen's.

Marchosias knelt beside Reeves, who remained unconscious but breathing steadily. *"She will recover,"* he said, more to himself than to Mick. *"The transition between realms is jarring for humans, but rarely fatal."*

Mick felt their shared consciousness shifting, Marchosias deliberately loosening his control, allowing Mick's awareness to move forward once more. The shadow-blades dissolved into wisps of darkness that were quickly absorbed back into their shared body.

The shadow-hounds, however, remained—solid and substantial, padding back to their master's side with the silent grace of predators satisfied with their hunt.

"I created them from our shared essence," Marchosias explained as Mick regarded the creatures with a mixture of awe and apprehension. "They are extensions of what we have become together—neither fully demon nor fully human."

"They're... incredible," Mick said aloud, his voice his own again though Marchosias's presence remained strong within him. "I never imagined..."

"Few do," Marchosias replied, a hint of what might have been pride colouring his mental voice. "Even among my kind, the ability to create semi-autonomous extensions is rare. It requires... balance. Harmony between essence and form."

"Between us," Mick clarified, understanding dawning. "This happened because of our arrangement. Because we've been... changing each other."

"Yes. Though I didn't anticipate this particular manifestation until Vassago made his critical error, bringing us to The Crossing."

One of the shadow-hounds pressed against Mick's leg, its form solid yet somehow not entirely physical, like pressing against dense smoke given impossible substance. Despite its monstrous appearance, Mick felt no fear—only a strange recognition, as if the creature was an extension of himself as much as of Marchosias.

A soft groan from Reeves interrupted his thoughts. Her eyelids fluttered, consciousness returning slowly. The shadow-hounds moved back, creating space as Mick knelt beside her.

"Diana?" he said gently, supporting her head as she tried to sit up. "Easy. Take it slow."

She blinked several times, her gaze unfocused. "What... happened?"

"Vassago brought us to something called The Crossing. A place between realms," Mick explained, helping her to a sitting position. "But he underestimated us."

Reeves' eyes widened as she registered the shadow-hounds standing silently behind Mick. She reached instinctively for her baton before Mick caught her wrist.

"It's okay," he assured her. "They're with us. Marchosias created them to fight Vassago's forces."

"Demon... dogs?" she managed, her professional composure temporarily shattered by the sight.

"Hounds of shadow," Marchosias corrected, his voice emerging briefly from Mick's mouth. *"An extension of our shared essence."*

Reeves pressed a hand to her temple, wincing. "I tasered a demon," she said, the memory returning. "An actual demon."

"And it worked," Mick confirmed. "Disrupted his control over his vessel temporarily. That was quick thinking."

"Where is he now?" she asked, scanning the chamber with renewed alertness.

"Gone. Retreated after Marchosias wounded him." Mick helped her to her feet, steadying her as she swayed slightly. "But this isn't over. We still need to find the children."

"They will be nearby," Marchosias said. *"The ritual requires their physical presence."*

One of the shadow-hounds lifted its massive head, as if scenting the air. It turned toward one of the dark archways leading from the main chamber, a low growl emanating from deep in its chest.

"The hound senses them," Marchosias explained. *"The children's fear creates a distinct essence signature."*

The shadow-hound moved toward the archway, looking back once as if to ensure they were following. Mick and Reeves exchanged a glance, then fell in behind the creature, the second hound taking up position at their rear like a silent guardian.

The passage beyond the archway descended further beneath the church, the air growing colder and damper with each step. The walls were rough-hewn stone, lacking the elaborate sigils of the main chamber but emanating the same sense of wrongness—of space that shouldn't exist beneath a London church.

After perhaps fifty yards, the passage opened into a smaller chamber, illuminated by a sickly green light that seemed to emanate from the stone itself. What Mick saw stopped him cold.

Thirteen children were arranged in a perfect circle, each secured to a stone chair by restraints that glowed with the same unhealthy light. Pale, frightened, but alive—their eyes reflecting the eerie illumination as they stared blankly ahead, clearly drugged into compliance.

But it was what occupied the centre of the circle that made Mick's blood freeze in his veins.

A raised stone dais dominated the middle of the arrangement, and upon it lay a familiar figure—a woman, unconscious, her dark hair spread around her head like a halo against the cold stone. Her hands were positioned precisely at her sides, ceremonial markings drawn on her exposed forearms. Her abdomen, visibly rounded with pregnancy, had been decorated with intricate sigils that pulsed with the same sickly light as the children's restraints.

Liz.

His sister.

"No," Mick whispered, the word escaping as barely more than a breath.

"That's not possible."

"No," Marchosias whispered, his mental voice carrying a note of genuine horror Mick had never heard before. *"They've imprinted Baalberith's essence signature on the unborn child."*

"What does that mean?" Mick demanded silently, his entire body rigid with shock.

"The child is being prepared as a vessel—not for sacrifice, but for incarnation."

Reeves had gone completely still beside him, instantly recognising Liz. "Mick," she whispered. "Is that—"

"My sister," he confirmed, his voice hollow. "She's supposed to be safe. I arranged protection."

"Vassago's reach is greater than we anticipated," Marchosias observed grimly. *"He must have taken her while we were occupied elsewhere."*

The shadow-hounds flanking them grew restless, sensing Mick's distress. One made a low sound, not quite a growl but something deeper, more primal—a promise of violence to come.

As if in response to the sound, a figure stepped from the shadows on the far side of the dais. Impeccably dressed in his familiar tailored suit, Vassago's human vessel approached Liz's prone form, laying one hand almost tenderly on her abdomen. The sigils brightened at his touch, drawing a soft moan of pain from Liz though she remained unconscious.

"Perfect timing," Vassago said, his voice carrying easily across the chamber. His face was unmarked, his vessel showing no signs of the damage Marchosias had inflicted during their confrontation in The Crossing. "I had rather hoped you would witness our masterwork."

The calculating coldness in his eyes as he looked up at Mick was more terrifying than any rage could have been.

"We've already administered the first part of my master's essence," Vassago continued, tracing one of the sigils on Liz's abdomen with elegant precision. "The child is becoming something new—something unprecedented."

"Get away from her," Mick growled, taking an instinctive step forward.

The shadow-hounds moved with him, their forms seeming to grow larger, more substantial as they responded to his fury. Darkness rippled beneath their skin, spines elongating along their backs, teeth gleaming in jaws that could tear through both flesh and reality.

Vassago appeared entirely unperturbed by the threat. He simply smiled—that terrible, wrong smile on his human face—and pressed his palm flat against Liz's forehead.

"I wouldn't," he said softly. "The connection is already established. Any disruption now would have... catastrophic consequences. For both mother and child."

Mick froze, trapped between desperate desire to act and paralysing fear of the consequences.

"He speaks truth," Marchosias confirmed, rage and frustration colouring his mental voice. *"The binding is complete. A direct attack now would likely kill both her and the unborn."*

"What have you done to my sister's baby?" Mick demanded, every muscle tense with restrained violence.

Vassago's smile widened. "Created a miracle. The unborn will emerge as a perfect hybrid—a being of both darkness and light, born into the human world rather than entering through a temporary portal."

"He plans to make the child a vessel for Baalberith," Marchosias explained, horror evident in his mental voice. *"A demon consciousness with no human soul, born into human flesh."*

"Why would you do this?" Reeves asked, her professional demeanour cracking slightly as she processed the implications.

"Evolution, Detective," Vassago replied, as if explaining a simple concept to a child. "My master has long been confined to darkness—limited by the same restrictions that constrain all our kind in this realm. But a being born here, in human form, with human rights and human freedoms..." He spread his hands, as if the advantages were self-evident.

"It would not be constrained to darkness," Reeves realised aloud. "It could walk in daylight. Go anywhere. Do anything."

"Precisely." Vassago sounded almost proud of her deduction. "A ruler of both light and darkness. Unbound by the traditional limitations of our kind."

Reeves looked at Mick, then at the shadow-hounds, her expression grim. "Would that make it—" she hesitated, seeming to search for the right terminology. "Would that make it the Antichrist?"

The question hung in the air for a moment before Marchosias took partial control, speaking through Mick's mouth but with his distinctive layered voice:

"If that is what your human mind can reconcile it as, then yes." There was no mockery in his tone, only a sombre acknowledgment of the concept. *"Though the reality is more complex than your religious texts suggest."*

"The thirteen children?" Mick asked, trying to process the horror of what was happening to his sister.

"Their essences will stabilise the transition," Vassago explained with clinical detachment. "The ritual carefully combines human vitality with infernal power, creating the perfect conditions for my master's consciousness to take root in the unborn vessel."

"He's not bargaining," Marchosias observed internally. *"Baalberith might have been interested in our shared consciousness under other*

circumstances, but this—a chance to rule both light and darkness—would be infinitely more valuable to him."

Mick's mind raced, searching desperately for options. "There must be a way to stop this," he insisted.

Vassago regarded him with something almost like pity. "The process has already begun. The child's original soul has been... displaced. There is only emptiness now, waiting to be filled by my master's consciousness at the ritual's completion."

"You're lying," Mick snarled, fists clenched so tightly his nails cut into his palms.

"He is not," Marchosias confirmed, his mental voice heavy with certainty. "I can sense it. The unborn's essence has been altered. The human soul is gone, replaced with a void attuned to Baalberith's signature."

One of the shadow-hounds pressed against Mick's leg, a low whine emerging from its massive form—as if it too understood the horrific implications of what had been done.

"So even if we rescued Liz now—" Reeves began.

"She would give birth to my master in human form," Vassago finished for her. "The ritual merely accelerates and stabilizes the process. The outcome is now inevitable."

Mick stared at his sister's unconscious form, at the terrible marks defacing her skin, at the gentle curve of her pregnant belly transformed into an incubator for unimaginable evil. Every protective instinct in his body screamed for action, but what action could possibly help?

"There are no good choices," Marchosias said privately to Mick, genuine regret colouring his thoughts. "Any attempt to physically intervene would kill her instantly. The binding is too deeply integrated now."

"And if we do nothing?" Mick asked silently.

"Then Baalberith will be born into your world, unconstrained by the limitations that bind other infernal entities. A demon with human rights, human freedoms, and powers beyond human comprehension."

Vassago watched Mick's internal struggle with evident satisfaction. "I'll leave you to consider the implications," he said smoothly. "The ritual completes at midnight, though your presence or absence makes no difference now. All the pieces are in place."

With a slight bow that seemed calculated to mock, Vassago stepped back into the shadows at the edge of the chamber, his vessel seemingly melting into the darkness until he was no longer visible.

The shadow-hounds growled at his departure, but made no move to pursue, sensing their master's uncertainty.

"Mick," Reeves said quietly, the professional mask completely gone now. "What do we do?"

Mick stared at his sister, feeling the weight of an impossible decision crushing down on him. The shadow-hounds pressed close on either side, their massive forms radiating a strange combination of comfort and deadly promise.

"There is another option," Marchosias said finally, his mental voice leaden. *"One you will not like. One I take no pleasure in suggesting."*

Mick knew, with terrible clarity, what the demon meant before he even articulated it. The knowledge settled like ice in his veins.

He could kill his sister and her unborn child. Prevent Baalberith from entering the world in human form. Make the ultimate sacrifice to protect countless others.

Just as he had failed to save Jamie all those years ago, he now faced the possibility of deliberately ending the life of someone he loved. The symmetry was so perfect, so cruel, it could only have been orchestrated by entities that had studied human suffering for millennia.

"Is there truly no other way?" he asked Marchosias, the question barely a thought, more a plea into the void.

"I have existed for aeons, witnessed countless horrors and miracles," Marchosias replied, his mental voice gentler than Mick had ever heard it. *"I would not suggest this if any alternative remained."*

Reeves must have read something of his thoughts on his face. She laid a hand on his arm, her expression grave. "Whatever you're considering," she said softly, "remember who you are. Who we are."

But that was precisely the problem. Who was he now? Still the broken detective who had failed to save Jamie? The flawed human who had become entangled with an ancient demon? Or something new—something neither fully human nor fully infernal, with responsibilities that transcended ordinary morality?

The shadow-hounds waited, utterly still beside him, awaiting their master's decision. Thirteen drugged children sat in their ritual circle, unwitting participants in a cosmic horror. And on the central dais, his sister lay helpless, her body transformed into the battleground for forces beyond human comprehension.

Mick considered his options, each more unbearable than the last.

23 The Broken Circle

Mick stared at his sister's prone form, the terrible sigils pulsing across her abdomen with sickly light. The shadow hounds pressed close on either side, their massive forms radiating a strange combination of comfort and deadly promise. Thirteen children sat in their ritual circle, unwitting participants in a cosmic horror.

"There is another option," Marchosias said finally, his mental voice leaden. *"One you will not like. One I take no pleasure in suggesting."*

"The child's soul hasn't been destroyed," Marchosias said, his mental voice filled with grim certainty. *"It's been displaced."*

Reeves looked between Mick and his sister, reading the one-sided conversation in his expression. "What's happening?"

"Marchosias says the baby's soul isn't gone—it's been moved." Mick struggled to process this information, to find any hope in this revelation. "What does that mean? Where is it?"

The shadow hounds grew restless, sensing the shift in energy. One padded forward, sniffing the air around Liz before backing away with a low whine.

"Baalberith would not destroy such a valuable resource," Marchosias explained. *"A pure, untainted human soul is precious—particularly one with shared bloodline to a vessel hosting a Great Marquis. He would preserve it... keep it."*

"Where?" Mick demanded, his voice cracking with desperation. "Where would he keep it?"

Marchosias was silent for a moment, and when he finally answered, his mental voice carried a weight Mick had never heard before.

"In Hell. Specifically, in Baalberith's personal collection."

The implications settled over Mick like a shroud. "Can we get it back?"

Another pause, longer this time.

"In theory, yes. But at terrible cost."

Reeves had moved to check on the children, confirming they were drugged but otherwise unharmed. She returned to Mick's side, her expression grim. "Whatever you two are discussing, it doesn't look good. We need to get these children and your sister out of here before Vassago returns."

"Moving her won't help," Marchosias said, his voice emerging from Mick's mouth. *"The binding is complete. The void will be filled at midnight with or without the ritual."*

"Then what's the option you mentioned?" Mick asked, desperate for any solution. "You said there was another way."

"To recover the soul, someone must physically travel to Hell and retrieve it from Baalberith's collection," Marchosias explained, his voice emerging from Mick's mouth for Reeves' benefit. *"A living human has never done this before."*

Reeves' face blanched. "Is that even possible?"

"It has never been done, but yes," Marchosias confirmed. *"But understand the price, Michael. When a living human enters Hell, the realm... we won't know how it reacts to the intrusion. Your living flesh would likely become a beacon, an anomaly. And no living entity who enters Hell has ever returned. The journey would be one-way."*

"A one-way trip to Hell," Mick repeated flatly, the words hanging in the charged air of the ritual chamber.

Reeves stepped closer, her professional detachment shattering completely. "No. Absolutely not. There has to be another way."

"There isn't," Marchosias said simply. *"The child's soul must be physically retrieved, and even then we do not know how, or even if, we could safely carry it back to the vessel."*

"But you just said it's a one-way trip," Reeves argued, her voice rising. "If Mick can't return—"

"I didn't say I would be staying with him," Marchosias interrupted. "In Hell, our arrangement would... change."

Mick felt a cold dread creeping up his spine. "If you separate from me in Hell, what happens to me?"

The shadow hounds shifted uneasily, as if sensing the gravity of what was being discussed.

"Hell affects living flesh differently than demonic essence," Marchosias explained carefully. "Without my presence to buffer you... the effects would be immediate. Devastating. Pain beyond your comprehension."

"But if you could get back with the soul," Mick started, thinking aloud, "you could restore it to the baby."

"Theoretically, yes," Marchosias confirmed. "But you would remain in Hell, experiencing... what the living are not meant to experience. Eternally."

The magnitude of the choice before him was staggering. Eternal torment in Hell to save his unborn niece or nephew's soul. A fate worse than death—a sacrifice beyond anything he'd imagined possible.

One of the shadow hounds pressed against his leg, as if offering comfort. The other circled protectively around Liz's unconscious form.

"There must be another way," Reeves insisted, her voice thick with emotion. "Some loophole, some alternative."

"Baalberith has been planning this for centuries," Marchosias said. "He has accounted for all conventional countermeasures. This is the only option that offers any chance of success."

Mick moved to his sister's side, looking down at her pale face, at the gentle curve of her belly now desecrated with eldritch markings. He thought of

the baby—the innocent life that had been violated before it had even drawn its first breath. He thought of Jamie—another child he had failed to save.

"How would it work?" he asked quietly. "How would we do this?"

"Mick, no," Reeves protested, grabbing his arm. "You can't be serious."

"The ritual is surprisingly simple," Marchosias replied. "No one has ever sought to enter Hell willingly, so few safeguards exist against it. A circle of blood, specific words of intent, and a willing sacrifice."

"And once we're there... once we're separated... how do I find the soul?" Mick asked.

"Baalberith keeps his collection in his personal chambers, in the administrative district of Hell," Marchosias explained. "The soul would be contained in something tangible—likely a gemstone or crystal vessel. You would need to retrieve it while I confronted Baalberith directly."

"Creating a distraction," Mick surmised.

"Yes. A risky one. Baalberith and I have... history."

"And if we succeed? If you get the soul back to the baby?"

"Then your sister's child would be born as it was meant to be—human, untainted by infernal essence. Baalberith's plan would fail. This particular avenue of manifestation would be closed to him."

Reeves had been listening to this exchange with mounting horror. "This is insane," she said finally. "You're talking about sacrificing yourself to literal Hell. Eternal torment. There has to be another option."

Mick turned to her, his expression calm despite the storm raging within him. "What would you do, Diana? If it was your family? Your sister's child?"

The question hit its mark. Reeves closed her eyes briefly, her professional mask crumbling further. "I'd do anything," she admitted quietly. "But this..."

"Yes. This." Mick's voice was steady now, resolution forming like a crystal in his mind. "Besides, I've been preparing for Hell my entire life. Every drink, every pill, every self-destructive choice. Maybe this was where I was always headed. The difference is, this time it means something."

"You understand there's no coming back," Marchosias said, genuine concern in his voice. *"Once we separate in Hell, you would remain there. Forever."*

"I understand," Mick confirmed. "But you'll get the soul back to the baby? You promise?"

"Yes," Marchosias said solemnly. *"This, I swear."*

Reeves wiped at her eyes, practical even in her distress. "What about the children? And Liz?"

"You'll need to get them out," Mick said, already planning. "Use the shadow hounds for protection. They'll respond to your commands once we've gone."

"I can bind them to her temporarily," Marchosias confirmed. *"They will protect her and the children until she reaches safety. But they must stay out of the light."*

"And disrupt the ritual," Mick added. "Buy us time."

Reeves nodded, professional training asserting itself despite her emotional turmoil. "I'll take care of it. I'll get them all to safety." She hesitated, then stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Mick in a fierce hug. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll look after Liz," Mick replied, returning the embrace briefly before stepping back. "Say you'll make sure the baby grows up knowing what happened."

"I will," she promised, her voice thick. "Of course I will."

Mick turned his attention back to Marchosias. "What do we need for the ritual?"

"Blood," Marchosias replied. "Drawn willingly for the purpose. And clear intent—spoken aloud."

The simplicity was almost disappointing. No elaborate preparations, no complex ingredients or ancient texts. Just blood and words—the most fundamental elements of magic across all cultures.

"That's it?" Reeves asked, disbelief evident in her voice.

"As I said, no one has ever sought to enter Hell willingly," Marchosias explained. "The barriers are designed to keep souls in, not out. The difficulty lies not in the journey there, but in what follows."

One of the shadow hounds approached Mick, pressing its massive head against his hand. He stroked the creature absently, feeling its solidity beneath his fingers—a manifestation of what he and Marchosias had become together.

"I'll need a blade," Mick said quietly.

Reeves hesitated, then reached into her boot, extracting a small folding knife. "Standard issue backup," she explained, handing it to him. "I shouldn't even have it."

Mick accepted the knife with a nod of thanks. "Stand back," he advised. "I don't know exactly what will happen."

"Draw the circle on the floor," Marchosias instructed. "Large enough to stand in. Then speak the words as I give them to you."

Mick knelt on the cold stone floor, flicking open the knife. He drew a deep breath, then pressed the blade against his palm, slicing it open with a single, decisive motion. Blood welled instantly, bright red in the sickly green glow of the ritual chamber.

He began to trace a circle on the stone, his blood leaving a dark, wet trail. As he worked, he felt Marchosias gathering power within their shared consciousness—preparing for whatever came next.

When the circle was complete, Mick stood in its centre, blood still dripping from his hand.

"Now the words," Marchosias said. "Repeat exactly: 'I, Michael James Hargraves, seek passage to the realm below. By blood freely given, by sacrifice willingly made, I surrender my living form to the dominion of Hell. I come not as suppliant, but as intruder. I come not in death, but in life. I come knowing there is no return.'"

Mick repeated the words, his voice steady despite the gravity of what he was doing. The shadow hounds grew restless as he spoke, pacing the perimeter of the blood circle, their massive forms seeming to grow larger, more substantial with each passing moment.

As he spoke the final words—"I come knowing there is no return"—the blood circle began to glow. Not with the sickly green light of Vassago's sigils, but with a deep, pulsing crimson that seemed to emanate from the stone itself.

Reeves backed away, her expression torn between fascination and horror. "Mick..."

"It'll be okay," he assured her, though they both knew it was a lie. "Get Liz and the children out. Be safe."

The shadow hounds moved to Reeves' side, flanking her protectively. She nodded, tears streaming freely now. "Goodbye, Mick."

The blood circle's glow intensified, growing brighter and hotter beneath Mick's feet. The stone seemed to soften, becoming less solid.

"It begins," Marchosias said, his mental voice strangely gentle. *"The transition will be... unpleasant."*

Mick closed his eyes as the floor beneath him began to give way—not crumbling or breaking, but melting like wax, taking him with it. The sensation was nauseating, like falling while standing still, like being unmade molecule by molecule.

His last sight of the human world was Reeves' face, grief-stricken but determined, the shadow hounds at her side, alert and ready.

Then reality inverted, and Mick Hargraves began his descent into Hell.

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The fall seemed endless.

Mick tumbled through a darkness so complete it felt like a physical substance—thick, oppressive, pressing against every inch of his skin. There was no air to breathe, no light to see by, just the nauseating sensation of descent without direction or destination.

Then, without warning, he struck solid ground.

The impact should have shattered bones, but instead, Mick found himself on his hands and knees, gasping for breath that shouldn't have existed in this place. He blinked, eyes adjusting to a light that wasn't light as humans understood it—a sick, reddish glow that seemed to emanate from everything and nothing simultaneously.

"Hell," he whispered, the word hanging in air that tasted of metal and ash.

"Indeed," Marchosias confirmed beside him. *"Though perhaps not what you expected."*

Mick looked up and froze in shock. Standing beside him was Marchosias—not as a voice in his head, not as a presence sharing his consciousness, but as a separate entity. The demon's true form towered above him, standing at least four times Mick's height.

Marchosias appeared as a towering being with remnants of celestial beauty corrupted by darkness. Massive wings that resembled shadowy flames extended from his back, and his form was simultaneously humanoid and bestial—powerful limbs ending in talons, a torso wrapped in what might have been armour or perhaps his own hardened skin. His face retained traces of angelic perfection, but twisted by ancient suffering into something both beautiful and terrible. His eyes were the most striking feature—containing both the brilliance of distant stars and the absolute darkness of the void between them.

"I can see you," Mick said, surprised by the steadiness in his voice despite his awe. "You're... separate."

"As I explained," Marchosias replied, his voice no longer confined to Mick's mind but resonating through the strange air around them. "In Hell, our arrangement changes. This is my true form—or close enough to it for your senses to comprehend."

Mick looked down at his own body, expecting to see some change, some demonic transformation. But he appeared exactly as he had in the world above—same clothes, same hands, same physical form. Deceptively normal, except for the faint glow emanating from his skin.

"You are still alive," Marchosias explained, noticing his confusion. "A rarity here. Your living flesh is... noticeable."

As if to confirm this assessment, Mick suddenly felt a wave of pain wash over him—not the sharp, localised pain of injury, but something deeper and more pervasive. It felt like X-rays or radiation tearing through his body like a burning sandstorm, blistering his skin from the inside though there was no visible damage. He doubled over, a gasp escaping through clenched teeth.

"The realm's rejection begins," Marchosias observed grimly. "Hell does not welcome the living. The effects will worsen with time."

"How long..." Mick managed between waves of agony, "...do I have before it becomes... unbearable?"

"Hours, perhaps. Less than a day by your reckoning, though time moves differently here." The demon lowered himself to one knee, still towering over Mick's hunched form. *"We must move quickly."*

Mick forced himself upright, fighting against the pain. "Where are we?"

For the first time, he took in their surroundings. They stood on what appeared to be a vast plateau of black stone, stretching in all directions toward a horizon that seemed both too close and impossibly distant. The

sky—if it could be called that—was a churning mass of dark clouds illuminated from within by occasional flashes of crimson lightning. In the distance, impossible structures rose—buildings that defied physics, towers that seemed to bend back on themselves, all constructed of materials that shifted and changed as he looked at them.

"The Outer Rim," Marchosias said. "The borderlands between Hell's domains. We must reach the Administrative District, where Baalberith keeps his collection."

"How far?"

"Distance is... fluid here. But far enough that we should not delay."

Mick nodded, steeling himself against another wave of pain. "Lead on."

They set off across the black plateau, Marchosias striding ahead while Mick struggled to keep pace. Each step sent fresh agony through his living flesh, as if the very ground rejected his presence. The air grew thicker, heavier with each breath, tasting increasingly of sulphur and decay.

"The shadow hounds," Mick gasped after they had walked for what felt like hours. "Did they stay with Reeves? Are they protecting her?"

Marchosias paused, his massive head tilting as if listening to something Mick couldn't hear. *"Yes. They have escorted her and the children to safety. Your sister remains unconscious, but stable."*

"You can still sense them? Even from here?"

"They are extensions of my essence," Marchosias confirmed. "A connection remains. Tenuous, but present."

This information sparked something in Mick's mind—a fragment of hope in this hopeless place. If Marchosias could maintain a connection across realms... But before he could explore the thought further, the landscape changed dramatically.

The black plateau ended abruptly at the edge of a vast chasm. Beyond it lay what could only be described as a city, though no human architect could have conceived it. Spires of obsidian and bone rose to impossible heights, connected by bridges that seemed to be made of living tissue. Streets twisted and curved, sometimes vertically, populated by shapes that Mick's mind refused to fully process.

"The Administrative District," Marchosias announced. *"Where Hell's bureaucracy operates."*

"Bureaucracy?" Mick repeated, momentarily distracted from his pain.

"Did you expect only fire and brimstone?" Marchosias asked, something like amusement in his voice. *"Hell is highly organised, meticulously documented. Souls must be processed, punishments assigned, privileges tracked. Baalberith oversees much of this—it's why he's called Hell's Secretary."*

Mick stared at the city, trying to comprehend what he was seeing. "How do we cross?"

In answer, Marchosias extended one massive hand. *"We fly."*

Before Mick could object, he found himself lifted into the air as Marchosias's enormous wings unfurled to their full span. With a single powerful beat, they launched into the air, soaring over the chasm toward the impossible city.

The flight offered a momentary reprieve from the pain of walking on Hell's surface, but introduced new torment—the air itself seemed to scorch Mick's lungs with each breath, and pressure built behind his eyes as if they might burst from their sockets. He clung to Marchosias's enormous hand, focusing on their mission: find the soul, save his sister's child, give his suffering meaning.

They descended into the city, landing in what appeared to be a plaza of polished black stone. Unlike the desolate plateau, the Administrative

District teemed with activity. Entities of various forms moved purposefully among the buildings—some appearing almost human, others completely alien to any earthly reference point. Most carried what looked like scrolls or tablets, hurrying from one structure to another with the harried demeanour of office workers late for meetings.

None approached them directly, but Mick noticed they were attracting attention. Entities paused to stare, whispering among themselves, pointing at the glowing human in their midst.

"Your presence is causing a stir," Marchosias observed. "Living humans are not supposed to be here. Word will reach Baalberith soon, if it hasn't already."

"Then we don't have much time," Mick said, fighting through another wave of pain. "Where does he keep his collection?"

"There." Marchosias pointed toward the tallest structure in the city—a twisting spire that seemed to be made of polished obsidian, its surface flowing like liquid despite appearing solid. *"The Central Archive. His chambers are at its apex."*

"How do we get in?"

"We don't—I create a distraction while you infiltrate."

"A distraction?" Mick looked up at the towering demon, understanding dawning. "You're going to confront him directly."

"It was always the plan." Marchosias's voice was grim. "Baalberith and I have... unfinished business. My appearance will draw his complete attention. While he focuses on me, you will enter his chambers and find the soul."

"How will I know which one it is?"

"It will call to you—blood recognises blood. The soul will be contained in a vessel, likely a gem or crystal. You must take only that one."

Mick nodded, then hesitated. "Wait—how will you return the soul to my sister's baby if I'm trapped here with it?"

Marchosias was silent for a moment, his star-filled eyes studying Mick with an expression impossible to interpret. *"I've been considering this since we arrived. There may be a way..."*

"What way?"

"The hounds," Marchosias said, his voice thoughtful. *"They exist simultaneously in two realms—extensions of my essence both here and in your world. It is... unprecedented. No entity has ever existed in two planes simultaneously."*

Hope flickered in Mick's chest. "You could use them to carry the soul back?"

"Perhaps. It would be dangerous, unstable... but possible." Marchosias straightened to his full, imposing height. *"We will attempt it. But first, we must obtain the soul."*

They approached the base of the great spire, where entities resembling elongated humans with too many joints and no eyes guarded an entrance twice as tall as Marchosias. The guards crossed their spear-like limbs as they approached.

"Identify," one guard demanded, its voice like gravel being crushed.

Marchosias drew himself up, wings spreading wide, eyes blazing with inner darkness. *"I am Marchosias, Great Marquis, Former Commander of Thirty Legions, Fallen of the Third Choir. I seek audience with Baalberith."*

The guards exchanged what might have been glances, though they had no eyes to do so with. "Marchosias is reported lost in the mortal realm," one said suspiciously.

"As you can see," Marchosias replied coldly, *"the reports were exaggerated."*

The guards hesitated, then stepped aside. "Proceed. The Secretary will be... interested in your return."

"I'm counting on it," Marchosias murmured as they passed between the guards.

Inside, the spire revealed itself to be a single massive chamber spiralling upward, with countless levels connected by staircases that defied gravity, sometimes running along walls or upside-down across the ceiling. Entities hurried up and down these impossible paths, carrying scrolls and tablets, disappearing into alcoves and reappearing elsewhere.

"Baalberith's chambers are at the top," Marchosias said. *"We must separate here. There is a service passage—"* he pointed to a narrow opening halfway up the chamber wall, *"—that will lead you to his collection room. I will create your opportunity. When you hear the commotion begin, move quickly."*

Mick nodded, jaw clenched against the constant pain that had become his companion. "How will I find you afterward?"

"I will find you," Marchosias assured him. *"Now hide. Wait for my signal."*

Mick concealed himself behind a twisted column as Marchosias strode into the centre of the chamber. The massive demon threw back his head and released a sound that was part roar, part musical note—a sound that no human throat could have produced. It echoed through the spire, causing every entity within to freeze in place.

"BAALBERITH!" Marchosias bellowed, his voice vibrating the very structure around them. *"I HAVE RETURNED! WILL YOU GREET AN OLD FRIEND?"*

The activity in the chamber ceased entirely. A heavy silence descended, broken only by a sound like distant thunder. Then, from the highest point

of the spire, a figure began to descend—not using the staircases, but floating downward with deliberate slowness.

Baalberith appeared first as a silhouette—tall, thin, and somehow wrong in proportion. As he came into clearer view, Mick understood why. The Secretary of Hell resembled a man in the way that a statue might—technically correct in form but missing something essential. He wore what appeared to be an immaculate three-piece suit of deepest black, but the fabric moved like oil, occasionally revealing glimpses of something writhing underneath. His face was handsome in a cold, perfect way, with features so symmetrical they became disturbing. Where eyes should have been, he had only swirling voids that seemed to contain galaxies being born and dying simultaneously.

"Marchosias," Baalberith said, his voice surprisingly pleasant—like honey poured over broken glass. "What an unexpected pleasure. We had thought you lost. Or perhaps... hiding?"

Recognising his cue, Mick began to move, using the distraction to make his way toward the service passage Marchosias had indicated. Each movement was agony, his living flesh protesting its very existence in this realm, but he forced himself onward, staying close to the shadows, avoiding the attention of the gathered entities.

Behind him, he heard Marchosias's thunderous reply: *"I was never lost, old friend. Merely... occupied with matters in the mortal realm."*

"Ah yes, the mortal realm. I've taken quite an interest myself recently. In fact, I have plans coming to fruition there very soon."

As Mick reached the service passage and slipped inside, the conversation faded behind him. The narrow corridor twisted upward, forcing him to climb despite his protesting body. The pain had intensified—now feeling like every cell was individually being set on fire, over and over again. He bit his lip to keep from crying out, tasting blood as his teeth broke the skin.

Below, the confrontation was escalating. Marchosias's voice rose in accusation: *"You've overstepped your authority, Baalberith. The human world is not yours to claim."*

"Authority?" Baalberith laughed, the sound like crystal shattering. "You speak of authority? You, who abandoned your post? Who disappeared into the mortal world rather than face judgment?"

The passage finally opened into a circular chamber near the top of the spire. Unlike the austere functionality of the rest of the structure, this room resembled a museum or perhaps a treasure vault. Glass cases lined the walls, each containing objects that glowed with inner light—objects of various shapes and sizes, but all emanating the same peculiar radiance.

Souls. Hundreds of them, each preserved in its own container.

Mick moved through the collection, eyes scanning desperately for anything that might call to him, anything that might be his sister's child. The pain was nearly blinding now, making it difficult to focus, but he pushed forward, driven by determination and the sounds of escalating conflict below.

Marchosias and Baalberith were no longer exchanging words but physical blows. The entire spire shook with the force of their confrontation, dust and fragments of obsidian raining from the ceiling.

"YOU WOULD CORRUPT A BLOODLINE THAT IS UNDER MY PROTECTION!" Marchosias roared, his voice making the glass cases vibrate.

"Protection? Is that what you call it?" Baalberith's voice had lost its pleasant quality, now sounding like mountains grinding together. "You've gone soft, Marchosias. Formed attachments. Become... contaminated by humanity."

The accusation was followed by a sound like thunder, and the spire shook so violently that Mick was thrown to his knees. The pain of contact with

the floor was so intense he nearly blacked out, but he forced himself back to his feet, continuing his search.

Then he saw it—a small crystal orb that glowed with a different light than the others. Where most of the souls emanated a steady, cold radiance, this one pulsed warm and golden, like a tiny sun. And more importantly, Mick felt it—a pull, a recognition, something that called to his blood and bone.

His sister's child. The unborn soul.

The orb was contained in a glass case like the others, labelled with symbols Mick couldn't read. He approached it, reaching out a trembling hand, then hesitated. Would an alarm sound? Would guards come running?

Below, the battle had reached new intensity. The very air seemed to tear open as powers beyond human comprehension clashed. Marchosias's voice rang out:

"YOU FORGET WHO I WAS, BAALBERITH! WHAT I COMMANDED! I MAY HAVE FALLEN, BUT I FELL FROM HEIGHTS YOU NEVER REACHED!"

The floor beneath Mick buckled as if the entire structure might collapse. He seized his chance—grabbing the glass case, he smashed it against the floor. The crystal orb rolled free, pulsing brighter as if recognising him. Mick scooped it up, cradling it against his chest.

The moment he touched it, something extraordinary happened. The constant, excruciating pain that had been his companion since arriving in Hell receded—not disappearing completely, but diminishing to a manageable level. The soul-crystal seemed to be shielding him somehow, recognising a kindred living essence.

"Thank you," he whispered to the orb, which pulsed warmly in response.

Now he needed to find Marchosias. Following the sounds of battle, Mick made his way back to the service passage and began his descent, moving faster now that the pain had subsided to tolerable levels.

The scene that greeted him when he emerged was one of absolute chaos. The central chamber of the spire had been transformed into a battlefield. The neat staircases and levels had been shattered, leaving a gaping space in which two titanic beings clashed in midair.

Marchosias's form had changed—grown larger, more primal, his wings now spanning the entire width of the chamber, his eyes blazing with inner fire. Baalberith too had abandoned his humanoid appearance, revealing a form composed mainly of writhing darkness punctuated by points of cold light, like stars seen through rips in reality.

Around them, the very fabric of Hell seemed to tear and mend itself repeatedly. Where they clashed, shock waves rippled outward, disintegrating anything they touched. The lesser entities had fled, leaving only these two ancient powers locked in combat.

Clutching the soul-crystal tightly, Mick sought shelter behind a fallen column, trying to remain hidden while catching Marchosias's attention. He didn't dare shout—not with Baalberith so close—but he needed to signal that he had succeeded.

As if sensing his presence, Marchosias briefly turned his blazing gaze toward Mick's position. Seeing the glowing orb in Mick's hands, the demon gave an imperceptible nod, then renewed his attack with greater ferocity.

"ENOUGH GAMES, BAALBERITH!" Marchosias roared, gathering what appeared to be living darkness between his massive hands. *"YOU HAVE OVERREACHED FOR THE LAST TIME!"*

The darkness solidified into a spear of pure shadow that Marchosias hurled directly at his opponent. Baalberith attempted to evade, but the weapon struck true, piercing the centre of his amorphous form. A sound like a thousand screams erupted as Baalberith's essence began to fracture, thin lines of light spreading across his writhing darkness.

"This isn't over, Marchosias," Baalberith hissed, his pleasant voice now distorted beyond recognition. *"We both know you cannot destroy me here, in my own domain."*

"Perhaps not," Marchosias agreed, drawing closer to the wounded entity. *"But I can ensure you remain here, attending to your injuries, while my business in the mortal realm concludes."*

With those words, Marchosias drew back one massive arm and struck Baalberith with such force that the Secretary of Hell went crashing through the walls of the spire, disappearing into the impossible city beyond. The structure groaned ominously, sections beginning to collapse inward.

Marchosias descended rapidly to where Mick crouched, his massive form shrinking somewhat as he approached. *"You have it,"* he said, eyes fixed on the glowing orb.

"Yes," Mick confirmed, holding it up. "Now what? How do we get it back to my sister's baby?"

"The connection," Marchosias said, extending one enormous hand to hover over the crystal. *"I can feel the shadow hounds in the mortal realm. They are with your sister now, guarding her in the hospital where your detective friend took her."*

"You can send the soul through them? Back to our world?"

"I believe so. But it will require—" Marchosias broke off, head turning sharply toward the hole in the spire wall. *"Baalberith's forces approach. We have little time."*

Indeed, the sounds of pursuit were growing louder—shouts, commands, the thunder of what might have been wings or running feet. The entire structure continued to deteriorate around them, chunks of obsidian falling from above.

Marchosias turned back to Mick, his star-filled eyes solemn. *"There is a complication. To transfer the soul back to the mortal realm, I must focus*

my entire essence on the connection to the shadow hounds. I cannot maintain my presence here while doing so."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I must return to you—merge our essences once more—while simultaneously projecting my consciousness through the hounds. It has never been attempted. The strain could destroy us both."

Mick laughed—a short, bitter sound. "We're already in Hell. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Oblivion," Marchosias replied seriously. "Not Hell. Not afterlife. True cessation of existence for us both."

The sounds of pursuit grew louder. They had minutes at most.

"I knew this was a one-way trip," Mick said, holding the soul-crystal up to Marchosias. "What's the alternative? Let Baalberith win? Let my sister's child become his vessel? I'd rather cease to exist."

Marchosias studied him for a long moment, those ancient eyes containing emotions Mick couldn't begin to decipher. *"Very well. But know this, Michael Hargraves: however this ends, your courage honours us both."*

Before Mick could respond, Marchosias placed one enormous hand gently on his shoulder. The sensation was like being touched by a storm—raw power barely contained, ancient beyond human comprehension.

"Now, we begin," Marchosias said. "Hold the soul-crystal to your chest and close your eyes. This will be... unpleasant."

Mick did as instructed, clutching the warm, pulsing orb against his heart. He felt Marchosias's presence envelop him, then begin to compress, condensing from the enormous being of shadow and flame back into a form that could merge with Mick's consciousness.

The pain returned tenfold—not just the ambient agony of living flesh in Hell, but a new, deeper torment. It felt as though he was being

simultaneously frozen and burned, crushed and stretched, torn apart and stitched back together. He wanted to scream but couldn't find the breath, wanted to collapse but remained standing through Marchosias's will alone.

Through the pain, he became aware of something extraordinary—a dual consciousness extending across realms. He could see through Marchosias's perception back into the human world, through the eyes of the shadow hounds. He glimpsed a hospital room, medical equipment, Reeves standing guard, and on a bed, Liz—pale but alive, the terrible sigils on her abdomen now faded to barely visible marks.

Marchosias was attempting something never done before—existing in three places simultaneously: merged with Mick in Hell, extended through the shadow hounds in the mortal world, and creating a bridge between the two to transport the soul.

The soul-crystal in Mick's hands grew almost painfully hot, then began to pulse in rhythm with his heartbeat. He felt it changing, becoming less solid, more essence than object. Power flowed through him, using his living body as a conduit, his blood connection to his sister as a targeting mechanism.

In the mortal world, the shadow hounds pressed close to Liz's bed, their forms growing less substantial as Marchosias channelled more of his essence through them. They began to glow with the same golden light as the soul-crystal, causing Reeves to step back in alarm.

Inside Mick's mind, Marchosias's voice was strained beyond recognition: *"It's... working. The connection... holds. But something... approaches."*

Through the haze of pain and double-vision, Mick became aware of a new sensation—a building pressure, like an approaching storm. The very fabric of Hell seemed to be responding to something, vibrating with anticipation.

"What is it?" Mick managed to gasp.

"Vassago," Marchosias replied grimly. *"He has begun his ritual in the mortal world. The bonds between realms thin. He seeks to bring Baalberith through."*

"But Baalberith is here, wounded—"

"Not his physical form. His essence. The ritual would draw it through, into the prepared vessel—your sister's child."

Horror gave Mick new strength. "We can't let that happen!"

Realisation dawned, an unexpected hope blooming in the darkness of despair. *"The ritual creates a bridge,"* Marchosias said, his mental voice gaining strength. *"A connection between realms that travels both ways."*

"We could use it," Mick understood immediately. "Hijack Vassago's ritual to send the soul back."

"Yes—and perhaps more."

The pressure continued to build around them, reality itself seeming to thin. Through their shared perception, they saw Vassago in the mortal world—standing before a makeshift altar in what appeared to be an abandoned underground station, surrounded by robed acolytes. He was chanting, hands raised toward a swirling distortion in the air before him.

Attempting to create a door for his master.

Marchosias gathered what remained of his strength, drawing power from depths Mick hadn't known existed within their shared consciousness. *"We must move now,"* he commanded. *"The ritual creates instability. Vassago builds a door with no understanding of what might come through."*

The soul-crystal had almost completely transformed from solid object to pure essence, a glowing sphere of light hovering between Mick's hands. Marchosias directed his consciousness through the shadow hounds on Earth, positioning them to intercept the bridge Vassago was creating.

"NOW!" Marchosias roared, both in Hell and through the hounds in the mortal world.

What happened next defied human understanding. The fabric of Hell tore open, not from external force but from within—Marchosias channelling power through Mick's living body to create an opening that aligned perfectly with Vassago's ritual bridge.

The soul-essence shot forward, propelled by Marchosias's will, streaking through the opening like a comet. In the hospital room, the shadow hounds howled in perfect unison, their forms becoming entirely light as they received the essence and directed it toward Liz's abdomen.

The sigils on her skin flared once, brightly, then dissolved completely as the soul returned to its rightful vessel.

But Marchosias wasn't finished. Using the temporary bridge between realms, he gathered Mick's essence along with his own, preparing for one final, desperate manoeuvre.

"Hold on," was all the warning Mick received before they were hurtling through the tear in reality, riding the backlash of Vassago's interrupted ritual.

The transition was more violent than anything Mick had experienced—worse than the descent into Hell, worse than the separation from Marchosias, worse than the constant agony of living flesh in the infernal realm. It felt as though he was being unmade at the molecular level, scattered across dimensions, then forcibly reassembled.

In the underground station, Vassago realised too late what was happening. His ritual, designed to bring Baalberith's essence into the mortal world, was being hijacked. The swirling portal he had created flared with blinding light, then collapsed inward before exploding outward with catastrophic force.

The blast threw Vassago and his acolytes backward, shattering his carefully constructed altar and extinguishing the eldritch flames that had powered his working. In the centre of the devastation, where the portal had been, a single figure materialised—falling to hands and knees on the cold concrete floor.

Mick Hargraves—somehow, impossibly, back in the mortal world.

He gasped, lungs filling with air that tasted impossibly sweet after Hell's sulphurous atmosphere. His body felt simultaneously leaden and weightless, every nerve ending raw and over sensitised.

Across the ruined ritual space, Vassago rose to his feet, his perfect human vessel now showing cracks—literal fractures in his skin through which darkness seeped like smoke. "Impossible," he hissed, voice distorted with rage. "No living human returns from Hell."

Mick raised his head, meeting the demon's gaze without flinching. "I didn't come back alone."

Within his consciousness, Marchosias stirred—changed, weakened by the journey, but present. Their connection had been altered by their ordeal in Hell, deepened in ways neither fully understood yet.

Vassago took a step forward, then froze, head tilting as if listening to something. The darkness seeping from the cracks in his vessel began to swirl more violently, and an expression of pure terror transformed his features.

"No," he whispered. "Master, please—I can explain—"

The plea was cut short as his vessel convulsed violently. Dark fluid poured from his eyes, nose, and mouth, and the cracks in his skin widened until his entire form seemed to be held together by the thinnest membrane of humanity.

"He's coming for you," Mick said, understanding instinctively what was happening. "Baalberith doesn't tolerate failure."

Vassago's vessel gave one final, horrible shudder before collapsing in on itself—not falling to the ground, but imploding, as if pulled back through an invisible portal to the realm they had just escaped.

In the sudden silence that followed, Mick became aware of approaching sirens. Reeves must have called for backup once she realised where Vassago's secondary ritual was taking place.

He struggled to his feet, every muscle protesting. *"We did it,"* he thought to Marchosias, their communication once again internal. *"The soul is back where it belongs. Vassago is gone."*

"For now," Marchosias cautioned, his mental voice weaker than before, but gradually strengthening. *"Baalberith will not forget this interference. And Vassago, if he survives his master's wrath, will seek vengeance."*

"Let them come," Mick thought, a grim smile forming. *"They've seen what we can do together now."*

"Indeed. Though I find myself... changed by this experience. As are you."

Mick couldn't argue with that assessment. Something fundamental had shifted during their time in Hell—their separation and reunion, the desperate gamble to save his sister's child, the journey back through Vassago's ritual bridge. The boundaries between them had blurred further, creating something not quite human, not quite demon, but a synthesis that was still finding its definition.

As the first police officers burst into the abandoned station, weapons drawn, Mick raised his hands in surrender. He would need to explain his presence here—though not the truth of what had happened. That would remain between him, Marchosias, and the very few humans who had glimpsed the reality behind the veil.

"The shadow hounds remain," Marchosias informed him, surprising Mick. *"Changed, like us, but persisting. They guard your sister even now."*

Somewhere across London, in a hospital room, two creatures born of shadow and flame kept vigil over a sleeping woman and her unborn child—a child whose soul had journeyed to Hell and back before taking its first breath.

"Let's go home," Mick murmured as Reeves pushed through the officers, her expression shifting from professional alertness to naked relief at seeing him alive.

The demon's response carried an emotion Mick had never detected from him before—something almost like contentment.

"Yes. Home."

25 Epilogue

Three months later, Mick stood outside the maternity ward, staring through the glass at the row of newborns in their clear bassinets. Third from the left, wrapped in a pale yellow blanket, lay his niece—Eliza Grace Harrison, seven pounds four ounces, born at 3:17 AM after fourteen hours of labour.

Perfect. Healthy. Whole.

"She glows differently than the others," Marchosias observed, his voice gentler than it had been before their journey to Hell. *"Can you see it?"*

Mick could. Not with his physical eyes, but with the altered perception that had become a permanent part of him since their return. A faint golden aura surrounded the sleeping infant, barely perceptible but unmistakably there—the mark of a soul that had travelled beyond mortal boundaries and returned.

"Will she remember?" Mick asked silently. "What happened to her, before she was even born?"

"Not consciously," Marchosias replied. *"But her soul carries the experience. In time, it may manifest in unexpected ways."*

"Good ways or bad?"

"That depends entirely on her. Some who touch the infinite become artists, visionaries, healers. Others..." The demon let the thought trail off.

"We'll be there either way," Mick said with quiet determination. "To guide her if needed."

"We." A hint of amusement coloured Marchosias's mental voice. *"How comfortable you've become with that word."*

It was true. After everything they'd experienced together—the separation in Hell, the desperate gamble to return the soul, the harrowing journey back

through Vassago's collapsing ritual—the boundaries between them had shifted. Not erased, but redefined. They were neither fully merged nor fully separate now, but something in between—two distinct consciousnesses sharing a symbiotic existence.

The doors to the maternity ward swung open, and Reeves emerged, looking uncharacteristically casual in jeans and a simple blouse. She carried two paper cups of what passed for coffee in the hospital cafeteria.

"Thought you could use this," she said, handing him one. "You've been standing here for almost an hour."

"Thanks." Mick accepted the cup, grateful for the warmth if not the quality. "How's Liz doing?"

"Sleeping. Bob's with her." Reeves took a sip of her coffee, grimaced, then nodded toward the nursery. "She's beautiful."

"She is."

They stood in companionable silence, both watching the sleeping newborn. Reeves had changed in the past three months as well. The rigid, by-the-book detective had given way to someone more flexible in her thinking, more accepting of the impossible. She still carried her warrant card, still solved conventional crimes with her usual methodical precision, but now she also maintained a separate set of files in her home office—cases with unexplained elements, incidents that defied rational explanation.

Cases for which she occasionally consulted Mick and, by extension, Marchosias.

"The shadow hounds were here earlier," she said casually, as if discussing the weather. "I saw them in the hallway around dawn. Most people walked right past them without noticing."

"They've grown more subtle in their manifestation," Marchosias commented. *"Adapting to this realm."*

"They're evolving," Mick translated for Reeves. "Learning to blend in better."

The hounds had become a permanent fixture since their return—not always visible, but present nonetheless. Sometimes they appeared as actual shadow-creatures, massive and intimidating. Other times they manifested as little more than a feeling of protection, a darkness that gathered wherever Mick went. They seemed particularly drawn to Liz and her newborn daughter, maintaining a vigilance that neither Mick nor Marchosias had consciously directed.

"Any word on our missing cult members?" Mick asked, changing the subject.

After Vassago's disappearance and the collapse of his ritual, most of his followers had scattered. Some had been arrested, providing sanitised versions of events that mentioned drugs and brainwashing but carefully omitted any supernatural elements. Others had simply vanished—whether into hiding or to some darker fate, neither Mick nor Reeves knew for certain.

"Three more turned up in psychiatric care last week," Reeves replied. "Same symptoms as the others—catatonia alternating with periods of speaking in unknown languages. The official diagnosis is 'collective psychotic episode triggered by hallucinogenic substances.'"

"Their minds were touched by Baalberith through the collapsing portal," Marchosias said. *"They glimpsed something human consciousness was never meant to process."*

"And Vassago himself?" Mick asked, though he already knew the answer.

"No trace." Reeves shook her head. "It's like he never existed. The human identity he was using—Marcus Deveraux—turns out to be a real person who disappeared fifteen years ago in Scotland. We've reopened that investigation, but I doubt we'll find anything useful."

"Vassago is back in Hell," Marchosias said with absolute certainty. "Facing Baalberith's displeasure. If he survives that, he will not be permitted to return to your realm for a considerable time."

The thought should have been comforting, but Mick knew better than to assume any victory against such entities was permanent. Three months of recovery and reflection had taught him that much, at least.

A nurse appeared in the nursery, checking each infant with practised efficiency. When she reached Eliza, she paused, a small frown creasing her forehead. She leaned closer, as if noticing something unusual, then shook her head and continued her rounds.

"Some humans have greater sensitivity," Marchosias observed. "They can sense echoes of the infinite, even if they cannot see them directly."

"Is she in any danger?" Mick asked silently. "Eliza, I mean. From what happened to her soul."

"Not from the journey itself," Marchosias assured him. "But Baalberith does not forget. He selected her for a reason—perhaps something in her particular essence attracted his attention. He may try again, though differently and not for many years."

"Then we'll be ready." The words came out as a quiet promise, audible to Reeves, who nodded in solemn agreement.

"Yes, we will."

The nurse finished her rounds and approached the glass, gesturing at Mick with a questioning expression. He nodded, and she smiled, moving to the bassinet and carefully lifting Eliza.

"She wants to know if you'd like to hold her," Reeves translated unnecessarily.

Mick's heartbeat quickened with sudden anxiety. "I don't know if that's—"

"Go," Marchosias urged, surprising Mick with his enthusiasm. *"I've never experienced an infant from this perspective. I find myself... curious."*

Directed by the nurse's gestures, Mick made his way around to the nursery entrance. After sanitising his hands, he was led to a rocking chair where the nurse carefully placed Eliza in his arms.

"Mind her head," the nurse instructed, helping him position his arms correctly. "There you go. Perfect."

The tiny weight settled against him, impossibly light yet somehow the heaviest responsibility he'd ever held. Eliza's eyes were closed, her miniature features peaceful in sleep. One tiny hand had escaped the blanket, five perfect fingers curled into a fist no bigger than Mick's thumb.

Something turned over in his chest—an emotion so powerful and unexpected it momentarily stole his breath.

"Oh," Marchosias said, his mental voice hushed with something like awe. *"I see now. The attraction of these small beings. So fragile, yet containing such potential."*

"They're miracles," Mick agreed silently, surprised to find his vision blurring with unaccustomed tears. "Every single one of them."

As if sensing his attention, Eliza's eyes fluttered open, unfocused but somehow finding his face nonetheless. For a brief, extraordinary moment, Mick would have sworn the infant saw both him and Marchosias—her gaze tracking something just beyond Mick's physical form, a small smile touching her lips.

"She sees me," Marchosias confirmed, genuine wonder in his voice. *"Her soul recognises the essence that helped return it to her."*

Eliza reached up, tiny fingers grasping at air, then yawned and settled back into sleep, nestling against Mick's chest where his heartbeat echoed the rhythm she'd heard for nine months inside her mother.

"Hello, Eliza," Mick whispered, cradling her carefully. "Welcome to the world. It's stranger and more wonderful than you can imagine."

"And more dangerous," Marchosias added privately.

"We'll protect her," Mick replied without hesitation. "No matter what comes."

"Yes," Marchosias agreed, and in that single word, Mick felt a shift in the ancient entity—a purpose beyond mere survival or power. *"We will."*

Later that evening, Mick sat on a bench in the hospital garden, watching the sunset paint London's skyline in shades of gold and crimson. The day's events had left him emotionally drained but strangely at peace. After spending time with Liz and Bob, meeting his niece, and ensuring hospital security was subtly reinforced by Reeves' most trusted officers, he'd needed a moment of quiet.

"You should eat something," Marchosias suggested, his tone somewhere between concern and command. *"Your body requires sustenance after such emotional exertion."*

"Is that professional medical advice?" Mick asked dryly.

"It is the observation of an entity who has become intimately familiar with your physical needs," Marchosias replied. *"Also, I find myself craving something sweet."*

Mick smiled despite himself. Some things hadn't changed. "Ice cream?"

"I was thinking perhaps that spiced cake from the café near your flat. The one with the sugared ginger on top."

"Gingerbread. You're developing quite the palate."

"I contain multitudes," Marchosias said with mock gravity, though the reference was likely lost on the ancient demon.

A familiar figure approached across the garden—Reeves, jacket slung over one arm in concession to the warm evening.

"Leaving?" Mick asked as she reached his bench.

"Night shift's taking over," she confirmed, settling beside him. "Three officers, all briefed to watch for 'unusual activity' without explaining exactly what that means. Plus your shadow friends seem to have the place well covered."

"They're not actually under my control," Mick felt compelled to clarify. "They sort of... do their own thing now."

"They have developed a level of autonomy beyond what I intended," Marchosias agreed. *"An unexpected side effect of our journey, perhaps. Or simply evolution."*

"Evolution," Mick echoed aloud. "That seems to be the theme lately."

Reeves studied him with the perceptive gaze that had made her such an effective detective. "You're different since you came back. Both of you."

It wasn't a question, but Mick nodded anyway. "Hell changes your perspective. Even if you only visit briefly."

"Do you want to talk about it? What happened there?"

Mick had given her only the barest outline of events—his separation from Marchosias, their recovery of the soul, their desperate escape through Vassago's collapsing ritual. The details of Hell itself, the true horrors he had witnessed, the pain of existing there as a living human—those he had kept to himself.

"Not yet," he said honestly. "Maybe someday, but not yet."

She accepted this with a nod. "Fair enough. But when you're ready, I'll listen."

They sat in companionable silence, watching as the sunset deepened, streetlights beginning to flicker on across the city. London continued its endless rhythm around them—oblivious to how close it had come to having a demon prince walk its streets in human form, unmolested by the usual restrictions.

"What happens now?" Reeves asked finally. "You can't exactly go back to your old life. Not with..." She gestured vaguely at him, encompassing the unseen presence they both knew resided within.

"An excellent question," Marchosias commented. "What does come next, Michael?"

Mick considered the query from both woman and demon. The past few months had been focused entirely on recovery—physical, mental, emotional. He'd spent time with Liz and Bob, preparing for the baby while privately ensuring no remnants of Vassago's influence lingered. He'd helped Reeves document what could be documented of the cult's activities, creating files that would never see official circulation but might help with similar cases in future.

But he hadn't thought beyond that, hadn't considered what his new life—this hybrid existence—might actually look like in the long term.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Continue my PI work, I suppose. Though the cases might be... different from what I'm used to."

"Different," Reeves repeated with a small smile. "That's one way to put it."

"We could offer services for very specific clientele," Marchosias suggested, warming to the idea. "Those with problems of a supernatural nature. Matters requiring our unique perspective."

"A demon detective agency?" Mick couldn't help the laugh that escaped him. "Sounds like a bad cable TV show."

"Makes as much sense as anything else these days," Reeves said, surprisingly accepting of the concept. "Besides, these cases keep coming

whether we acknowledge them or not. Might as well have someone qualified handling them."

"She makes an excellent point," Marchosias agreed. "And it would provide structure for our continued existence together—a purpose beyond mere survival."

Mick had to admit the idea had a certain appeal. His old skills combined with Marchosias's supernatural knowledge could be formidable. And after everything they'd been through—after literally journeying to Hell and back—the prospect of facing lesser evils seemed almost manageable.

"I'll think about it," he promised, not quite ready to commit but feeling the first stirrings of genuine interest. "Though I might need a partner. Someone with official credentials who can run interference with the authorities when needed."

Reeves shook her head, though her expression remained thoughtful rather than dismissive. "I have a career, Mick. Twenty years on the force. A pension to consider."

"Of course. Just a thought." He hadn't seriously expected her to consider it—her life was established, respectable, secure. Everything his wasn't.

She stood, brushing invisible lint from her trousers. "But I could consult. Unofficially. When cases intersect."

"A beginning," Marchosias observed, satisfaction evident in his voice. "Foundations of something new."

"A beginning," Mick agreed aloud, looking up at his former partner. "I'd like that."

Reeves nodded, her decision apparently made. "I'm heading home. Early shift tomorrow. You staying here tonight?"

"For a while longer. I promised Liz I'd be nearby if she needed anything."

"Call me if you do," she said, and he knew she meant it. Then, with a small smile: "Either of you."

After she left, Mick remained on the bench, watching as the last colours of sunset faded from the sky, giving way to London's peculiar night—never truly dark, the city's glow reflecting off low clouds, creating an artificial twilight that lasted until dawn.

Reeves paused, turning back. "Actually, I've got my car. Need a lift home?"

"That would be great," Mick admitted, suddenly aware of the bone-deep weariness settling into his limbs. The emotional toll of the day had left him drained.

"I find myself oddly content," Marchosias said as they walked toward the car park. "It is not a sensation I am familiar with."

"Contentment?" Mick asked silently, surprised. "Not exactly what I'd expect from a fallen angel turned demon."

"Nor I. Perhaps it is another effect of our unusual bond—emotional transference. Or perhaps it is simply the novelty of having a purpose again. In the long ages since my fall, I have existed rather than lived."

The observation was unexpectedly poignant, revealing a depth to Marchosias that Mick was still discovering. Their journey had changed them both, drawing them closer while paradoxically defining their individual identities more clearly.

Reeves unlocked her car, a sensible sedan that had seen better days. As they settled in and she pulled away from the hospital, Marchosias spoke up with unusual enthusiasm.

"We should stop for ice cream."

Mick couldn't help but laugh. "He wants ice cream," he translated for Reeves.

She raised an eyebrow, though her lips twitched with amusement. "There's a place still open on the way. The one near Regent's Park."

"You're enabling him," Mick accused good-naturedly.

"I'm enabling both of you," she corrected. "You look like you could use it."

As they drove through London's evening traffic, Mick reached for the radio, but before his fingers touched the dial, it switched on by itself, flipping through stations before settling on a heavy metal channel. The unmistakable sounds of Five Finger Death Punch filled the car, the song "Wrong Side of Heaven" blasting at a volume that made Reeves jump.

"Sorry!" Mick apologized, reaching to turn it down, then paused as realisation dawned. "That wasn't me."

"Superior music," Marchosias declared smugly. "I explored your collection while you were healing after Hell. This speaks to me."

Reeves glanced between Mick and the radio, understanding immediately. Her surprised laugh joined Mick's as they drove through the city streets, an ex-detective, a current detective, and an ancient demon united by ice cream and heavy metal.

"Your taste is evolving," Mick commented dryly as the powerful chorus filled the car.

"As are we all," Marchosias replied philosophically. "Life is, after all, about balance. Pleasure and pain. Light and darkness. Human and demon."

"Poetic," Mick said. "Don't tell me you're becoming sentimental in your old age."

"Merely observant," Marchosias countered. "And very, very old."

As they pulled into the ice cream shop's car park, Mick became aware of movement in the shadows—the hounds, following at a discreet distance, maintaining their vigil without being asked. They would remain near Liz

and Eliza even as Mick himself departed, an extension of protection that spanned the city.

The night embraced them, shadows deepening where Mick walked. Not threatening, but familiar—a darkness that had become as much a part of him as his own heartbeat. London spread before them, a landscape of hidden wonders and terrors waiting to be discovered.

A new chapter was beginning—for Mick, for Marchosias, for the unique partnership they had forged in the crucible of shared trauma and triumph. Whatever came next, they would face it together, neither fully human nor fully demon, but something entirely new.

Something, perhaps, that the world needed more than it knew.