



Blood Tithe

A Mick Hargraves Novel

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1 The Yorkshire Hunt

The boy's leg shot out with inhuman speed, catching Mick square in the stomach. The air left his lungs in a painful whoosh as he staggered backward, barely keeping his footing on the muddy embankment.

"Bloody hell," Mick wheezed, hunched over and trying to catch his breath. "That's the third time he's got me."

Eight-year-old Timmy Clarke stared at him from across the clearing, his eyes solid black marbles in a face too young for the cruel smile it now wore. The child's small frame seemed to vibrate with unnatural energy as he bounced lightly on his toes, head cocked at an angle that stretched the skin of his neck unnaturally taut. Beneath the pale surface of his arms, veins pulsed with an oily darkness that had nothing to do with blood.

"Perhaps you might consider accepting some assistance?" Marchosias's sardonic voice echoed in Mick's mind. *"Or shall we continue with this... masterful display of detective work?"*

"I've got this," Mick muttered, straightening up. He kept his voice low enough that the gathering crowd of concerned villagers at the edge of the park couldn't hear him talking to himself. That's all he needed—the locals thinking he was as mad as they already suspected.

The air around the boy seemed to shimmer with heat despite the autumn chill, and Mick caught a whiff of something acrid—like burnt metal and rotting vegetables—that made his nostrils flare in involuntary disgust.

"Are you quite certain? Because from where I'm standing—which is, regrettably, exactly where you're standing—we're getting beaten up by an eight-year-old."

"He's possessed by a demon," Mick hissed through clenched teeth. "One that apparently knows kung fu."

“Throzal is hardly a martial artist,” Marchosias replied with the mental equivalent of an eye roll. “He’s simply using the boy’s natural agility combined with his own strength. Children make surprisingly effective vessels when properly motivated. Their consciousness bends without breaking... usually.”

“Yeah, well, enlightening as this lesson is—” Mick began, but stopped as Timmy suddenly bolted toward the village pond.

“Shit!”

Mick lunged after him, narrowly avoiding a pensioner walking her dog. The boy moved with unnatural speed, darting between concerned onlookers with the fluid grace of something that had never been human. His feet barely seemed to touch the ground, and where they did, the grass withered slightly in small, perfect footprints. Birds ceased their chattering as he passed, an unnatural silence following in his wake.

Mick’s phone rang in his pocket. He fumbled for it without slowing down, nearly dropping it as he vaulted over a park bench.

“Hargraves,” he answered breathlessly, keeping his eyes fixed on the small figure weaving through the village green ahead.

“Mick, it’s Reeves.” Detective Inspector Diana Reeves’ clipped London accent was unmistakable. “Where are you? The background sounds like you’re running a marathon.”

“I’m a bit busy right now,” Mick panted, dodging around a mother with a pram who gave him a startled look. “I’ll have to call you back.”

“I have something that needs your attention,” she continued, undeterred. There was an unfamiliar tension in her voice, something beyond her usual professional concern. “The Blackwood case. The circumstances match your... particular expertise.”

“Look, I really can’t—” Mick broke off as he watched Timmy scramble up a tree with inhuman agility, perching on a branch and grinning down at him

with that same terrible smile. For just a moment, Mick saw something else superimposed over the boy's features—something ancient and malevolent, with too many teeth arranged in concentric rings. He blinked, and it was just a boy again. "I've got to go."

He hung up and jammed the phone back into his pocket, approaching the tree cautiously.

"Come on, Timmy," Mick called up, trying to sound calmer than he felt. "This isn't you. Let me help."

The boy's head rotated further than a human neck should allow, the vertebrae visibly shifting beneath the skin with audible pops. "Timmy's having ever so much fun," came a voice that was nothing like a child's—a deep, multi-toned sound that seemed to bypass Mick's ears and vibrate directly against his eardrums. "Aren't you, Timmy?" The last words emerged in a perfect mimicry of what must have been the boy's actual voice, making Mick's skin crawl. The transition between the two voices was like hearing reality itself tear at the seams.

"You do realise there's a simple solution," Marchosias commented idly. *"I could manifest just enough to—"*

"No," Mick said firmly. "No scaring the kid more than he already is. He's still in there."

"Your compassion is touching, if completely impractical."

"There has to be a connection," Mick muttered, circling the tree. "Something linking the demon to the boy. Something personal."

The air felt heavier here, and Mick's ears popped as if he'd descended rapidly in elevation. The temperature dropped noticeably, his breath forming a faint cloud despite the mild day.

"The necklace," Marchosias suddenly said, his mental voice sharpening with interest. *"The pendant around his neck. It's carved bone—human*

bone, if I'm not mistaken. From a child even younger than this one. Not exactly standard playground accessories for British schoolchildren."

Mick squinted up at the boy and saw a crude pendant hanging from a leather cord around his neck. It was yellowed with age but seemed to pulse with a subtle inner light that caught the eye wrong, like trying to focus on something that refused to be seen clearly. Small, intricate markings covered its surface—symbols that seemed to shift and rearrange themselves when looked at directly.

"Where the hell did he get that?"

"Ask him. Or better yet, ask the demon. Throzal has always been vain about his trophies. That piece is at least three centuries old, from a plague victim if I recognise the craftsmanship."

"That's a nice necklace, Timmy," Mick called up, forcing a conversational tone. "Or should I say, Throzal? Bit ostentatious, isn't it? Wearing your kills around a child's neck?"

The demon's smile faltered slightly, and the branch beneath the boy creaked and bent unnaturally, as if suddenly bearing much more weight than that of a small child. "You know my name, human?"

"I know more than that," Mick replied, moving closer to the tree. "I know you're barely a mid-level entity. I know you specialise in animal mutilations and minor hauntings. I know you're not powerful enough to maintain possession of a child without an anchor."

The boy's face contorted with rage, the skin stretching too tight across the bones, eyes bulging slightly from their sockets. "You know NOTHING!"

"I know you're using that bone pendant to maintain your hold," Mick continued, reaching the base of the tree. "I know if I take it from you, you're finished."

With a shriek of fury that made the leaves tremble and fall from surrounding branches, the possessed child launched himself from the branch, directly at Mick's face.

"Duck!" Marchosias warned.

Mick dropped to the ground as the boy sailed over him. He spun around in time to see Timmy land in a crouch, already tensing to spring again. The impact of his small feet left two perfect, smoking indentations in the grass.

"Let the boy go," Mick demanded, slowly rising to his feet. "You're outmatched here."

The demon laughed with the child's mouth, a sound like glass breaking inside a metal drum. "By you? A drunk? A failure who couldn't even save his own—"

"Not by me," Mick interrupted, his voice dropping dangerously low. "By what's inside me."

For the first time, uncertainty flickered across the possessed child's face. Behind him, a squirrel dropped from a nearby tree, falling limp to the ground as if the life had been suddenly extracted from it.

"Let me show him," Marchosias urged. *"Just a glimpse."*

Mick hesitated, then gave a small nod. He felt the familiar cold rush as Marchosias surged forward inside him, not taking control but making his presence known. The air around Mick distorted slightly, light bending wrong around his silhouette. The grass at his feet frosted over in a perfect circle, crackling softly as it froze. Mick knew his eyes had gone black—not just the irises, but the entire surface transformed into pools of absolute darkness that reflected nothing—when the demon inside Timmy took an involuntary step backward.

"You're..." the creature began, its voice losing some of its confidence, the multi-layered tones separating into discordant fragments.

“He’s with me,” Mick said quietly, his breath emerging as dark vapour rather than white. “Now let the boy go.”

“Never,” snarled the demon, backing toward the pond. Wherever Timmy’s feet touched the ground, small insects scurried away in frantic patterns. “The child invited me in. He found my relic. He spoke my name. He is MINE.”

“Half-truths,” Marchosias commented. “The boy found the bone, yes, but he couldn’t possibly have known what it was. Throzal is manipulating the rules. The possession is tenuous at best. I can see where its essence is incompletely merged with the child—like oil refusing to mix with water.”

“Last chance,” Mick warned, advancing slowly. The darkness in his eyes receded as Marchosias pulled back, but the surrounding temperature remained unnaturally cold. “Leave willingly, or we’ll make you leave.”

The demon’s answer was to make Timmy sprint toward the pond’s edge, his movements jerky and wrong, like a marionette with tangled strings. The water of the pond seemed to recoil as he approached, small waves pushing away from the shore.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Mick groaned, breaking into a run.

“Perhaps you could have threatened him AFTER we were in grabbing distance?” Marchosias suggested dryly.

Mick put on a burst of speed, closing the gap. He lunged, fingers just brushing the back of Timmy’s shirt—

—and found himself grasping at air as the boy fainted left, then darted right with inhuman agility, leaving a blurred after-image that hung in the air for a heartbeat too long.

Mick’s momentum carried him forward, directly into the murky waters of the village pond. He crashed through the surface with a spectacular splash, arms windmilling futilely.

Underwater, everything was green and brown and surprisingly deep. His feet failed to find the bottom as he flailed, disoriented. Weeds tangled around his legs, pulling him deeper with an insistence that felt strangely deliberate, wrapping around his ankles like desperate fingers.

“This is certainly one approach to demon hunting,” Marchosias remarked, somehow managing to sound bone-dry even in Mick’s waterlogged mind. *“Though I confess it’s not one I’ve encountered before.”*

Mick kicked hard, breaking the surface with a gasp. He wiped muddy water from his eyes to see Timmy standing at the pond’s edge, doubled over with laughter that was too deep and cruel to belong to a child.

The demonic mirth cut off abruptly as a woman’s voice called out, “Timothy Alexander Clarke! What on earth is going on?”

A harried-looking woman in her thirties hurried across the green, her face a mixture of confusion and anger. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

The demon inside Timmy hesitated, caught between flight and maintaining its human charade. At that moment of indecision, Mick saw its control of the boy flicker—for just an instant, Timmy’s real face showed through, terrified and confused, before the malevolent mask slammed back into place.

“The pendant,” Marchosias reminded him. *“We need the pendant.”*

Mick surged forward through the water, reaching the edge of the pond in three powerful strokes. He lunged upward, but his fingers closed on empty air as Timmy danced backward with unnatural agility, cackling with a voice that seemed to come from somewhere beneath the ground.

“Too slow, drunk man!” the demon taunted in a voice that was a grotesque parody of childish sing-song, the words leaving visible ripples in the air like heat haze.

Before Mick could make another grab, Timmy spun around and ran straight into his mother’s arms, nestling against her like a perfectly

ordinary eight-year-old boy seeking protection. The transition was jarring—one moment a vessel for ancient malevolence, the next a frightened child.

“Timothy Alexander Clarke!” The woman held her son at arm’s length, looking him over with the expert eye of a mother who could spot a scraped knee at fifty paces. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you! What’s got into —” She broke off, noticing the bone pendant hanging around his neck. “What on earth is this filthy thing?”

The demon, in the perfect disguise of an innocent child, gave Mick a triumphant smirk over the mother’s shoulder. But the smirk faltered as the woman’s fingers closed around the pendant. Where her skin touched the bone, tiny red marks appeared, like microscopic burns.

“No—” the demon began, but it was too late.

“Disgusting,” the mother declared, yanking the necklace off with a snap of the leather cord. She held it between thumb and forefinger like a dead mouse. “Where did you get this? It looks like something left over from Sunday lunch.”

The demon’s eyes widened in panic as its anchor was removed. Mick, still waist-deep in pond water and looking like a drowned rat, could only watch as the exorcism he’d been struggling to perform was accomplished by an unwitting mother’s disgust.

“I don’t want to see you with this sort of rubbish again,” she continued, and with a flick of her wrist, tossed the bone pendant into the pond. It landed with a small plop just inches from Mick, sending ripples across the murky surface. Where it entered the water, the liquid briefly darkened to the colour of old blood before returning to its natural murky green.

The effect on Timmy was instantaneous. His small body went rigid, eyes rolling back to show only whites. A sound began deep in his chest—not a child’s voice but something ancient and furious, rising in pitch until it

became a wail that no human throat should produce. The surrounding air shimmered as if with intense heat, and for a terrible moment, a shadow separated from him—a writhing, formless thing that hovered above the boy before dissipating like smoke in a strong wind.

“Timmy!” the mother cried, grabbing her son as he began to collapse. The wail cut off as suddenly as if someone had flipped a switch, and the boy blinked up at her in confusion.

“Mum?” he said in a perfectly normal eight-year-old voice, though thin red lines marked his neck where the pendant’s cord had rested. “Why are we at the pond? Why is that man all wet?”

The mother turned to stare at Mick, still standing in the water with duckweed in his hair and a stunned expression on his face. “Yes, exactly what I’d like to know. Who are you and why were you chasing my son?”

“I’m a... specialist,” Mick improvised lamely. “Your son had a... a seizure. Just happened to be passing through.” He gestured vaguely at the pond. “Tried to help. Obviously.”

“A masterful explanation,” Marchosias commented dryly. *“I’m sure she’s completely reassured now.”*

“A specialist who decided treatment was best administered from the middle of a duck pond,” Marchosias noted. *“Very convincing.”*

The woman didn’t look convinced either, but she was too focused on her son to press the issue. Timmy was blinking up at her now, confusion clear on his face, but the unnatural tension had left his small body.

Mick tried to maintain some dignity as he squished across the village green, painfully aware of the crowd of onlookers who had witnessed his impromptu swim. Duckweed clung to his hair, and something that might have been a small water snail was making its way across his shoulder.

“That went exceptionally well,” Marchosias said, his voice rich with amusement. “I particularly enjoyed the part where you demonstrated your mastery of aquatic exorcism techniques.”

“Shut up,” Mick muttered, picking a lily pad from his collar.

“The look on your face when you surfaced surrounded by those ducks... truly priceless.”

“I said shut up.”

“Ah well, Throzal is banished, the boy is saved, and you’ve added ‘pond drainage’ to your detective skills. I would call this a successful day.”

Mick squeezed water from his jacket sleeves, grimacing at the murky liquid that poured out. His phone chose that moment to vibrate in his pocket.

“Bollocks.” He fished it out, water dripping from the case. Thank goodness for modern technology and waterproof phones.

Squishing his way to his car, Mick stripped off his sodden jacket and tossed it in the boot. He grabbed what looked like an old towel, it had certainly been one once, and used it to dry his hair as best he could.

Ten minutes and one stop at a village shop later, he was seated on a bench with a new shirt, and a pair of jogging bottoms that had never been fashionable, dialling Reeves’ number.

“Hargraves,” she answered on the second ring. “I was about to send out a search party.”

“Sorry about earlier, Diana,” Mick said, still picking pond debris from his hair. “Had a situation that needed immediate attention.”

Mick sighed. “You mentioned the Blackwood case?”

“Yes.” DI Diana Reeves’ voice turned serious, dropping to a tone Mick had rarely heard from her. “Judge Blackwood found dead of apparent suicide, but there’s far more to it than that.”

“Unusual how?”

“His body being covered with markings. Markings that would be best off seen rather than described.” There was a hesitation before she added, “I’ve seen a lot in twenty years with the Met, Mick, but this... this isn’t right. It’s not just the symbols—it’s what they’re doing to his body even after death.”

Mick sat up straighter, pond water forgotten, a cold dread settling in his stomach that had nothing to do with his wet clothes. “Where?”

“He’ll be at the morgue, ready for autopsy tomorrow. You should see it before then.”

“I’ll be there in four hours,” Mick said, already heading toward his car.

“I’m on my way,” Mick told Reeves, ending the call as he slid behind the wheel.

As he pulled away from the village, leaving behind an exorcised child and a pond full of bewildered ducks, Mick grimaced at the memory of the bone pendant now sitting at the bottom of the murky water. He should probably go back to retrieve and properly dispose of it, but the humiliation of another pond dive was more than he could bear right now. Besides, there were more pressing concerns.

Deep in the murky water, half-buried in silt, the bone pendant pulsed once with a dull, sickly light before going dormant. It would wait. It had waited before.

The car sped south, carrying them toward London and whatever darkness awaited.

2 The Judge's Fall

PC Andrew Hollis had been on the force long enough to know what death smelled like, but this was different. The metallic tang of blood hung in the air, underlaid with something else—an acrid, burnt odour that reminded him of overheated electronics. Something unnatural.

“Christ,” muttered Sergeant Dawson behind him, still frozen in the doorway of the judge’s chambers. “Is that—”

“Yeah,” Hollis said, fighting the urge to back away. “That’s Judge Blackwood.”

The body sat behind the mahogany desk, slumped forward but held upright by what appeared to be invisible forces. Blackwood’s wrists lay palm-up on the desk’s polished surface, deep vertical cuts running from wrist to elbow. The blood had pooled on the desktop before overflowing onto the plush carpet in thick, congealing rivulets.

But it wasn’t the blood that had stopped both officers cold.

It was the writing. Every inch of visible skin—Blackwood’s face, hands, and forearms—was covered in intricate symbols carved into the flesh. The same symbols crawled across the walls in what they both desperately hoped was just red paint, spiralling outward from the desk in an organised pattern that hurt the eyes when followed too closely.

“We need to call this in,” Dawson said, his voice cracking as he reached for his radio. “Request immediate assistance at Judge Blackwood’s chambers. Possible... suicide with suspicious circumstances.”

Hollis stepped cautiously into the room, years of training fighting against instinct. “I don’t think we should touch anything.”

His foot nudged something on the carpet—a small leather-bound journal that had fallen from the desk. The cover was unmarked except for the judge’s official monogram embossed in gold on the corner.

“Sarge, look at this.” Hollis pointed without touching. “Personal journal, maybe?”

Dawson nodded, still in the doorway. “Could be important.” He stopped as a shadow shifted across the wall. Both officers froze, watching as the shadow coalesced, then dispersed.

Just a cloud passing over the sun outside, Hollis told himself. Nothing more.

The room felt too cold for a summer morning. Too still. Like the air itself was holding its breath.

“We were just supposed to get a bloody warrant signed,” Dawson muttered, backing out of the doorway. “Just a signature.”

Detective Inspector Diana Reeves arrived precisely seventeen minutes after the call came in. Her dark suit was impeccable despite the oppressive July heat, her hair pulled back in its customary severe ponytail. She’d been in the middle of reviewing case files when the call diverted her here, and the timing couldn’t have been worse—she’d just hung up after trying Mick’s number again.

His abrupt end to their earlier conversation in Yorkshire had left her uneasy. Whatever he’d been handling up north had clearly been one of those cases—the kind that kept finding her with alarming frequency these days.

She took in the scene with a single sweeping glance before turning to the two officers.

“Either of you touch anything?” she asked, pulling on latex gloves with practised efficiency.

“No, ma’am,” Hollis replied. “Just opened the door and found him like that.”

“You did the right thing.” She gestured for the forensic team to enter. “I’ll need your statements, but first, tell me exactly what you saw when you entered. Not what you think you saw—what you actually saw.”

The officers exchanged glances.

“Something’s wrong with this one, isn’t it?” Dawson asked quietly.

Reeves’s expression remained impassive. “Just tell me what you saw.”

Hollis cleared his throat. “We came for a warrant signature on the Fulton case. Door was unlocked. We found him... like that. Blood everywhere, all those carvings on his skin.” He hesitated. “And there was a smell. Not just blood. Something... burnt.”

“The symbols,” Dawson added. “They’re not like any language I’ve seen. And they’re everywhere—on the walls, the ceiling, his skin. Like he was writing some kind of message.”

Reeves nodded, her face betraying nothing. “Wait outside. If anyone asks, this is a suspicious death under investigation. Nothing more specific than that. I’ll be out for your full statements shortly.”

As the officers left, Reeves turned her attention to the body. Judge Anthony Blackwood, sixty-two, a fixture of the Old Bailey for over twenty years. Known for his harsh sentencing and zero-tolerance approach to violent crime.

The forensic team moved around her, documenting the scene in clinical detail. Reeves stepped closer to the desk, studying the symbols carved into Blackwood’s skin.

“Another one,” she muttered under her breath. Just like all the other impossible cases that seemed to be finding their way to her desk lately, as if the universe had decided she was the Met’s unofficial paranormal liaison. Three months ago, she would have called them bizarre coincidences. Now she knew better.

Each mark was impossibly precise, cut to identical depths with surgical accuracy. No hesitation marks, no variation in pressure. Impossibly consistent across curved surfaces of flesh.

She leaned closer, examining the judge’s eyes. The pupils were dilated to pinpricks despite the dim lighting, and the whites were threaded with burst blood vessels, as if he’d been screaming for hours.

On the desk lay a letter opener, its edge coated in dried blood. The apparent suicide weapon, yet there were no prints on the handle—not even the judge’s own, she’d bet anything on it.

She’d seen enough.

Pulling out her phone, Reeves hesitated for a fraction of a second before dialling. Procedure dictated notifying her superintendent. Instead, her finger hovered over a different contact.

Mick Hargraves.

Three days ago, she would have followed protocol without hesitation. But that was before she’d seen a child’s eyes turn completely black, before she’d watched shadows become solid and tear a man apart from the inside.

Before she’d accepted that Mick Hargraves shared his body with something that wasn’t human.

She made the call, hoping he’d finished whatever he’d been handling in Yorkshire when she’d called earlier. His abrupt “I’ve got to go” had been typical Mick, but the splashing sounds and child’s unnatural laughter in the background had stuck with her all morning.

“Mick,” she said when he answered, voice low enough that the forensic team couldn’t hear. “I need you at the Old Bailey. Judge Anthony Blackwood’s chambers. It’s... something in your area of expertise.”

There was a pause on the line. “Marchosias says the name is familiar,” Mick replied, his voice rough with either sleep or drink. A wet squelching sound accompanied his words, as if he was still wringing out clothing. “What am I walking into?”

“Ritual suicide, or something made to look like it. Symbols carved everywhere—skin, walls, ceiling. I’ve never seen anything like them.” She paused. “Did you resolve whatever situation had you swimming earlier?”

“Handled. Somewhat less gracefully than planned.” There was a hint of reluctant amusement in his voice that told her whatever “Mick’s situation” had been, it had ended messily but successfully. “I was about to head back to London anyway.”

“Actual symbols or just random markings?” The question had a sharpness to it that told her Mick was suddenly very sober, very alert.

“Deliberate. Organised in patterns. Seems to radiate outward from the body.”

Another pause. When Mick spoke again, his voice had a layered quality to it, as if someone else was speaking in perfect unison with him: *“Don’t let anyone wash the blood away. Don’t let them move the body until I arrive.”*

She knew that voice—Marchosias speaking directly through Mick. It still sent a chill down her spine.

“I’ll meet you in the morgue,” she replied, ending the call before anyone could notice.

Reeves pocketed her phone and turned back to the scene. The forensic photographer was capturing the symbols on the walls, his face screwed up in concentration.

“These patterns,” he said, “they keep shifting when I look away. Like my eyes can’t quite focus on them.”

“Just document everything exactly as you find it,” Reeves instructed, her voice steadier than she felt. “And nobody touches that body until I give the order. Is that clear?”

As they nodded, Diana took one last look at Judge Blackwood. For a moment, she thought she saw something move in the reflection of his glassy eyes—a figure standing behind her that wasn’t there when she turned around.

Just a trick of the light, she told herself.

But she didn’t believe it any more.

The Metropolitan Police morgue was cold and sterile, the fluorescent lights reflecting harshly off metal surfaces. Judge Blackwood lay on the examination table, body bag unzipped but the autopsy not yet begun. The medical examiner, Dr. Nadia Patel, stood with her arms crossed, clearly annoyed at the delay.

“Inspector, I have three more bodies waiting. Whatever your reasons for this hold, they’d better be good.”

Reeves checked her watch. “My consultant should be here any minute. He has expertise in this specific type of... ritual death.”

Patel raised an eyebrow. “Since when does the Met employ occult specialists?”

“He’s not official. Just an outside perspective.”

“Well, your ‘outside perspective’ has fifteen minutes before I start cutting regardless.”

The morgue doors swung open, and Mick Hargraves trudged in. He looked worse than the last time Reeves had seen him—the circles under his

bloodshot eyes darker, his stubble verging on an unkempt beard. He wore clothes that weren't his usual—a plain t-shirt that was slightly too tight and track bottoms that had never been fashionable. His hair was still damp, and his gait favoured his damaged right leg more than usual, as if it had stiffened during the drive from Yorkshire.

Yet there was something different about him, a focus that cut through his dishevelled appearance. His eyes, when they met hers, were sharper than they had any right to be.

“Reeves,” he acknowledged with a nod before turning to the medical examiner. “Dr. Patel. Been a while.”

“Hargraves,” Patel replied flatly, eyeing his unusual attire with barely concealed curiosity. “Heard you were private now.”

“Something like that.” He approached the body, pulling on gloves. “Had to make an unexpected stop at a village shop for these clothes. Previous ones had an unfortunate encounter with a Yorkshire duck pond.” The comment was directed at Reeves, a rare acknowledgment of their earlier interrupted call. “Everyone out except Reeves.”

Patel bristled. “This is my morgue—”

“Fifteen minutes,” Reeves cut in. “Please, Nadia.”

With visible reluctance, Patel and her assistant left the room. As soon as the door closed, Mick's posture changed, becoming more precise, more controlled. When he spoke, his voice carried the subtle harmonic undertone that signalled Marchosias was close to the surface.

“The symbols are Assyrian in origin,” he said, examining the markings on Blackwood's forearms. *“But modified, combined with something older. A binding ritual.”*

“Binding what to what?” Reeves asked, stepping closer.

“Unclear. But this isn’t suicide.” Mick-Marchosias leaned closer to the corpse. “A human couldn’t maintain the precision required for these markings, especially on themselves. The pain alone would make it impossible.”

“So someone else did this to him?”

“Not exactly.” He pointed to the judge’s eyes. “Look at the capillaries. Classic sign of possession. Something was inside him, using his body. Something that left once its work was done.”

Mick-Marchosias circled the table, examining the body from different angles. *“The symbols are a message. Or rather, a signature.”*

“Can you read it?”

“Parts. This group here—” he pointed to a cluster of markings on the judge’s left wrist, “—roughly translates to ‘justice returned’ or ‘balanced scales.’”

Mick suddenly flinched, his face contorting briefly before settling back into its focused expression. Reeves recognised the sign—an internal struggle for control.

“You alright?” she asked.

“Fine,” Mick answered, his voice his own again. “Marchosias just gets... excited when he recognises something ancient.” He ran a hand through his dishevelled hair. “What can you tell me about Blackwood?”

“Longtime judge at the Old Bailey. Known for harsh sentencing in violent crime cases. No family, married to his work. Well-respected, if not particularly well-liked.”

“Any unusual cases recently? Anything with occult connections?”

“Not that I’m aware of, but I haven’t had time to dig deep yet.” Reeves hesitated. “The officers who found him mentioned a journal at the scene. Could be worth looking at.”

Mick nodded. “We need to see that journal.”

“Evidence lockup. I can get us in.”

Mick nodded, then turned back to the body. He carefully lifted one of Blackwood’s hands, examining the fingernails.

“Look at this,” he said, his voice dropping. “There’s residue under the nails. Black, like obsidian dust.”

Something in his tone made Reeves step closer. “Is that significant?”

“Maybe.” His expression had grown guarded. “We should check his home as soon as possible. If he had any occult objects, we need to find them before anyone else does.”

The morgue doors swung open as Dr. Patel returned, looking pointedly at her watch.

“Time’s up, consultants. I have work to do.”

Mick straightened. “One more thing.” He pulled out his phone and took several close-up photographs of the symbols on Blackwood’s skin. “We’ll need copies of your findings as soon as possible.”

Patel looked to Reeves, who nodded. “Official investigation. Priority status.”

“Fine. Now out, both of you.”

As they left the morgue, Reeves studied Mick’s face. Something had changed when he’d seen the residue under Blackwood’s nails—a flash of recognition or concern he wasn’t sharing.

“What aren’t you telling me?” she asked as they walked through the corridor.

Mick glanced around to ensure they were alone before answering. “Obsidian has significance. It’s used in certain binding rituals—bindings that can affect entities like Marchosias.”

“You think whatever did this was trying to bind a demon?”

“Or already has.” Mick’s expression darkened. “We need to see Blackwood’s place. Today.”

As they neared the exit, Reeves caught Mick looking at his own reflection in a glass cabinet—not with the usual self-loathing she’d grown accustomed to, but with something closer to concern.

“Seeing something I should know about?” she asked quietly.

Mick turned away from the glass. “Just making sure I’m the only one looking back.”

The statement hung between them, heavy with implications neither was ready to voice. Instead, Reeves pulled out her keys.

“My car’s outside. Blackwood’s house is in Highgate.”

The corridor’s fluorescent lights flickered briefly as they left, casting momentary double shadows behind them that vanished when the lights stabilised.

Behind them, unnoticed, a small puddle of condensation on the floor beside the morgue door briefly reflected a face that belonged to neither of them.

3 The Binding Stone

Judge Blackwood's Highgate home loomed against the afternoon sky, a Victorian town-house with too many shadows for such a bright day. Perfectly maintained hedges lined a short gravel path, the stones crunching beneath their feet as Mick and Reeves approached the front door. Yellow police tape fluttered in the gentle breeze—a flimsy barrier against the wrongness that seemed to pulse from within the structure itself.

"No family to notify?" Mick asked, watching as Reeves unlocked the door with a key from evidence.

"None that we've found. Never married, no children. His clerk said he lived for his work." Reeves pushed the door open, revealing a pristine entryway of polished wood and antique furnishings. "Typical judge's salary doesn't usually stretch to a place like this in Highgate."

"Family money," Mick said, stepping across the threshold. The air inside felt dense, as if reluctant to enter his lungs. "Third-generation legal family according to Marchosias. Grandfather was on the bench too."

The house had the stillness of a place that knew it had been abandoned. Not just empty—abandoned. As if the building itself understood its owner would never return.

"Something's wrong here," Marchosias commented, his voice rippling through Mick's consciousness like cold water. *"The ambient energy is... disturbed."*

"Meaning what, exactly?" Mick muttered, following Reeves into a formal sitting room where leather-bound law books lined the walls.

"Meaning something has been altered. Recently. The metaphysical equivalent of furniture being rearranged."

Reeves glanced back at him. "Anything I should know about?"

“Marchosias says the energy feels off. Something’s been changed.”

“Well, that’s helpfully vague.” She gestured toward a hallway. “Study’s this way. Forensics has already been through, but they were looking for conventional evidence.”

The study was smaller than Mick had expected—intimate rather than imposing. A mahogany desk dominated the space, its surface meticulously organised with files arranged in perfect alignment. A leather chair sat behind it, expensive enough to make Mick’s back twinge in sympathy for his own cheap office furniture.

“No computer?” Mick asked, scanning the room.

“Laptop was taken to digital forensics. His clerk said he was old-school, preferred physical files for most things.” Reeves pointed to a filing cabinet in the corner. “That’s where we found the journal mentioned in the initial report. It was locked in the bottom drawer.”

Mick moved toward the cabinet, but stopped as his gaze caught on something sitting on the desk—a paperweight made of polished black stone, roughly the size of a tennis ball but perfectly spherical. Unlike everything else in the immaculate study, it was slightly off-centre on the desk blotter, as if hastily placed.

“*Don’t*—” Marchosias began, but too late.

Mick’s fingers had already closed around the stone.

Cold shot through his arm like liquid nitrogen injected directly into his veins. It wasn’t the temperature of the stone—though that was unnaturally cold—but something deeper, something fundamental. The cold raced up his arm, spreading across his chest and into his throat, choking off his startled cry.

And then, silence.

Complete, absolute silence in his mind.

The constant background presence of Marchosias—the whispers, the subtle pressure of another consciousness against his own—vanished like a radio snapped off mid-broadcast.

Mick staggered backward, the stone dropping from nerveless fingers to land on the carpet with a muffled thud. His back hit the bookshelf, sending several leather-bound volumes tumbling to the floor. He clutched at his chest, mouth working but no sound emerging as he struggled to comprehend the sudden emptiness inside him.

“Mick?” Reeves was at his side in an instant, her hand on his arm. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

He couldn’t answer. His lungs worked overtime, dragging in ragged breaths that did nothing to fill the void where Marchosias should be. His knees buckled, and he slid down the bookshelf to the floor, eyes wide and unfocused.

“Mick!” Reeves knelt beside him, her face swimming in his vision. “Talk to me!”

“He’s gone,” Mick finally managed, the words barely audible. “Marchosias is gone.”

The silence in his mind was deafening—an absence so profound it had physical weight, pressing against his skull from the inside. For the first time in months, Mick was completely alone in his own head, and the solitude was terrifying.

“What do you mean, gone?” Reeves demanded, her voice sharp with concern.

Mick pointed a shaking finger at the obsidian sphere on the carpet. “The stone. As soon as I touched it... silence.”

Reeves looked from Mick to the stone and back again, understanding dawning in her eyes. She reached for her evidence bag.

“Don’t touch it directly,” Mick warned, his voice steadying slightly as the initial shock began to ebb. “Use gloves. Thick ones.”

She nodded, pulling on a pair of nitrile gloves before retrieving a thicker set from her coat pocket—the kind used for handling potentially caustic materials. With careful movements, she picked up the stone and placed it in an evidence bag, sealing it shut.

“What happened?” she asked, setting the bag on the desk, well away from both of them.

Mick shook his head, not in negation but in confusion. “I don’t know. I’ve never...” He swallowed hard.

He tried to stand, using the bookshelf for support. His leg throbbed with a fresh intensity, as if Marchosias had been dulling the chronic pain without him realising it. The world felt duller too—colours less vibrant, shadows less defined. He hadn’t realised how much his perception had changed until it reverted.

“It’s a binding stone,” he said, the realisation clicking into place as he remembered their theories from the morgue. “Obsidian, but not natural. It’s been... prepared somehow.”

“Like the symbol on Blackwood’s arms,” Reeves said. “A binding ritual.”

Mick nodded slowly, still adjusting to the absence in his mind. He focused on his breathing, trying to calm the rising panic. “Blackwood must have been using it, or was going to use it. The residue under his nails...”

“And now whatever happened to him has happened to Marchosias?” Reeves asked, alarm evident in her voice despite her attempt at professional detachment.

“No, not exactly. This is different.” Mick pressed his palms against his temples, trying to organise his thoughts. “Marchosias isn’t gone completely. I’d know if he was. It’s more like... he’s been muted. Silenced.”

It was the best he could explain it—like a television with the volume turned all the way down, still playing but inaudible. He could sense the vague outline of Marchosias’s presence, but couldn’t hear or feel him.

“We need to figure out what this thing is, and how to undo whatever it’s done,” Mick said, forcing himself to focus on the investigation rather than the unsettling emptiness inside him. “Blackwood was involved in something. Those symbols, this stone—they’re all connected.”

Reeves hesitated, studying him with a concern that made him uncomfortable. “Are you... okay to continue? You look like hell, Mick. More than usual, I mean.”

“I’m fine,” he lied, straightening up with effort. “Let’s check those files. See what else Blackwood was working on.”

The filing cabinet yielded numerous files, neatly labelled and organised with the precision of a legal mind. Mick’s eyes caught on a small leather-bound journal tucked between two larger folders—likely the one mentioned in the initial police report.

He leafed through it, his detective instincts fighting to overcome the disorientation of Marchosias’s absence. The journal documented Blackwood’s thoughts over the past several months, becoming increasingly disturbed as the entries progressed.

“He was scared of something,” Mick said, showing Reeves an entry from two weeks prior. The typically neat judicial handwriting had deteriorated, words slanting across the page with increasing urgency.

“It’s happening again,” Reeves read aloud. “The reflections are wrong. I see things moving behind me when I’m alone. The markings appeared on my arm this morning—gone by lunch, but I know what I saw.”

“Markings like the ones carved into his body at death,” Mick observed.

Reeves turned to the final entries. The handwriting had deteriorated completely, some words pressed so hard into the paper they’d torn through.

The last coherent entry, dated the day before his death, contained only four words:

“‘I am the last.’”

“The last of what?” Reeves asked, looking up from the journal.

“That’s what we need to find out.” Mick moved back to the desk, careful to stay clear of where the obsidian sphere had been. He rifled through the papers there, finding nothing but standard legal briefs and court schedules.

As he spoke, a chill ran through the room—not the gradual cooling of air conditioning, but a sudden drop in temperature that left their breath misting in front of their faces. The lights flickered once, then steadied.

Instinctively, Mick reached for Marchosias—for the familiar surge of power that accompanied moments of supernatural danger—only to encounter that terrible silence again. He was on his own.

“Did you feel that?” he asked, voice hushed.

Reeves nodded, her hand moving subtly toward the taser at her hip. “Is it... him? Marchosias trying to break through?”

“No.” Mick’s eyes darted around the room, seeking any sign of movement or distortion. “This is something else.”

The chill intensified, concentrating near the large mirror that hung on the wall opposite the desk. The reflective surface seemed to ripple for a moment, like water disturbed by a gentle touch.

Without Marchosias to enhance his vision, Mick squinted at the mirror, trying to discern if what he was seeing was real or imagination. For just a moment, he thought he saw a face superimposed over his own reflection—
younger, male, with hollowed eyes and skin that seemed too tight across its bones.

Then it was gone, and the temperature began to normalise.

“Did you see that?” Mick asked, still staring at the mirror.

“See what?”

“A face in the mirror. Not mine. Young man, maybe early twenties.”

Reeves looked from the mirror to Mick, concern evident in her expression.

“I didn’t see anything. But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t there.”

She’d learned quickly, Mick thought—no longer immediately dismissing the impossible. That was progress, at least.

“We should take that journal and get out of here,” he said, moving carefully toward the door. “I need to figure out how to reverse whatever that stone did.”

“And find out who these other people are,” Reeves added, bagging the journal as evidence. “If Blackwood wasn’t the first victim, he might not be the last.”

As they continued searching the study, Mick was drawn to a built-in bookshelf covering one wall. Unlike the meticulously arranged legal volumes in the sitting room, these shelves contained a more eclectic collection—worn paperbacks on true crime, several volumes on historical judicial systems, and tucked away on a bottom shelf, a small section of books on the occult and supernatural.

“Bit of light reading for a High Court judge,” Mick commented, pulling out a slim volume titled “Binding Rituals of the Ancient World.” The dust jacket was faded, but the pages showed signs of recent handling—corners turned down, margin notes in Blackwood’s precise handwriting.

“He was researching something,” Reeves said, peering over his shoulder. “Something he didn’t want others to know about.”

Before Mick could respond, a chill ran through the room—not the gradual cooling of air conditioning, but a sudden drop in temperature that left their

breath misting in front of their faces. The lights flickered once, then steadied.

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She’d learned quickly, Mick thought—no longer immediately dismissing the impossible. That was progress, at least.

“We should take the journal and that book,” he said, moving carefully toward the door. “I need to figure out how to reverse whatever that stone did.”

“I’ll have forensics do a complete sweep,” Reeves added, bagging the journal as evidence. “Look for anything connected to the binding stone.”

As they left the study, Mick paused in the doorway, looking back. The mirror hung innocently on the wall, reflecting only the empty room. But in his peripheral vision, just at the edge of perception, he could have sworn he saw movement—a figure standing where no one stood, watching as they left.

Without Marchosias, he felt exposed, vulnerable in a way he hadn’t since their unexpected partnership began. The demon may have been an unwelcome intruder initially, but his absence now left a void that resonated with something dangerously close to loss.

They made their way back to Reeves’s car in silence. As she placed the evidence bag containing the obsidian sphere in the trunk, Mick found himself staring at it with a complexity of emotions he wasn’t prepared to examine—fear, certainly, but also a desperate hope that its effects weren’t permanent.

“We need someone who understands these things,” Reeves said as they got into the car. “Someone who can tell us what that stone is and how it works.”

“I might know someone,” Mick said reluctantly. “A book dealer in Soho. Specialises in the kind of texts that don’t make it into university libraries. Not exactly official channels.”

“Neither are you,” Reeves pointed out as she started the engine. “But here we are.”

As they pulled away from Blackwood's house, Mick caught a glimpse of movement at an upstairs window—a shadow passing behind the curtains in a room they hadn't entered.

He said nothing. Without Marchosias to confirm what he was seeing, he couldn't trust his own perceptions. The isolation of being alone in his own head was disorienting in ways he hadn't anticipated.

As they drove toward Soho, Mick found himself reaching instinctively for the flask he kept in his jacket—only to remember he was still wearing the clothes from the village shop, his flask left behind with his sodden clothing.

"Here," Reeves said, noticing the gesture. She reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a small bottle of whisky—the cheap, harsh kind that burned all the way down. "Just don't tell Professional Standards."

Mick accepted it with a nod of thanks, taking a long pull that did little to fill the emptiness inside him. The silence in his mind remained absolute, a void where Marchosias's sardonic commentary should have been.

For all his complaints about sharing his consciousness with a demon, Mick had never realised how accustomed he'd grown to the arrangement until it was suddenly, terrifyingly absent. The world felt flatter, dangers more immediate without Marchosias's enhanced senses and ancient knowledge to guide him.

As the car rounded a corner, sunlight flashed across the windscreen, momentarily transforming it into a mirror. In that brief instant of reflection, Mick could have sworn he saw a face behind his own—young, male, with eyes that held decades of patient hatred.

When he blinked, it was gone.

But the cold void remained, settling deep in his bones where Marchosias's presence had once resided.

4 Black Reflections

“Are you sure you’re fit to continue?” Reeves asked, eyeing Mick as they pulled into the Old Bailey parking structure. His complexion had taken on a waxy pallor during the drive, and his hands hadn’t stopped trembling since they’d left Blackwood’s home.

“I’m fine,” Mick lied for the second time that hour, the words sounding hollow even to his own ears.

The emptiness inside his skull throbbed like a phantom limb—an absence with physical presence. He kept reaching mentally for Marchosias, a reflex as natural as breathing after months of shared consciousness, only to encounter that terrible void each time.

Reeves didn’t believe him either, but had the decency not to press the issue. “Security office is on the ground floor,” she said instead. “The duty manager’s expecting us.”

The security hub of the Old Bailey was a windowless room filled with the blue glow of monitor screens. A heavysset man in his fifties nodded at Reeves as they entered.

“Inspector. Got your request.” He gestured to a bank of monitors set up at an empty workstation. “Pulled two weeks of footage from Blackwood’s chambers and the corridors. Everything you asked for.”

Mick settled into a chair that creaked under his weight, his body suddenly feeling impossibly heavy. His brain kept stalling on simple tasks—the after-effect of having part of his consciousness abruptly silenced.

“I’ll need a few hours,” he told Reeves.

“Take your time. I’ll check the archives for more background on these unusual deaths.” She handed him a paper cup of vending machine coffee that smelled like industrial solvent. “Call if you find anything.”

The security manager showed Mick how to navigate the system before leaving him alone with the footage. Normally, he'd have Marchosias's inhuman patience and recall to help with the tedium of reviewing hours of security video. Now there was just him, forcing his scattered thoughts to focus as the screens flickered with the mundane routines of court staff.

Day by day, Mick worked backward from Blackwood's death, watching for anomalies. The judge's routines were almost mechanically consistent—arriving at 7:15 each morning, leaving after 6:00 each evening. Seeing the man alive after examining his corpse created an unsettling disjunction, like watching a ghost in reverse.

Four days before his death, the first irregularity appeared.

Blackwood was working late, the timestamp showing 8:47 PM. The judge paused at his desk, head tilting as if he'd heard something. He turned slowly toward the large mirror mounted on his chamber wall—the same mirror Mick had noticed earlier. Blackwood approached it, leaning forward to examine his reflection.

And then he stumbled backward so violently he knocked over his chair.

Mick leaned closer to the screen, pulse quickening. The footage showed Blackwood frantically straightening his tie and smoothing his hair, looking around the empty room as if expecting to find someone there. He glanced back at the mirror, visibly relieved to see only his own reflection, then gathered his belongings and left in obvious haste.

"What did you see?" Mick murmured, rewinding the footage to watch the moment again. The camera angle didn't show the mirror's reflection—only Blackwood's reaction to it.

The next anomaly came two days later. Blackwood entered his chambers in the morning, moving with the careful deliberation of someone expecting danger. He avoided looking directly at the mirror, keeping his back to it as he worked. By mid-afternoon, he appeared to have relaxed.

Until his reflection moved when he didn't.

The footage showed Blackwood frozen at his desk, pen suspended above a document, staring at something off-camera. His face drained of colour. His lips moved, forming words the security footage couldn't capture. Then he was on his feet, backing toward the door, eyes never leaving whatever he saw in the mirror.

Blackwood didn't return to his chambers that day.

"This is where Marchosias would say something sardonic about human perception," Mick muttered to himself, the silence that followed his words more disturbing than any response might have been.

The final day's footage showed a changed man. Blackwood entered his chambers with the hollow-eyed resignation of someone who had exhausted all options. He moved like an automaton, mechanically completing paperwork for an hour before rising and standing before the mirror.

The judge's posture straightened. His head tilted at an angle that looked uncomfortable, almost unnatural. He raised one hand to the glass, fingers splayed against the surface.

And then the image distorted.

At first, Mick thought it was a glitch in the recording—digital artefacts or corruption in the file. But the anomaly was isolated to the area immediately surrounding Blackwood. The rest of the frame remained clear and stable while the judge's form seemed to... shimmer. As if the pixels that composed him were being rearranged.

When the distortion cleared, Blackwood turned from the mirror with movements that were subtly wrong—too fluid, too precise. He walked to his desk, opened a drawer, and removed what appeared to be the obsidian sphere Mick had handled earlier. He placed it on the blotter, then picked up his letter opener.

The camera angle shifted as Blackwood moved around his desk, partially obscuring what happened next. When he reappeared in frame, he was carving something into his forearm, using the letter opener with methodical precision. Blood welled from the cuts, but the horrifying aspect wasn't the mutilation itself—it was Blackwood's face.

His expression was a mask of pure terror. His mouth stretched open in a silent scream, tears streaming down his cheeks as his eyes bulged with a primal fear that transcended physical pain. His head kept trying to turn away, to escape witnessing what his own hands were doing to his flesh, but it would jerk back as if controlled by invisible strings, forcing him to watch.

The disconnect was stomach-churning—his body moving with inhuman precision, back straight, hands steady as they carved intricate symbols, while his face contorted in absolute agony and terror. It was as if Blackwood was a passenger in his own body, fully conscious and aware as something else used his hands to mutilate himself.

Occasionally his whole body would tremble, a momentary rebellion against whatever force controlled him, but then the trembling would cease, and the carving would continue with mechanical precision. All the while, his eyes remained locked in a silent plea, screaming without sound as blood flowed freely from his self-inflicted wounds.

The final moments showed Blackwood returning to his chair. He placed both arms on the desk, palms up, and drew the letter opener deeply from his wrist up his forearm in a single smooth motion. As blood pooled on the desktop, his head raised slightly, looking directly at the camera. His lips moved in what might have been a smile.

Then his body went rigid, back arching unnaturally as his mouth opened in a silent scream. For just an instant, the video distorted again—and at that moment, Mick could have sworn he saw two figures occupying the same

space: Blackwood in his chair, and standing behind him, the translucent outline of a young man with hollow eyes.

When the distortion cleared, only Blackwood remained, slumped forward in the position he'd been found.

Mick pushed back from the monitors, his heart hammering against his ribs. The clinical part of his brain catalogued what he'd seen: evidence of paranormal activity, possible possession, ritual suicide. The rest of him was fighting waves of nausea and the bone-deep cold that hadn't left him since touching the binding stone.

His hand moved automatically to his pocket for his flask before remembering again it wasn't there. The cheap whisky Reeves had given him was long gone. He needed something stronger—needed the burn of alcohol to counteract the pervasive chill, to dull the edges of the horror he'd just witnessed.

But more than that, he needed to understand what he'd seen. And for the first time in months, he had to do it without Marchosias's ancient knowledge to guide him.

"Detective Hargraves?"

Mick startled at the voice, turning to find a young woman in court attire standing in the doorway.

"Sorry to disturb you. Inspector Reeves asked me to bring you these." She held out a collection of thin file folders. "Additional case records she thought might be relevant."

"Thank you," Mick said automatically, taking the files. His hand was still trembling.

After she left, Mick opened the folder to find a collection of slim case files—over a dozen in total. Each contained minimal documentation on cases Blackwood had presided over throughout his career, all marked as closed.

“Looking for patterns,” Mick muttered to himself, spreading the files across the desk.

Without Marchosias’s perfect recall, he had to rely on his own fragmented memory and instincts. The first few files contained straightforward cases—drug offences, fraud, aggravated assault—all with Blackwood’s characteristic harsh sentencing.

The seventh file was thinner than the others, containing only a single incident report, a court transcript cover page, and a small newspaper clipping. Mick almost passed over it before noticing a name in the corner of the transcript: Harrington.

Nothing immediately remarkable stood out about the case—some kind of robbery from the 1980s—and Mick set it aside to continue through the remaining files. Something about that name tugged at his memory, but the connection remained frustratingly out of reach.

He continued methodically through the stack, his detective training taking over as he searched for commonalities between the cases. Most were unremarkable, typical of a long judicial career, but his eye kept returning to that seventh file, the name Harrington hovering at the edge of his consciousness like a half-remembered dream.

He pulled out his phone and dialled Reeves.

“I’ve been through the security footage,” he said when she answered. “Blackwood was seeing things in mirrors. Something was haunting him before it possessed him.”

“Like the face you thought you saw in his study?”

“Exactly like that.” Mick glanced down at the files spread across the desk. “Have you found any connections between these cases he presided over?”

“Still digging,” Reeves replied. “But there’s something odd about the dates. I’m checking death records for several people connected to his earlier cases.”

Mick heard papers shuffling over the line.

“Something’s not right,” Reeves continued. “I’ve found two other deaths connected to Blackwood that occurred on significant anniversaries of their original cases. Still confirming details.”

Something cold that had nothing to do with Marchosias’s absence slithered down Mick’s spine.

“It could be an anniversary pattern,” he said. “Or something using those dates.”

“I’ve requested the complete case files from archives,” Reeves said. “And I’m working on a timeline of all these deaths. If there’s a pattern here—”

“There is,” Mick interrupted. “And I think I just watched it claim Blackwood. Whatever it is, it’s methodical.”

“Let me sort through this data first,” Reeves countered. “You can’t protect potential targets if we don’t know who they are.”

“Agreed. Keep me posted.” Mick hesitated. “And Diana... be careful around mirrors.”

After they disconnected, Mick returned to the security footage, fast-forwarding through earlier days. He was looking for the moment Blackwood first noticed something wrong—the beginning of the haunting.

His eyes stung from fatigue and the hours staring at screens. The coffee had gone cold beside him, untouched. His hand kept straying to his jacket pocket, muscle memory seeking the familiar outline of his flask. The combined absence of alcohol and Marchosias left him feeling hollowed out, his senses dulled just when he needed them most.

As he cycled through more footage, his attention kept returning to the Harrington file among the others. There was something naggingly familiar about the name, something important he couldn’t quite grasp without Marchosias’s vast knowledge to draw upon.

Moving from the monitors to stretch his legs, Mick caught sight of his reflection in the darkened screen of an inactive display. For a moment—just the briefest instant—he thought he saw someone standing behind him, a young man with hollow eyes and prison-pale skin.

When he spun around, the security office was empty.

Heart racing, Mick turned back to the screen. His reflection appeared normal now, though the shadows under his eyes seemed deeper than before. He was exhausted, rattled by Marchosias's absence and what he'd seen in the security footage. His mind was playing tricks on him.

Wasn't it?

A notification popped up on his phone—Reeves had sent him a text: *Found something odd. Michael Keene, prison guard who died last December, had connection to Blackwood. Looking into it further.*

Before Mick could respond, a glint of light caught his eye—a reflection from one of the security monitors. He looked up, expecting to see motion on the screen.

Instead, the monitor showed only static, but within the grey noise, shapes seemed to be forming—a face trying to push through, like someone pressing against a membrane from the other side.

Mick lurched backward, knocking over his chair. The sound of it hitting the floor was impossibly loud in the quiet room. When he looked back, the monitor displayed only the normal security feed again.

His phone buzzed with another message from Reeves: *Strange coincidence with the dates. Keene died on an anniversary tied to an old case. Still gathering details.*

Mick's hands were shaking too badly to type a proper response. He hit the call button instead.

“What kind of connection are we talking about?” he asked as soon as Reeves answered.

“Keene was a prison guard who worked at HMP Belmarsh in the eighties,” Reeves replied. “He crossed paths with Blackwood on multiple cases. I’m still piecing it together, but there’s something about the timing of his death that feels deliberate.”

“You mentioned an anniversary?”

“Yes, though I’m not certain what it’s marking yet. The records from that era aren’t fully digitised.” There was a pause on the line. “Are you alright, Mick? You sound shaken.”

“I just saw... something. In one of the monitors here.” Mick swallowed. “A face in the static.”

“A face?” Reeves’s tone grew sharper. “Whose face?”

“I don’t know. Couldn’t make it out.” Mick swallowed, reluctant to sound like he was cracking under the pressure. “Earlier, I thought I saw someone behind me in a reflection too.”

There was a brief silence before Reeves spoke again. “Mick, be honest with me. Is this... normal? Without Marchosias, I mean. Could this be withdrawal or something?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But the security footage shows Blackwood seeing things in mirrors before he died. The same pattern.”

“Alright. I’m coming to get you,” Reeves said decisively. “We need to go through these files together and establish what’s happening.”

“What about Marchosias?” Mick asked, the words escaping before he could stop them. The desperation in his voice was palpable.

“One problem at a time,” Reeves said gently. “Meet me outside in fifteen minutes.”

After they disconnected, Mick gathered his notes with trembling hands. As he sorted through the files, a name on one of the newspaper clippings caught his eye. He paused, pulling it closer.

The article detailed a controversial case from 1987. Among the names mentioned was “Thomas Harrington,” accompanied by a small courtroom photograph.

The young man stared out from the faded newsprint with hollow eyes and prison-pale skin.

The same face Mick had glimpsed in reflections twice now.

A sudden, violent chill swept through the room. The lights flickered once, then stabilised. One of the monitors directly in front of Mick went black, its screen now a perfect reflective surface in the dim room.

And in that improvised mirror, Thomas Harrington stood directly behind him, close enough to touch.

Mick didn’t turn around this time. He knew there would be nothing there—and that was somehow more terrifying than if there had been. Instead, he watched the reflection as the figure’s mouth opened, forming words he couldn’t hear.

The lights flickered again. When they steadied, the reflection showed only Mick, alone and pale with fear.

He gathered the files and fled the room, not looking back.

In the corridor outside, Mick leaned against the wall, dragging air into lungs that felt too tight. The cold that had settled in his bones since touching the binding stone intensified, as if responding to what he’d just experienced.

Without Marchosias’s knowledge or power, he felt blind, fumbling in the dark against something he barely understood. The demon would have immediately recognised the patterns, would have known the exact nature

of what they were facing. Mick had only human instincts and fragmented information, pieced together with increasingly unsteady hands.

For months, he'd complained about sharing his consciousness, about Marchosias's constant commentary and judgmental observations. Now he would have given anything to hear that sardonic voice in his head, telling him exactly how human and predictable his fear was.

As he pushed away from the wall to head outside, Mick passed a restroom. The door was propped open, revealing a row of sinks with mirrors above them. He averred his gaze, walking faster.

In every reflective surface he passed—a window, a glass door, the polished lift doors—he refused to look directly at his own image, terrified of what might be looking back.

5 The Prison Guard

The door to Michael Keene's flat swung open with a reluctant creak, revealing a space frozen in time. Yellow police tape criss-crossed the entrance—clearly ignored by someone, as the broken seal indicated. Dust motes danced in the shafts of afternoon light that managed to penetrate the half-drawn blinds.

"Been sealed for nearly seven months," Reeves said, pulling on latex gloves. "No family came forward to claim his effects, so the property's in limbo. Previous investigation ruled it suicide."

Mick stepped across the threshold, wincing as his damaged leg protested. The absence of Marchosias's influence had reawakened every old injury, every ache that the demon had somehow been dulling. The physical pain was almost welcome—a distraction from the hollow silence in his head.

"Suicide like Blackwood's?" he asked, scanning the dingy one-bedroom flat.

"Not as dramatic. Hanged himself from that exposed beam." Reeves pointed to a sturdy wooden beam crossing the living room ceiling. "No ritual markings, no occult symbols. Just a standard suicide note blaming financial troubles and depression."

The flat told a different story. Stacks of paperwork covered every surface—court transcripts, prisoner records, handwritten notes spanning decades. Some were organised in neat manilla folders, others scattered as if in a frantic search. A cork board on one wall held newspaper clippings, prisoner intake photos, and a map of London with various locations circled in red.

"Doesn't look like financial troubles to me," Mick observed, moving deeper into the flat. "Looks like obsession."

He approached the cork board, examining the aged photographs pinned there. Most showed prisoners—hard-faced men in institutional clothing,

their eyes dead or defiant. Nestled among them was a yellowing photograph of a younger Michael Keene in a guard's uniform, standing beside three colleagues outside HMP Belmarsh.

"Proud of his work," Mick murmured, leaning closer to examine the photograph. "But something changed."

A chill swept through the room, raising goosebumps on his arms. Without Marchosias's presence, Mick couldn't distinguish between ordinary drafts and supernatural temperature drops. He glanced at Reeves, but she showed no reaction as she sorted through papers on a cluttered desk.

"Found something," she called, holding up a small leather-bound journal similar to Blackwood's. "Personal notes spanning decades. Entries become increasingly paranoid in the months before his death."

Mick moved to join her, but stopped as something caught his eye—a flash of metal beneath the sofa. Kneeling awkwardly, he reached underneath and retrieved a small key with a plastic tag attached. The tag bore a single word: "Contraband."

"Prison contraband," Reeves said, examining the key. "He was smuggling items to prisoners?"

"Or keeping evidence of it." Mick surveyed the room again, looking for anything that might fit the key. His gaze settled on a metal lockbox partially hidden beneath stacks of papers in the corner. "There."

The key slid in smoothly, the lock turning with a satisfying click. Inside lay an assortment of items that had no business being in a retired prison guard's flat: several mobile phones of varying ages, small bags containing what appeared to be drugs, folded notes on prison-issued paper, and a bundle of cash bound with a rubber band.

"He wasn't just a guard," Mick said, carefully removing the items. "He was running a smuggling operation inside Belmarsh."

"For how long?" Reeves asked, still paging through the journal.

“Decades, by the looks of these phones.” Mick held up a bulky Nokia from the early 2000s. “Started small, probably, then expanded. The question is, why keep this evidence? If he was smuggling, these are just souvenirs of his crimes.”

“Unless he wasn’t the smuggler,” Reeves suggested. “What if he discovered the operation and collected evidence?”

“Then why not report it?” Mick began examining the folded notes, most containing terse messages about deliveries and payments. “Unless he was being paid to look the other way.”

“Or blackmailed.” Reeves held up the journal, open to an entry dated three weeks before Keene’s death. “Listen to this: ‘They’re watching me through the bathroom mirror. I covered it with a towel, but I can hear them scratching at the glass from the other side. T.H. won’t stop until we’ve all paid. We should have known there would be consequences.’”

Mick’s blood went cold. “T.H.—Thomas Harrington?”

“The same name from the files,” Reeves confirmed. “And this isn’t the only mention. Keene became convinced Harrington was somehow reaching out from beyond the grave.”

“Not just reaching out,” Mick said grimly. “Hunting.”

The implications settled between them—two deaths connected by the same spectral presence, the same initials appearing in both investigations. Whatever had happened to Blackwood had claimed Keene months earlier.

Mick moved toward the bathroom, drawn by the mention of the mirror. The small room was stark and utilitarian, with a shower stall, toilet, and pedestal sink beneath a medicine cabinet with a mirrored door. A towel lay crumpled on the floor—the one that had once covered the mirror, perhaps.

The mirror itself appeared ordinary, slightly spotted with age. Mick deliberately avoided looking directly at his reflection, instead examining the frame and edges for anything unusual.

“Anything?” Reeves called from the living room.

“Nothing obvious,” Mick replied, still studying the mirror from his peripheral vision. “But—”

He broke off as the temperature plummeted. His breath clouded in front of him, and frost formed on the mirror’s surface with unnatural speed, creeping from the edges toward the centre like reaching fingers.

“Reeves!” he called, backing toward the door. “Something’s happening.”

As the frost covered the mirror, lines began to appear—not random patterns, but deliberate strokes forming words: *CELL 217*.

Reeves appeared in the doorway just as the writing completed itself. They both stared at the frost-etched message.

“Cell 217,” Reeves read aloud. “That’s specific.”

“Belmarsh,” Mick said. “Must be where Harrington was held.”

The message began to fade as the frost melted, water running down the glass like tears. For a split second, Mick thought he saw a face in the streaks—hollow eyes, gaunt features, mouth open in a silent scream—before the mirror cleared completely.

They retreated to the living room, where Reeves immediately pulled out her phone. “I’ll check if Thomas Harrington was held in Cell 217 at Belmarsh.”

While she made calls, Mick continued exploring the flat. The bedroom was sparsely furnished, with a single bed and a wardrobe containing neatly hung uniforms. A bedside table held a framed photograph of a much younger Keene standing proudly in his first guard uniform, and beside it, a bottle of prescription sleeping pills.

The bottle was nearly empty, with a label dated just two weeks before Keene’s death. Mick pocketed it for later investigation.

He opened the wardrobe, pushing aside hanging clothes to examine the back panel. Nothing seemed out of place until his fingers detected a slight irregularity in the wood—a small, almost imperceptible seam. Pressing against it revealed a hidden compartment, from which he extracted a manilla envelope.

Inside was a court transcript from 1987—Thomas Harrington’s trial, with Judge Anthony Blackwood presiding. Keene had marked certain pages with sticky notes, highlighting testimony he had given about Harrington’s behaviour while in custody.

According to the transcript, Keene had testified that Harrington was violent and uncooperative, requiring frequent discipline. His testimony had helped secure a longer sentence when Harrington was convicted of armed robbery.

“Mick,” Reeves called, her voice tight with urgency. “You need to see this.”

She stood by the window, holding her phone with the screen displaying prison records. “Thomas Harrington, convicted of armed robbery in 1987, sentenced to fifteen years by Judge Blackwood. Died in Belmarsh in 1989—Cell 217.”

“Died how?” Mick asked, knowing the answer would be significant.

“Official record says suicide by hanging, but—” she scrolled through more information, “—there were inconsistencies in the report. Bruising patterns that didn’t match self-inflicted injuries, missing surveillance footage. The investigation was closed quickly, labelled a straightforward suicide.”

“Let me guess—Keene was on duty that night?”

Reeves nodded grimly. “Senior guard on the block. He discovered the body.”

The pieces were beginning to align, forming a picture of corruption and cover-up that spanned decades. Blackwood the judge, Keene the guard—

both connected to Thomas Harrington, both dead under unusual circumstances.

“We need to—” Mick began, but stopped as the room suddenly transformed around them.

The walls seemed to stretch and narrow, concrete replacing plaster, closing in with an almost suffocating pressure. The ceiling lowered, industrial pipes now exposed overhead, dripping condensation that left dark patches on the floor. The furniture blurred and reformed—Keene’s sofa warping into a metal bed bolted to the floor, its thin mattress stained with substances Mick didn’t want to identify. A stainless steel toilet-sink combination materialised in the corner, uncovered and humiliatingly public. The window behind Reeves elongated, then divided into narrow sections crossed with reinforcing bars, the glass so thick and yellowed it barely admitted light.

For a disorienting moment, they were standing not in a flat, but in a prison cell—a cage for a human animal.

“Do you see that?” Mick whispered, reaching instinctively for Marchosias’s power only to encounter that terrible void again.

Reeves’s wide eyes and pale face told him she saw it too. “The room—”

The transformation continued, assaulting all their senses. The light fixtures buzzed and flickered, becoming the harsh fluorescents of a prison block that cast everything in a sickly, institutional pallor. The ambient temperature dropped several degrees, the chill of cement and steel seeping into their bones.

But it was the smell that made Mick’s stomach lurch—a complex miasma that defied single description. Institutional disinfectant provided a thin veneer over more primal odours: unwashed bodies crowded together in close proximity, stale sweat permeated with fear, the sharp tang of urine from poorly maintained facilities. Underlying everything was the

distinctive scent of prison food—bland, overcooked, and oddly sweet, reminiscent of school cafeterias but with notes of something gone slightly rancid. The combination created a unique olfactory signature instantly recognisable to anyone who'd spent time in a correctional facility.

Sound penetrated the vision too—the distant echoes of a cellblock at night. Keys jangling, doors slamming with metallic finality. Muffled conversations, occasional shouts, and somewhere, the endless, monotonous sobbing of a man who had surrendered his last shred of hope.

The walls seemed to pulse with decades of accumulated desperation, rage, and resignation. Scratches appeared in the concrete—tallies of days, crude messages, pleas to forgotten gods. In one corner, where the shadows gathered most densely, faint bloodstains blossomed on the floor.

On the wall beside them, a number materialised as if being carved into the concrete by invisible hands: 217.

“Cell 217,” Reeves breathed. “We’re in his cell.”

The air felt dense with more than just odours—it carried the weight of confinement itself, the psychological pressure of knowing escape was impossible, that every minute of existence was controlled by others. The overwhelming sense of powerlessness was its own entity in the room, pressing against their skin, tightening their throats.

The vision—hallucination—whatever it was lasted only seconds before the room snapped back to normal, leaving them standing in Keene’s ordinary flat once more. But the sensory ghost of Cell 217 lingered—the smell clinging to their clothes, the chill in their bones, the whispered echoes of despair still fading in their ears.

“What the hell was that?” Reeves demanded, her professional composure cracking.

“A message,” Mick said, struggling to process what he’d seen without Marchosias’s guidance. “Harrington is showing us where he died. Where something happened that connects Blackwood and Keene.”

“And maybe others,” Reeves added. “In his journal, Keene wrote ‘we’ve all paid.’ Plural.”

“We need those prison records,” Mick said. “Everyone connected to Cell 217 while Harrington was there. And we need to talk to whoever’s still alive from that time.”

“I’ll make calls,” Reeves said, already dialling.

As she spoke in low tones on her phone, Mick felt a strange pressure building behind his eyes. The room dimmed around him, and for a moment, he thought the cell vision was returning. Instead, something else took shape—not a transformation of the present, but a window into the past.

Michael Keene sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the bathroom door. It was 3:17 AM according to the glowing digital clock—the third night in a row he’d woken at precisely the same time. The bathroom door was closed, a towel stuffed into the gap at the bottom, another covering the mirror inside.

“Just bad dreams,” he whispered to himself, rubbing his face with shaking hands. “Guilty conscience playing tricks.”

A faint scratching sound came from behind the bathroom door.

Keene froze, breath caught in his throat. The scratching continued, rhythmic and deliberate—fingernails on glass. From within the bathroom came the sound of water running, though he knew the taps were shut off.

“Not real,” he muttered. “Not possible.”

The scratching stopped. Silence stretched for thirty agonising seconds before a soft voice called from behind the door.

“Officer Keene.”

The voice was young, hollow, its tone conversational despite the impossibility of anyone being in the locked bathroom. Keene recognised it instantly—a voice he hadn’t heard in over thirty years, yet had never forgotten.

“You can’t hide from your reflection forever, Officer Keene.”

Moving as if in a trance, Keene rose from the bed. His legs carried him to the bathroom door despite his mind screaming at him to run. His hand reached for the knob, turning it with agonising slowness.

The bathroom was empty, the mirror still covered with a towel.

Relief flooded him, followed immediately by doubt. Had he imagined it? Was his mind finally breaking after months of haunting?

With trembling fingers, he reached for the towel covering the mirror. One quick look to prove to himself nothing was there. One glance to confirm his solitude.

He pulled the towel away.

Thomas Harrington stared back at him—not as the nineteen-year-old who had died in Cell 217, but as the man he would have become. His prison pallor had deepened to something cadaverous, his eyes sunken into dark hollows. But it was unmistakably him, standing where Keene’s reflection should have been.

“Thirty-two years,” Harrington said, his voice emerging from the mirror with perfect clarity. “Three decades of waiting while you lived your life.”

“You killed yourself,” Keene whispered, unable to look away. “It wasn’t my fault.”

Harrington’s reflection smiled—a terrible expression that stretched his skin too tight across his bones. “We both know that’s not true, Officer Keene.”

The reflection's hand pressed against the glass from the other side, leaving a smear that glistened wetly in the dim light. Not condensation, Keene realised with mounting horror. Blood.

"They found me hanging," Harrington continued, voice dropping to a confidential whisper. "But we both know I was already dead when you strung me up."

"No," Keene moaned, backing away. "That's not what happened."

"Four of you," Harrington's reflection continued as if he hadn't spoken. "Four men who decided a prisoner's worthless life could be sacrificed. Four men who covered up what really happened in Cell 217."

The blood from Harrington's palm began to run down the mirror's surface, forming patterns—symbols like those Keene had begun seeing in his dreams. Arcane markings that burned into his retinas, pulsing with meaning he couldn't comprehend but instinctively feared.

"I'm going to show you what it feels like," Harrington said, his voice deepening, multiplying into a chorus of whispers. "I'm going to show you what Cell 217 really is."

The room around Keene began to transform, the bathroom walls elongating, the ceiling lowering. The tiles beneath his feet cracked and reformed into concrete. The shower stall stretched and mutated into a narrow prison bed. The medicine cabinet warped into a metal desk bolted to the wall.

Cell 217 materialised around him, perfect in every horrific detail—the stained mattress, the metal toilet with no privacy, the scratches in the walls from countless desperate occupants. The smell hit him like a physical blow—disinfectant failing to mask bodily odours, mildew, and the unique scent of institutional hopelessness.

"No," Keene gasped, spinning around to find the door gone, replaced by solid concrete. "This isn't real."

“It was real enough for me,” Harrington’s voice came from everywhere and nowhere. “For two years, this was my entire world. Until that night.”

The lights flickered, and suddenly Keene wasn’t alone in the cell. On the floor—a young Thomas Harrington, bloodied and still.

“You shouldn’t have been asking questions,” the younger Keene was saying. “About the contraband, about where it was coming from. You goaded me that you were going to report it.”

“So you shut me up,” said Harrington, “Permanently.”

“It was an accident!” the younger Keene insisted. “I just wanted to scare you!”

“Who’s scared now?”

The scene played out in grotesque pantomime—Keene staging Harrington’s “suicide,” creating the false scene, building a story. Showing no remorse, only fearing for themselves, and acting with cold calculation.

“You killed me,” Harrington’s voice whispered directly into Keene’s ear. “And you covered it up. All for your little smuggling operation.”

“I’m sorry,” Keene sobbed, falling to his knees in the phantom cell. “I never meant for you to die.”

“Sorry doesn’t bring back thirty years,” Harrington replied, his tone almost gentle now. “But justice might.”

The cell dissolved, returning Keene to his bathroom. But the mirror no longer showed Harrington’s reflection—instead, it showed Keene himself, hanging from the beam in his living room, eyes bulging, face purple, body twisting slowly on the rope.

“You’re the second,” Harrington’s voice said from behind him.

Keene turned to find the bathroom empty. When he looked back at the mirror, his normal reflection had returned, pale and terrified.

On the steamed-up surface, invisible fingers wrote five words: JUSTICE COMES FOR YOU.

Three days later, Michael Keene was found hanging from the beam in his living room, exactly as the mirror had shown him.

The vision released Mick suddenly, leaving him gasping and disoriented. Reeves was staring at him with alarm.

“Mick? What just happened? You completely zoned out for nearly a minute.”

He leaned against the wall, trying to process what he’d witnessed. “I saw it,” he managed. “I saw what happened to Keene before he died. The same thing that happened to Blackwood.”

“You had a vision?” Reeves asked, her professional scepticism warring with the evidence of her own recent experiences.

“More than that,” Mick said, straightening with effort. “I saw what really happened to Thomas Harrington in 1989. He didn’t commit suicide. He was killed during a prison beating that Keene arranged—meant to intimidate him, but it went too far. Then staged it as a suicide to cover it up.”

“Arranged a beating?” Reeves asked, her detective’s mind immediately picking up the connection.

“Harrington was asking questions about Keene’s contraband operation in the prison,” Mick explained. “Keene paid a visit to ‘warn’ Harrington, but the beating went too far. Harrington hit his head on the concrete wall and died.”

“So Keene covered it up,” Reeves said, following the logic.

Reeves’s expression hardened as the pieces fell into place. “So Blackwood and Keene—they each contributed separately to Harrington’s wrongful imprisonment and eventual death.”

“Separate failings in the system,” Mick agreed grimly. “People who never saw the complete picture of what they were doing to an innocent man. But Harrington sees it now, and he’s systematically taking revenge on each of them.”

“Starting with the most directly responsible—Keene,” Reeves said.

“Then Blackwood,” Mick added. “Which means there could be others.”

The implications settled between them—death connected by a vengeful spirit seeking justice denied in life. Keene and Blackwood could be just the beginning.

“We need to find out if there are any others connected to Harrington’s imprisonment,” Mick said, “We need to find them before Harrington does.”

“Assuming they’re still alive,” she said, taking a photo of the clipping with her phone.

“Harrington seems to be working through a list, and he’s making sure each death sends a message to the others. Blackwood and Keene may not be the only ones, just the ones we know about.”

As they left the flat, Mick noticed the door to the bathroom had swung closed. Through the narrow opening, he caught a glimpse of the mirror, now cracked from edge to edge as if struck by tremendous force.

The crack formed a distinct pattern—the crude outline of a hangman’s noose.

Mick pulled the door shut behind them, leaving Keene’s secrets and the broken mirror sealed inside. But as they walked down the corridor, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something had followed them out—something that had been waiting years for this moment, watching from reflective surfaces, patient and vengeful.

Without Marchosias's guidance, he felt blind, fumbling through a case with supernatural dimensions he was ill-equipped to navigate alone. The binding stone's effects showed no signs of weakening, and the silence in his mind remained absolute.

For the first time since their unwanted partnership began, Mick found himself desperately missing the demon's presence. Not just for the power or the knowledge, but for the simple reassurance that he wasn't facing this darkness alone.

As they reached the street, he caught their reflection in a parked car's window—two figures, and behind them, the shadowy outline of a third. When he turned to look, there was only empty space where the reflection had shown someone standing.

Thomas Harrington was watching, and the message was clear: he wasn't finished yet.

6 The Broker

Sunset bled across London's skyline as Mick stood outside the Crossroads Club, the building's unremarkable facade belying what waited within. Nothing about the converted warehouse suggested the supernatural—no occult symbols, no mysterious doormen, just a simple brushed steel sign above a pair of matte black doors. To casual passersby, it appeared to be nothing more than another exclusive nightclub in Soho, the kind that relied on whispered recommendations rather than flashy advertisements.

To those who knew what to look for, however, the signs were there. The shadows around the entrance pooled unnaturally deep, seeming to flow against the gentle evening breeze. The street lights nearest the club flickered with subtle irregularity, their illumination never quite reaching the doorway. And the people who entered—if one looked closely enough—sometimes cast reflections that moved a fraction of a second too late.

"This is a mistake," Reeves said, standing beside him at the edge of the pool of shadow. "You can barely stand up straight, and you want to go in there alone?"

Mick's hand trembled slightly as he adjusted his jacket collar. The persistent chill that had settled into his bones since touching the binding stone had intensified as they approached the club, as if his body instinctively recognised the danger that waited inside.

"I have to," he replied, his voice rough. "Lilaeth will know something about the stone, but she won't talk if you're there. Police make her... uncomfortable."

"And what about you? Without Marchosias, you're just—"

"Just what? Just human?" Mick's laugh was bitter and sharp. "I managed thirty-eight years without a demon in my head. I think I can handle one conversation."

Reeves' expression hardened. "We both know that's not true. You barely handled a trip to the corner shop yesterday. I saw how you avoided looking at the windows, how you flinched when you caught your reflection in the freezer door."

Mick didn't answer immediately. The silence in his mind where Marchosias should be felt deeper than ever, a void expanding with each passing hour. He'd grown accustomed to the demon's constant presence—the sardonic commentary, the ancient knowledge, the subtle enhancements to his senses. Without that, the world seemed flatter, dangers more immediate, and options fewer.

"Look," he said finally, "Lilaeth deals in information. She might know what the binding stone is and how to break its hold. But she won't speak freely with law enforcement present. That's just how it works."

"And you're sure she'll even see you without..." Reeves gestured vaguely at his head.

"Marchosias isn't my invitation. I've been here before." He didn't add that his previous visits had always been with the demon's protection—a detail that suddenly seemed critically important. "Just wait here. If I'm not out in an hour, then you can come in, badge blazing."

Reeves looked like she wanted to argue further but instead reached into her jacket and pulled out her taser. "Take this at least."

Mick eyed the device sceptically. "Against creatures that can tear reality apart? Might as well bring a water pistol to a nuclear war."

"It's better than nothing," she insisted, pressing it into his hand.

The weight of the weapon was both reassuring and ridiculous. Mick pocketed it anyway, knowing it would be confiscated the moment he entered. But the gesture was appreciated—a human response to a problem far beyond human solutions.

“One hour,” he promised, then stepped toward the doors before he could reconsider.

The interior of the Crossroads Club existed in defiance of architectural sanity. From the outside, the building appeared to be a standard three-story warehouse conversion. Inside, it unfolded into impossible dimensions—balconies that shouldn’t fit within the structure, corridors that bent at subtly wrong angles, and a central atrium that stretched upward into darkness that seemed to consume light rather than merely absence it.

The club’s lighting pulsed with a rhythm just slightly out of sync with the music—a disorienting effect that made depth perception unreliable and shadows appear to move independently of their sources. The music itself resonated at frequencies that made Mick’s molars ache, carrying undertones that human instruments couldn’t produce. It wasn’t unpleasant exactly, but listening too closely left him feeling like something was crawling beneath his skin.

The patrons appeared human at first glance—beautiful people in expensive clothes laughing, drinking, dancing. But in his peripheral vision, Mick caught glimpses of what lay beneath the glammers: eyes that reflected light like animals’, fingers that bent at impossible angles, smiles that revealed too many teeth arranged in patterns nature never intended.

Without Marchosias’s enhanced perception, these glimpses were fragmentary and unsettling rather than clear. The uncertainty of what he was seeing made it worse somehow—was that woman’s skin actually rippling with scales beneath her silk dress, or was it just a trick of the light? Did that man’s shadow really stretch toward the alcohol in someone else’s glass, or was that just paranoia?

A server approached—slender and androgynous, with features so symmetrical they crossed from beautiful into unsettling. “Mr. Hargraves,”

they greeted, voice modulating between masculine and feminine tones. “This is... unexpected. Where is your other half?”

“Indisposed,” Mick answered, trying to project confidence he didn’t feel. “I need to see Lilaeth.”

The server smiled, revealing teeth that seemed just slightly too sharp. “Of course. Though I should warn you, she can smell fear. And right now, you reek of it.” They gestured toward a spiral staircase that Mick could have sworn hadn’t been there a moment ago. “She’s expecting you. Third floor, end of the hall.”

As the server glided away, Mick felt a hand close around his wrist. He looked down to see nothing there, yet the sensation of cold fingers lingered for several seconds before dissipating. A warning, perhaps—or a hunger that couldn’t quite manifest.

Mick made his way across the main floor, painfully aware of the attention he was attracting. Conversations faltered as he passed, heads turning with predatory interest. Without Marchosias’s presence marking him as off-limits, he had become something else entirely in their eyes—not a threat, not an equal, but prey.

A woman with pupils like vertical slits brushed against him deliberately, inhaling deeply as she passed. “You’re different tonight,” she murmured, her tongue flickering out to taste the air between them. “Incomplete. Vulnerable.” Her smile revealed the tips of fangs. “If she doesn’t want you, come find me after. I’ve always wondered what a demon’s pet tastes like when abandoned.”

Mick stepped away without responding, his hand instinctively reaching for the taser before he thought better of it. Drawing a weapon here would be like cutting yourself in shark-infested waters.

The spiral staircase seemed to extend upward far longer than the building’s exterior suggested possible. Each step felt slightly wrong beneath his feet

—too shallow or too deep by fractions of an inch, forcing him to pay conscious attention to the simple act of climbing. By the time he reached the third floor, his damaged leg was throbbing with pain, and sweat had soaked through his shirt despite the pervasive chill.

The corridor stretched before him, lined with doors made of dark wood that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. At the far end, double doors of polished obsidian stood open, revealing a room beyond that shimmered with an interior light source he couldn't identify.

Taking a steadying breath, Mick approached, every instinct screaming at him to turn back. Without Marchosias, he was walking into the den of a predator with no protection but his human wits. It was suicide, or worse.

But Blackwood and Keene were dead, others would follow, and the binding stone was his only connection to understanding what they faced. If Lilaeth had answers, he needed them—whatever the cost.

Lilaeth's private salon defied simple description. The walls appeared to be lined with dark velvet that moved subtly, as if breathing. No obvious light sources existed, yet the room was illuminated with a pearlescent glow that seemed to emanate from the surfaces themselves. The furniture—low couches and oddly proportioned chairs—looked like it had been grown rather than built, its organic curves reminiscent of bones and sinew rather than wood or metal.

And seated at the centre of this unnatural space was Lilaeth herself.

She reclined on a chaise lounge of midnight blue, her form a study in impossible beauty. Her skin was the colour of fine porcelain, so pale it seemed to capture and reflect the room's ethereal light. Hair blacker than the deepest void fell in perfect waves past her shoulders, moving occasionally in currents no human air could create. Her features were almost painfully perfect—high cheekbones, full lips curved in perpetual

amusement, eyes that shifted between the deepest blue and bottomless black depending on the angle of observation.

She wore a dress that appeared to be made from the night sky itself—a deep midnight blue fabric that shimmered with an inner pearlescence, the surface occasionally rippling with shadows that moved with purpose rather than following the contours of her body. It clung to her form like a second skin, revealing a figure designed to inspire both desire and terror.

“Michael Hargraves,” she said, her voice carrying harmonics that made the air vibrate strangely around them. “Alone at last.”

As she shifted to sit upright, Mick caught a glimpse of something beneath her perfect surface—a flicker of motion under her skin, like a second face pressing outward from within, mouth open in a silent scream before subsiding back into the depths. The momentary distortion was so swift he might have imagined it, yet the horror of it lingered.

“Lilaeth,” he acknowledged, remaining just inside the doorway. “I need information.”

Her laugh was like crystal breaking in slow motion. “Of course you do. That’s all humans ever want from me.” She gestured to a chair opposite her. “Sit. You look... unwell.”

Mick approached cautiously but remained standing. “The binding stone. What is it?”

Lilaeth’s eyes widened slightly, genuine interest flickering across her perfect features. “So that’s what happened to your passenger.” She rose in a single fluid motion that contained too many subtle wrongnesses to catalogue—joints that bent at impossible angles, weight distribution that defied physics, a grace that suggested her body was merely a costume rather than a constraint.

“You’re like a child who’s lost his security blanket,” she observed, circling him with predatory deliberation. “I can see the hollow where he should be

—a perfect Marchosias-shaped void.” Her eyes gleamed with something between amusement and hunger. “How very interesting.”

“The stone,” Mick insisted, struggling to keep his voice steady as she moved behind him, close enough that he could feel a cold that had nothing to do with temperature radiating from her. “What is it? How do I reverse what it’s done?”

“So direct,” Lilaeth sighed, completing her circle to stand before him again. “No pleasantries, no negotiation. Has Marchosias taught you nothing about our ways?” As she spoke, her shadow stretched toward him across the floor, reaching for his feet despite the direction of the ambient light.

“I don’t have time for games,” Mick said, taking an involuntary step backward as her shadow touched the toe of his shoe. “People are dying.”

“People are always dying,” she dismissed with a languid wave of her hand. For an instant, her fingers seemed too long, the joints too numerous, before settling back into human proportions. “It’s what you do best.” She moved to a sideboard that materialised from the darkness, pouring something into two glasses that caught the light like liquid obsidian. “But since you’re here without your protector, I’ll be generous.”

She offered one glass to Mick, who made no move to take it. Her smile widened at his refusal, revealing teeth that were perfectly white and momentarily too sharp before returning to human appearance. She set his glass aside and sipped from her own.

The casual cruelty in her tone sent a chill through Mick that had nothing to do with the room’s temperature. “The binding, how do I break it?”

“So concerned for your demon.” Lilaeth’s expression shifted to one of calculated curiosity. “One might almost think you miss him.”

“He’s useful,” Mick said flatly. “I need his knowledge.”

“Liar,” she said softly. “I can hear the emptiness in you. The loneliness. The fear of facing your little investigation without him whispering ancient secrets in your ear.” She moved closer, her scent bringing images of cinnamon and fresh blood. “What would you give to have him back, I wonder?”

The question hung between them, heavy with implication. Mick knew the danger of answering too quickly, of revealing his desperation. This was the true business of the Crossroads Club—not information, but bargains made from positions of weakness.

“What would it cost me?” he asked instead.

Approval flickered across Lilaeth’s perfect features. “Better,” she murmured. “At least you remember that much.” She circled back to her chaise, the movement accompanied by a momentary distortion of her form—for just an instant, something else showed through, something with too many limbs and angles that eye and mind refused to process.

“To break the binding requires knowledge I possess,” she said, reclining again in a pose too perfect to be unconsidered. “Knowledge I would be willing to share... for a price.”

“Name it,” Mick said, knowing he was stepping onto dangerous ground.

“A favour,” Lilaeth replied, the simple words carrying weight far beyond their syllables. “To be collected at a time I choose.”

“What kind of favour?” asked Mick.

“Oh, we need not go into specifics just now. We can decide on the terms later.” Her lips curved in a smile that never reached her eyes.

“No deal,” Mick said immediately. “I need specific terms. It wouldn’t be smart making an open-ended deal with the devil.”

Lilaeth’s laughter was like glass shattering in slow motion. “You’ve learned something at least. Very well. My assistance with your binding

problem, in exchange for a single favour to be claimed within one year, involving no harm to your family, no surrender of your soul, and nothing that would directly result in human death. Specific enough?”

The offer hung in the air between them, a verbal contract with implications Mick could only partially grasp. Without Marchosias to counsel him on the hidden traps in demonic bargains, he was navigating blindfolded.

“I’ll think about it,” he said, buying time. “What can you tell me about a man named Thomas Harrington?”

The shift in topic caused something to flicker behind Lilaeth’s eyes—surprise, possibly, or recognition. “The ghost who’s hunting the corrupt? How very interesting that you’ve encountered him.”

“You know about the deaths?”

“I make it my business to know when the realms bleed into each other,” she replied, tracing one perfect finger along the edge of her glass. “Vengeance from beyond the grave has a distinct... flavour to it. Harrington is making quite a stir in certain circles. Very old magic, very pure intent.”

“Not magic,” Mick corrected. “Justice. These men helped convict and kill an innocent person.”

“Justice, vengeance—such human distinctions,” Lilaeth waved dismissively. “The result is the same: a spirit permitted to reach across the veil and exact payment from the living.” Her eyes gleamed with something between amusement and hunger. “The binding stone and Harrington’s revenge may be more connected than you realise.”

Mick’s attention sharpened. “How so?”

“Consider the timing,” Lilaeth suggested, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone. “Your encounter with the stone occurs just as a vengeful spirit rises to hunt those who wronged him. Patterns within patterns.” She leaned forward, her dress shifting like liquid darkness.

“Marchosias would see it immediately, of course. Such a shame he’s... unavailable.”

The implication was clear—without the demon’s insights, Mick was fumbling in the dark, missing connections that might be obvious to supernatural entities. The thought reinforced just how vulnerable he had become, how dependent he’d grown on Marchosias’s knowledge despite his initial resistance to their partnership.

“The stone and Harrington,” Mick pressed. “What’s the connection?”

“But what are you prepared to pay for your answer?” Lilaeth replied silkily.

“What do you want?”

“A memory. Not yours, one of Marchosias’s memories. It can be anything of your choice.”

“Anything?”

“Yes, anything you like. Something you have experienced from before your time together, a memory unique to Marchosias.”

Mick thought back, trying to find something that would not place either of them in any danger, or expose any vulnerability. There were fragments he’d glimpsed during their time together—moments from Marchosias’s existence that had slipped through their shared consciousness.

“Ok, I have something. How do we do this?”

“Just open your eyes, look into mine, and concentrate.”

“I’m not letting you into my head. How can I trust you?”

Lilaeth opened her palm face up and conjured a blue flame that danced just above it, burning from nowhere. “As long as this flame burns blue, I cannot lie or deceive you, even by omission.”

Looking at the flame, something assured Mick that what she said was true. The light it cast seemed to clarify rather than illuminate, cutting through the layers of deception that normally surrounded her.

Mick stared into her eyes, both terrible and beautiful at the same time, and thought of the memory he had chosen. It was of Marchosias flying high above a gleaming white and gold city landscape—an ancient metropolis that existed before human civilisation, its architecture impossibly perfect, its towers stretching toward a sky different from Earth's. The sensation of flight, of wings cutting through air currents, the perspective of seeing the world from above—all of it came from a time when Marchosias had been something else, something not yet fallen.

In an instant the connection was over, and Lilaeth's eyes glowed with an inner light as she savoured the memory he had shared.

"Such heights," she whispered, a genuine emotion flickering across her features before disappearing behind her perfect mask. "I had almost forgotten how the air tasted above the Spires of Dawn."

She seemed lost in the memory for a moment, then collected herself, the blue flame on her palm flickering higher.

"For this, I will tell you of the stone, but not how to break the binding. The binding stone is ancient," she said, running one finger around the rim of her glass, producing a tone that made Mick's ears pop painfully. "Created by a particularly clever Sumerian priest about five thousand years ago. It's one of only three ever made, designed specifically to temporarily silence a demon without banishing it."

"What's the difference?"

"Banishment sends us back to our realm. Silencing..." she savoured the word like fine wine, "...traps us within the host, unable to communicate or manifest, but still present. Like being buried alive, I imagine. Quite exquisite torment."

The blue flame pulsed steadily as she continued.

“The stone wasn’t targeted at Marchosias specifically. I suspect that Blackwood was trying to defend himself against another. The one seeking vengeance. It was intended to trap and bind it so he could escape payment for his role in the events leading up to Harrington’s death.”

Mick leaned forward slightly. “But can it be broken?”

“The binding is powerful. There is going to be a cost to break it.” The flame flickered but remained blue. “Tell me why you want the demon back in your life? Most humans would want a demon banished.” Lilaeth’s head tilted at an angle that seemed just slightly wrong, her curiosity apparently genuine.

“That’s my business, and information you cannot afford,” retorted Mick.

“Touché, detective.” She smiled, a genuine amusement replacing her usual calculated expressions. “You know, I almost like you. There’s a directness to your nature that’s... refreshing.”

She raised her glass in a mocking toast. “Let me tell you something else, then—a gesture of goodwill.” The blue flame danced higher on her palm. “Your ghost, Thomas Harrington, is collecting what is owed to him. He’s working through a list, and Blackwood was not the second on that list, merely the most recent.”

“How many are there?”

“Five in total. The guard, the judge, and three others who built a cage around an innocent man. People whose individual actions might seem small—a blind eye turned here, a signature on a document there—but whose collective failure facilitated a monstrous injustice.” Her eyes glittered like black diamonds. “Harrington was innocent, you see. Every single person in that chain knew it, yet allowed him to be imprisoned. And eventually, to die.”

“What was the real story?” Mick asked, his detective instincts pushing through his unease.

Lilaeth’s perfect lips curled. “That would be another payment, I’m afraid. But I’ll give you this much: look for the witness who lied under oath. The one whose testimony sealed Harrington’s fate. He lives in terror now, knowing what’s coming for him.”

“And how is this connected to the binding stone?”

“Blackwood acquired the stone through obscure channels, believing it would protect him from Harrington’s wrath. He thought it would bind the vengeful spirit when it came for him.” Her laugh was like ice cracking. “Such a foolish man. The stone doesn’t work on human spirits, only entities like Marchosias. By the time he realised his mistake, it was too late.”

Mick absorbed this, the pieces starting to align in his mind. “So when I picked up the stone...”

“You triggered a binding meant for something else entirely.” Lilaeth nodded, the movement too smooth to be human. “Quite unfortunate timing for your companion.”

The blue flame on her palm flickered and began to dim.

“And what of the witness? What was his name?”

The flame guttered and went out. Lilaeth’s smile returned to its predatory aspect. “That’s all the truth you’ve paid for, detective. If you want more, the price increases.”

Mick knew better than to press when the flame was extinguished. He had what he needed—the nature of the stone, the connection to Harrington, and a direction for his investigation.

“One last question,” he said, already turning to leave. “Does Harrington have any weaknesses? Any way to stop him?”

Lilaeth's expression sharpened with interest. "Now that would be another bargain entirely." She moved toward him, her proximity sending cold ripples across his skin. "But I'll give you this for free: ghosts are tethered to the living world by unfinished business. Resolve what binds them, and they must move on."

"Revenge is binding him," Mick concluded. "Once he's killed everyone responsible..."

"Perhaps," Lilaeth allowed. "Or perhaps something else keeps him here. The truth has many layers, Detective." As she spoke, her form seemed to momentarily distort again—the trapped human consciousness within her vessel visibly struggling beneath the surface of her skin before being subsumed once more.

Mick turned to leave, unable to suppress a shudder at the glimpse of the true horror beneath Lilaeth's beautiful facade. At the doorway, her voice stopped him.

"Detective," she called, her tone almost gentle. "When you restore your bond with Marchosias, give him a message for me."

Mick waited, not turning back.

"Tell him I still have his feather," she said, satisfaction dripping from every syllable. "From before. He'll understand."

The words meant nothing to Mick, but he nodded nonetheless. Whatever history existed between Lilaeth and Marchosias was ancient and complex—another reminder of how little he truly understood about the entity with whom he shared consciousness.

"And detective?" she added, "When you face Harrington's ghost, remember—he died believing no one would ever pay for what was done to him. Thirty years is a long time to nurse a grudge."

As he made his way back through the impossible corridors of the Crossroads Club, Mick felt the weight of all he'd learned settling over him.

Without Marchosias to guide him through the supernatural dimensions of the case, he would need to rely on human methods to find the witness Lilaeth had mentioned—and to discover what had really happened to Thomas Harrington.

The patrons seemed to sense something had changed, their predatory interest now tempered with a certain wariness. Whatever mark his conversation with Lilaeth had left upon him, they could see it.

Outside, Reeves was exactly where he'd left her, tense with worry. "Fifty-seven minutes," she said by way of greeting. "I was about to come in after you."

"I got what we needed," Mick replied, his voice rough with exhaustion. "I know more about the binding stone, and I think I understand what's happening with Harrington."

"What did you have to give her?" Reeves asked sharply, her eyes searching his face.

Mick looked back at the unassuming facade of the Crossroads Club, where creatures played at being human while making bargains that transcended mortality. "Just a memory. Nothing important."

He could feel Reeves' scepticism radiating off her in waves, but she asked only, "Was it worth it?"

"Ask me when this is over," Mick said, already walking toward her car. "Right now, we need to find the witness who testified against Harrington. If he's next on the list, we don't have much time."

As they drove away, Mick caught sight of his reflection in the side mirror. For just an instant, he thought he saw someone else looking back—not Thomas Harrington this time, but his own face with Marchosias's black eyes, watching him with an expression caught between concern and fury.

Then it was gone, leaving only his own haggard reflection and the empty silence in his mind where the demon should be.

7 The Silenced Prosecutor

“Samuel Wells. Prosecutor, Old Bailey. Found dead in his home two years ago.”

Reeves slid the file across the desk to Mick, who caught it before it could fall over the edge. They were in her office at New Scotland Yard, surrounded by stacks of case files and evidence boxes. Three empty coffee cups stood sentinel by her computer, testament to the hours they’d already spent piecing together the connections between Blackwood, Keene, and Thomas Harrington.

Mick opened the file, wincing as pain shot through his damaged leg. Without Marchosias’s presence dulling his chronic injuries, every movement was accompanied by fresh reminders of his physical limitations. He shifted in his chair, trying to find a position that didn’t send spikes of agony up his thigh.

“Official cause of death?” he asked, scanning the autopsy report.

“Asphyxiation,” Reeves replied, her expression grim. “Initially ruled suicide, but the circumstances were... unusual enough that some officers had questions.”

The crime scene photos were clinical yet disturbing. Wells lay on the floor of his study, surrounded by scattered legal documents. His face was contorted in a rictus of terror, his mouth grotesquely distended. Protruding from between his blue-tinged lips were what appeared to be wadded legal papers, forced so deeply down his throat that they’d blocked his airway completely.

“Jesus,” Mick muttered, studying the images. “And this was ruled a suicide?”

“The working theory was that he’d suffered some kind of psychotic break,” Reeves explained, her tone making it clear what she thought of that

conclusion. “No signs of forced entry, no defensive wounds, security system was armed. The papers in his throat were from his own files.”

Mick set down the photos and rubbed at his temple, where a persistent headache had been building since morning. The silence in his mind where Marchosias should be seemed to amplify the pain rather than causing it—a void that throbbed with absence.

“When exactly did this happen?”

Reeves consulted her notes. “June 14th, 2023. Almost exactly two years ago.”

“And the connection to Harrington?”

“Wells was the crown prosecutor at his trial in 1987.” Reeves handed him another file, this one yellowed with age. “He personally argued the case against Harrington, pushing hard for maximum sentencing despite some irregularities in the evidence.”

Mick opened the older file, scanning the trial transcript. Samuel Wells’s name appeared repeatedly, his prosecutorial style aggressive and unrelenting. Reading between the lines, Mick could see how Wells had systematically dismantled any defence arguments, presenting Thomas Harrington as a hardened criminal despite his young age and lack of prior convictions.

“Any signs of haunting before his death? Mirrors, reflections, anything like Blackwood and Keene experienced?”

“Nothing in the official report,” Reeves replied. “But I managed to track down the responding officer. Constable Miller noticed something odd that never made it into his report—Wells’s house was filled with paper. Not just normal clutter, but legal documents covering every surface. Thousands of pages from cases he’d worked over his career.”

Mick felt a chill that had nothing to do with the room’s temperature. “Like he was being forced to confront every case he’d handled.”

“Exactly. And Miller said something else interesting—many of the documents appeared to have been chewed or partially eaten. There were bite marks and saliva on papers throughout the house.”

“He was being made to consume evidence,” Mick said, the pattern clicking into place. “Just like Keene was forced to experience imprisonment and Blackwood was compelled to carve the truth into his own skin.”

“There’s more,” Reeves said, pulling another document from the stack. “Wells’s sister told investigators he’d been acting strangely in the weeks before his death. He’d stopped eating normal food, claiming everything tasted like paper. He’d wake up with ink on his fingers and tongue despite not remembering writing or eating anything during the night.”

The hallucinatory torment matched what they knew of Harrington’s other victims—a personalised hell tailored to each person’s role in his wrongful conviction and death. Mick could almost admire the poetic justice of it, if the results weren’t so horrifically violent.

“We need to see Wells’s house,” he said, gathering the files. “Is it still sealed?”

“No, but it remains unoccupied. His estate has been tied up in probate for two years—no will, no direct heirs except a sister who wants nothing to do with the property. I’ve already got the keys from the estate attorney.”

Mick nodded, pushing himself to his feet with effort. The emptiness where Marchosias should be felt especially acute whenever they discovered new connections in the case—moments when the demon’s ancient knowledge would have provided insights beyond human understanding. Now he had only his own fragmented deductions and Reeves’s methodical police work to guide them.

“We should go,” he said, checking his watch. “If I know barristers, they keep meticulous records. Wells might have documentation that could lead us to the others on Harrington’s list.”

Wells's home stood in stark contrast to Blackwood's austere Highgate residence—a modern glass and steel construction in Richmond that screamed new money and contemporary tastes. The property backed onto the Thames, with floor-to-ceiling windows offering panoramic views of the river. Two years of neglect had dulled its sleek surfaces, dust gathering on the glass like cataracts.

“Prosecutors must make more than I thought,” Mick commented as Reeves unlocked the front door. “Or Wells had family money.”

“Neither,” Reeves replied, disabling the alarm system with a code the estate attorney had provided. “The property was purchased just five years ago, well beyond what his salary should have afforded. Financial forensics found evidence of multiple offshore accounts, but could never trace the source.”

“Bribes?” Mick suggested, stepping into the marble-floored foyer.

“Possible. Wells prosecuted several high-profile corruption and organised crime cases. Plenty of opportunities for a man with flexible ethics.”

The house felt wrong the moment they entered—not supernaturally so, but with the stagnant emptiness of a space that had witnessed horror and never recovered. Dust motes danced in shafts of afternoon sunlight, and the air held a peculiar staleness beyond mere abandonment. Beneath it lurked a faint but persistent scent of paper and ink, like an old library left to rot.

“Most of the paper was removed as evidence,” Reeves explained as they moved through the living room, where outlines on dusty surfaces showed where stacks of documents had once stood. “But they didn’t take everything. His study is upstairs.”

The staircase curved elegantly upward, each step made of thick glass that should have offered a sense of lightness but instead created unsettling distortions of the floor below. Mick gripped the steel banister tightly, his damaged leg protesting with each step. Without Marchosias subtly

enhancing his strength and dulling his pain, such simple tasks had become gruelling endurance tests.

The upstairs hallway was lined with framed newspaper articles chronicling Wells's most notable prosecutorial victories—a gallery of professional vanity that now seemed like macabre foreshadowing. The headlines captured career highlights spanning decades, including several prominent organised crime convictions that had made national news.

At the end of the hall, double doors stood open to Wells's study—the room where he had died. Despite two years of police investigation and cleaning services, the space retained an aura of wrongness that made Mick's skin crawl.

The study was impressively appointed, with custom-built bookshelves lining three walls from floor to ceiling. A massive desk dominated the centre of the room, its glass surface still bearing the faint, ghostly outlines where evidence markers had once stood. Behind it, the fourth wall consisted entirely of windows overlooking the Thames, currently streaked with dust and grime that created strange, undulating shadows across the floor.

“This is where they found him,” Reeves said quietly, indicating a spot near the desk with a subtle nod. “Face-down, surrounded by papers.”

Mick approached the desk, forcing himself to focus on the investigation rather than the unsettling atmosphere. Unlike Blackwood's meticulously organised workspace, Wells's desk held only a thin layer of dust, its surface deliberately cleared during the original investigation.

“The case files would have been stored where?” he asked, scanning the rows of bookshelves.

“According to his secretary, Wells kept ongoing cases in that cabinet,” Reeves pointed to a steel filing cabinet adjacent to the desk, “and archived materials in the basement storage room.”

Mick tried the filing cabinet, finding it unlocked. The drawers slid open smoothly, revealing hanging folders organised by case name. Most contained recent work—cases Wells had been actively prosecuting before his death—but nothing dating back to the 1980s or Thomas Harrington.

“If we want the Harrington files, we’ll need to check the basement,” he said, closing the drawer. As he turned away from the cabinet, a flicker of movement caught his eye—a shadow that seemed to elongate unnaturally before returning to normal proportions.

Before the binding stone, Mick would have instantly known whether the movement was supernatural or mundane. Now, robbed of Marchosias’s otherworldly senses, he was left guessing at shadows like any ordinary person—blind to a dimension he’d grown accustomed to perceiving. The not-knowing gnawed at him worse than certainty ever could.

“Mick?” Reeves’s voice pulled him from his thoughts. “You alright?”

“Fine,” he lied, the word becoming a reflexive response to her concerned inquiries. “Let’s check the basement.”

They made their way back downstairs, Mick moving more carefully than normal, aware of how his weakened state might make him a liability if they encountered anything beyond natural explanation. The basement door was located off the kitchen, a heavy steel security door that seemed out of place in the otherwise stylish home.

“Paranoid type,” Mick observed as Reeves unlocked it.

“With good reason, apparently,” she replied dryly.

The basement stairs were concrete, dimly lit by recessed LEDs that activated automatically as they descended. Unlike the modernist aesthetic of the main house, the basement was purely functional—an archive with metal shelving units arranged in neat rows, each loaded with banker’s boxes labelled by year and case name.

“Organised, at least,” Mick muttered, scanning the shelves. “Let’s find 1987.”

They separated, each taking different rows. Mick moved slowly along the shelves, his trained detective’s eye scanning the labels with methodical precision. The oldest cases were at the back, furthest from the stairs, preserved like archaeological specimens of Wells’s career.

“Found it,” Reeves called after several minutes of searching. “Section F, bottom shelf.”

Mick joined her as she knelt beside a shelf containing several boxes labelled “1987.” One was marked clearly: “R v. Harrington – Armed Robbery.”

“Careful,” Mick warned as she reached for it. “If there’s something supernatural at work here...”

Reeves hesitated, then withdrew a pair of latex gloves from her pocket, snapping them on with practised efficiency. “Better safe than possessed.”

She removed the box from the shelf and placed it on a small metal table nearby. The cardboard was yellowed with age but otherwise unremarkable—just another case file in a prosecutor’s long career. Yet something about it made the hairs on Mick’s neck stand on end, as if the box itself emanated wrongness.

Mick felt like a man who’d lost his night vision goggles in hostile territory. His detective instincts—once sharp enough to make him a rising star at the Met—now seemed like bringing a magnifying glass to study a black hole. He tensed as Reeves lifted the lid, bracing for whatever supernatural backlash might follow.

Nothing happened. Inside lay neatly organised legal files—prosecution notes, evidence lists, witness statements, and trial transcripts. Reeves began methodically examining each document, her police training evident in her careful handling of the aged papers.

“Wells was thorough,” she commented, leafing through a sheaf of handwritten notes. “Every aspect of the case documented in detail.”

Mick leaned over her shoulder, studying the papers. The familiar rhythms of a prosecution case unfolded before them—evidence collection, witness preparation, strategy notes for undermining defence arguments. It was textbook prosecutorial work, meticulous and comprehensive.

Too comprehensive, Mick realised as patterns began to emerge.

“Look at this,” he said, pointing to a section of Wells’s trial notes. “He knew the evidence was compromised. There are notes here about inconsistencies in the police reports, questions about the chain of custody for the weapon. He knew the case had problems.”

Reeves nodded, her expression hardening. “And here—notes about pressuring witnesses, coaching their testimony. He was deliberately building a case he knew was flawed.”

As they continued examining the files, the outlines of a deliberate miscarriage of justice became clearer. Wells had systematically constructed a prosecution that highlighted circumstantial evidence while burying exculpatory information. Notes in the margins revealed his awareness of the ethical boundaries he was crossing, yet he had proceeded regardless.

Mick pulled out a transcript of the sentencing hearing, where Judge Blackwood had delivered Harrington’s fifteen-year sentence. “Blackwood knew too,” he said, pointing to annotations in Wells’s handwriting. “These notes indicate Wells had private conversations with the judge about the case’s weaknesses. They were working together to ensure a conviction.”

“But why?” Reeves asked, her professional detachment momentarily cracking. “Why target Harrington specifically?”

Mick continued sorting through the papers, searching for anything that might explain the prosecutor’s fixation on securing this particular

conviction. Near the bottom of the box, he found a thin file folder marked only with the initials “P.W.”

Inside was a single sheet of paper—handwritten case notes in Wells’s meticulous script, dated during Harrington’s trial:

Harrington case presents evidence concerns. Career implications significant. Blackwood amenable to our approach despite inconsistencies. Will discuss with Morris after court—need his testimony angles solidified before closing.

The notes were sparse but telling—a prosecutor acknowledging problems with a case while pushing forward anyway, prioritising career advancement over justice.

“Morris,” Mick repeated, showing the notes to Reeves. “Detective Harold Morris—we should look into him next.”

“A prosecutor acknowledging evidence problems but proceeding anyway,” Reeves summarised, her expression hardening. “Wells was willing to convict someone despite knowing the case had issues.”

“The question is how deep this goes,” Mick said, continuing to examine the files. “These notes suggest Blackwood was involved too, but we need more evidence before jumping to conclusions.”

Before Reeves could respond, the temperature in the basement plummeted. Their breath clouded in front of them, and the recessed lights flickered ominously. A distant sound reached them—the rustle of paper, thousands of sheets moving simultaneously, like a whispering tide.

“We need to go,” Mick said urgently, gathering the key documents they’d discovered. “Now.”

They moved toward the stairs, Mick’s damaged leg protesting with each step. Behind them, the rustling grew louder, more insistent. Glancing back, Mick saw papers beginning to slide from boxes on the shelves, drifting to the floor with unnatural slowness, as if suspended in liquid rather than air.

As they reached the stairs, the basement door slammed shut above them with a metallic boom that echoed through the confined space. Reeves rushed forward, trying the handle—locked.

“Damn it,” she hissed, pulling out her phone. “No signal.”

The rustling behind them intensified, becoming a roar of shifting paper. Documents were now flying from the shelves, swirling in a vortex of white that engulfed the basement floor. In the centre of the maelstrom, a figure began to form—not physical, but composed of swirling pages, a humanoid shape with hollow spaces where eyes should be.

Mick backed against the stairs, one hand instinctively reaching for Marchosias’s power before encountering that terrible void again. Without the demon’s protection, he felt naked before whatever force was manifesting.

“Thomas Harrington,” he called out, hoping communication might delay whatever was coming. “We’re not your enemies. We’re trying to understand what happened to you.”

The paper figure tilted its head, the movement oddly birdlike and unsettling. Pages shifted and rearranged, creating a crude approximation of a face—young, with hollow eyes that somehow conveyed decades of patient hatred despite being formed from nothing but swirling documents.

When it spoke, the voice emerged not from the paper construct but from everywhere at once—thousands of pages vibrating in unison to create words that felt like they were being whispered directly into Mick’s skull.

“They took my voice,” it hissed, the sound like sandpaper on stone. *“They filled my mouth with lies and silenced the truth.”*

The paper figure raised its arms, and documents began flying toward them with increasing speed, the edges sharp as razors. Reeves ducked as a sheet sliced past her cheek, leaving a thin line of blood.

“We’re investigating what they did to you,” Mick persisted, shielding his face with his arm as papers whipped around them. “We know there were problems with your case.”

The assault paused momentarily, pages hanging suspended in the air like frozen raindrops. The figure’s head tilted again, regarding them with those terrible hollow eyes.

“Five silenced me,” it whispered. *“Five who knew the truth and chose lies.”*

Mick seized the opening. “We’re trying to understand what happened. Help us find the truth about your case.”

The figure seemed to consider this, its paper body rippling with what might have been contemplation. Then, with shocking suddenness, it disintegrated, pages scattering across the basement floor. The temperature began to normalise, and the basement door clicked open above them.

Reeves didn’t wait for a second invitation, hurrying up the stairs with Mick following as quickly as his damaged leg would allow. They emerged into the kitchen, slamming the basement door behind them and leaning against it as if expecting pursuit.

“What the hell was that?” Reeves demanded, her composure finally cracking. “Direct contact with Harrington’s spirit?”

“A manifestation,” Mick confirmed, breathing heavily. “More controlled than what Blackwood and Keene experienced. He’s getting stronger, more focused.”

“We need to find out how far this goes. Who else is involved,” Reeves said, dabbing at the cut on her cheek with a tissue. “and find them before Harrington does...”

“We might be able to stop the cycle,” Mick finished. “But we need to move quickly. Especially from what we’ve seen of Harrington’s methods.”

They moved toward the front door, eager to leave the oppressive atmosphere of Wells's home. As they passed through the living room, Mick noticed something that hadn't been there when they entered—a legal document lying open on the coffee table.

"Reeves," he called, approaching cautiously.

The document was a transcript page from Harrington's trial, showing the testimony of a witness identified as "J. Patterson." The testimony was circled in what appeared to be fresh ink, with a single word scrawled in the margin: "LIAR."

"James Patterson," Reeves read, studying the page. "A key prosecution witness in Harrington's case."

"Could be important," Mick said, carefully folding the page and placing it in his pocket. "Another thread to follow."

As he turned away from the coffee table, movement caught his eye in the large decorative mirror hanging on the wall. For just an instant, he saw not his own reflection but Samuel Wells standing behind him—his mouth grotesquely distended, legal papers protruding from between blue-tinged lips, eyes bulging with terror as he clawed at his own throat.

When Mick spun around, the room was empty.

"Time to go," he said, his voice rougher than he'd intended. The apparition had seemed too vivid to be mere imagination—a glimpse, perhaps, of Wells's final moments as Harrington's vengeful spirit had enacted its particular justice.

Before they left the study, Mick scanned the bookshelves one last time, searching for anything else that might connect to Harrington's case. Finding nothing obvious, he turned to leave—and froze.

In the doorway stood Samuel Wells.

Not the Wells of the crime scene photos, not the corpse with papers stuffed down his throat, but Wells as he must have appeared in the weeks before his death. He wore an expensive suit, perfectly tailored, his silver hair immaculately styled. But his eyes held a haunted look, and his skin had an unnatural pallor that spoke of sleepless nights and growing terror.

Mick blinked, and the figure was gone—just a momentary hallucination, a product of his exhaustion and the oppressive atmosphere of the house.

“Did you see that?” he asked Reeves, who was gathering the remaining documents.

“See what?”

“Nothing,” Mick muttered, chalking it up to stress and the absence of Marchosias’s stabilising influence. “Let’s get out of here.”

As they headed for the front door, Mick couldn’t shake the feeling they were witnessing only fragments of what Wells had experienced in his final days. The full horror of his demise remained hidden, echoing through the empty rooms like whispers just below the threshold of hearing.

On the drive back to the Yard, Mick stared out the window, his mind racing with connections and implications. The emptiness where Marchosias should be ached like a phantom limb, particularly acute during moments of supernatural encounter. He found himself longing for the demon’s sardonic commentary, for the ancient knowledge that would have made sense of what they were facing.

“You’re quiet,” Reeves observed, glancing at him as she navigated through evening traffic.

“I’m thinking about Wells,” Mick replied, though it wasn’t entirely true. “The way he died—forced to consume the evidence he’d manipulated, silenced by the lies he’d used in court. Harrington’s vengeance has a certain symmetry to it.”

“Poetic justice doesn’t make it less horrific,” Reeves said sharply.

“I didn’t say it did,” Mick countered. “But understanding the pattern helps us predict what might happen to others involved. Harrington mentioned five people. We know about Blackwood, Wells, and Keene. That leaves two more we need to identify.”

“We should look into Detective Morris and this Patterson witness,” Reeves said, her detective instincts engaging. “If they were part of what happened to Harrington, they could be in danger.”

“Agreed,” Mick said with a nod. “We need to locate them quickly. This pattern of vengeance seems to be accelerating.”

As Reeves nodded in agreement, Mick caught his reflection in the side mirror. For a moment—just the briefest instant—he thought he saw Marchosias looking back at him, the demon’s black eyes filled with what might have been concern. Then it was gone, leaving only his own haggard face and the emptiness that grew more unbearable with each passing hour.

The hunt for the remaining names on Harrington’s list had become a race against time, with lives hanging in the balance. Without Marchosias’s power and knowledge, Mick felt handicapped, reduced to human methods against a supernatural threat. Yet as they drove back to begin the search, he felt a grim determination taking root.

Ghost or not, Thomas Harrington was following a pattern, leaving a trail that any good detective could follow. And Mick had been a good detective long before a demon took up residence in his mind.

It was time to prove he still was.

8 Evidence Room

The Metropolitan Police evidence storage facility at Lambeth Road stood like a fortress against the early morning mist. Three stories of concrete and steel where the physical remnants of London's criminal history were catalogued, preserved, and forgotten. Behind its reinforced doors lay everything from shoplifting tags to murder weapons, all waiting in climate-controlled silence.

Mick slouched in the passenger seat of Reeves's car, his left leg stretched awkwardly into the footwell to ease the constant throbbing. Four days without Marchosias's presence had intensified every physical ailment he'd grown accustomed to ignoring. The pain in his leg was now a persistent companion, sharp and insistent when he moved, dull and gnawing when he didn't.

"This isn't going to work," he muttered, eyeing the security cameras monitoring the facility's entrance. "They know I'm not on the force any more. I'll be recognised."

Reeves checked her watch. "Shift change in ten minutes. O'Malley's on duty this morning—his eyesight's getting worse, but he's too proud to admit it. And he owes me a favour."

"A favour big enough to risk his job smuggling an ex-copper into evidence storage?"

"He doesn't need to know that part." Reeves reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a visitor's badge. "Put this on. Keep your head down, let me do the talking, and try to look like you still belong there."

"So act like I did when I actually worked for the Met?" Mick's attempt at humour fell flat, his voice hollow without Marchosias's silent commentary to sharpen it.

“Plus a shave wouldn’t have hurt,” Reeves muttered, eyeing his stubble that was rapidly approaching beard territory. “You look more homeless than detective right now.”

She wasn’t wrong. The past few days had taken their toll, leaving Mick with bloodshot eyes and a perpetual tremor in his hands. Sleep had become a rare commodity, disturbed by dreams that might have been Marchosias attempting to reach him or simply his own fractured psyche responding to the void in his mind. Either way, he woke each morning more exhausted than when he’d fallen asleep.

“Let’s just get on with it,” he said, clipping the visitor badge to his jacket.

They approached the facility’s entrance with Reeves leading, her bearing every inch the confident DI with business to conduct. Mick kept close behind, eyes lowered, focusing on the rhythm of their footsteps against the pavement. The security door buzzed open as Reeves swiped her access card, and they entered a small reception area where a heavysset man with thinning grey hair manned the security desk.

“Inspector Reeves,” the man greeted, squinting slightly as he looked up from his crossword puzzle. “Bit early, aren’t you?”

“Morning, O’Malley. Just need to review some evidence for the Blackwood case.” She gestured vaguely toward Mick. “My colleague here is helping with some background details.”

O’Malley peered at Mick with watery eyes that struggled to focus. “Don’t think I’ve seen you around before.”

“Transferred in from West London,” Mick said, keeping his voice neutral and his face partially turned away. “Just helping the inspector connect some dots.”

“Right, right.” O’Malley nodded, reaching for the sign-in sheet. “Names and badge numbers, please.”

Reeves signed her name with a flourish, then handed the pen to Mick. He scrawled an illegible signature and a random series of numbers, banking on O'Malley's failing eyesight.

"And what exactly are you looking for today?" O'Malley asked, reaching for the keyboard of his ancient computer terminal.

"Multiple cases," Reeves replied. "The Morris file from 2022, Wells from 2023, and we need to cross-reference with some older cases from the eighties."

O'Malley sighed, his fingers hovering uncertainly over the keyboard. "That's going to take some doing. The older cases aren't all in the system yet."

"I know it's a pain," Reeves said, leaning against the counter with a sympathetic smile. "But it would really help us out, especially with the Commissioner breathing down our necks on this one."

At the mention of the Commissioner, O'Malley straightened slightly. "Right, well, let me see what I can do."

He began laboriously typing, muttering under his breath about the computer system. Reeves caught Mick's eye with a subtle nod toward the corridor beyond the security desk.

"Actually, O'Malley," she said, her voice pitched to sound casual, "while you're looking that up, do you mind if I borrow your facilities? Been a long drive over."

"Of course, Inspector. You know where they are."

As Reeves headed toward the toilets, O'Malley turned his attention back to Mick. "Must be important if they've got teams working on it this early."

Mick made a non-committal sound, shifting his weight to ease the pressure on his leg. "You know how it is. High-profile case, everyone wants results yesterday."

O'Malley nodded sagely. "Been that way for thirty years, mate. Nothing changes except the paperwork—there's always more of that."

The computer terminal beeped, drawing O'Malley's attention. "Ah, here we are. Morris, Harold. Evidence is in Section C, Row 14. Wells is in Section D, Row 8. The older cases..." he squinted at the screen, "might be in the archive room. Physical logs only for anything pre-1995."

"We'll start with the recent ones," Mick said.

Reeves returned, catching the tail end of the conversation. "Find everything, O'Malley?"

"Section C and D for the recent cases. Archive for the older ones."

"Perfect," Reeves said. "Listen, while we're here, I wanted to ask you about that fishing trip you mentioned last month. My brother's been talking about getting into it, and I thought you might have some tips."

O'Malley's face lit up. "Well, now, that depends on what he's looking to catch..."

As O'Malley launched into an enthusiastic dissertation on the merits of various fishing techniques, Reeves gave Mick a subtle nod. Taking the cue, he slipped past the security desk and down the corridor, the sound of O'Malley's fishing expertise fading behind him.

The evidence storage area was a cavernous space divided into neat sections by high metal shelving that disappeared into the gloom. The Met's recent eco-initiative had replaced the old lighting system with motion-activated LEDs, creating islands of harsh white illumination that followed Mick while leaving the rest of the warehouse in unsettling darkness. As he moved between the rows, lights clicked on overhead with mechanical precision while those behind him extinguished after thirty seconds, as if the darkness was constantly pursuing him.

The air held the distinct scent of cardboard and preservatives, undercut with the faint mustiness of aged paper and the sterile, metallic tang that

seemed unique to police evidence storage. The silence was absolute except for the soft click of the sensors detecting motion and the almost imperceptible hum of the LED panels as they awakened. Each sound seemed magnified in the stillness, the vast darkness surrounding his small pocket of light making the space feel both claustrophobic and endlessly vast.

Section C emerged from the darkness as he approached, marked with a large blue sign. Following the numbered rows, Mick found Row 14 and began scanning the shelves for Harold Morris's evidence box. The motion sensors triggered new lights as he moved deeper into the row, while the entrance fell back into darkness. The sensation of being cut off from escape sent a prickle of unease down his spine. The rows were meticulously organised, each box labelled with a case number and date. About halfway down, he found what he was looking for: "Morris, H. – Suspicious Death – 28/03/2022."

The box was sealed with evidence tape, but Mick had come prepared. From his pocket, he withdrew a small utility knife and carefully sliced through the tape, making a mental note to reseal it before leaving. Inside, he found the standard materials of a suspicious death investigation: photographs, bagged items, and a thick case file.

He began with the autopsy report. Harold Morris, age 67, had been found dead in his flat in Croydon. Cause of death: asphyxiation due to plastic evidence bags sealed over his head with evidence tape wrapped tightly around his neck. Initial investigation suggested suicide, though the report noted the unusual method and some inconsistencies in the scene.

As Mick studied the crime scene photographs, the LED lights above him flickered, their sterile white glow momentarily fading to an unnatural bluish tint. The surrounding air seemed to thicken, becoming difficult to draw into his lungs. The photograph in his hand—Morris slumped in his chair, plastic evidence bags pulled tight over his head—began to ripple, the image distorting as if viewed through water.

Mick tried to drop the photograph, but his fingers wouldn't respond. Instead, the image expanded, crawling up his arms like liquid, enveloping his field of vision until the evidence room disappeared entirely.

He was in Morris's flat—not as an observer but as Morris himself. His hands—Morris's hands—trembled violently as they held a stack of evidence bags, the plastic rustling with an unnatural loudness in the quiet room. Files surrounded him, spread across every surface like an accusatory sea of paper, each one containing evidence of his corruption, his lies, his role in destroying Thomas Harrington's life.

Mick felt Morris's terror as if it were his own, the desperate knowledge that there was no escape from what was coming. The mirror on the wall opposite showed not Morris's reflection but Thomas Harrington, standing directly behind him, though when Morris turned, there was nothing there but more stacks of files.

He tried to speak, to beg, but his mouth—Morris's mouth—wouldn't form the words. Instead, his hands moved with jerky, puppet-like motions that fought against his will. He watched in helpless horror as they raised an evidence bag to his face, the plastic clinging to his nostrils and mouth as he tried to inhale.

His body fought the intrusion, instinct overriding whatever force controlled him. His hands clawed at the plastic, fingernails tearing at the impermeable barrier, but other hands—hands that weren't there, that couldn't be there—seized his wrists, forcing them down. The strength of the invisible grip was impossible, immovable as stone, cold as ice against his skin.

A second bag was pulled over the first, then a third, each one further muffling his increasingly desperate attempts to breathe. Clear plastic fogged with condensation from his panicked exhalations, clinging to the contours of his face like a second skin. Through the layers, the room took on a distorted quality, objects stretching and warping at the edges of his vision.

His lungs began to burn, demanded oxygen that couldn't penetrate the multiple layers of plastic. The pain was exquisite in its intensity, radiating from his chest through his entire body. His fingers, still restrained by invisible hands, contorted into claws that scratched uselessly at the air.

Evidence tape appeared in his field of vision, floating as if held by unseen hands. It wrapped around his neck with deliberate, measured movements, the adhesive bonding to the plastic bags and to his skin, sealing his fate with each circuit. The pressure increased as layer upon layer of tape tightened, compressing his throat until the blood pounded in his temples and blackness began to creep in from the edges of his vision.

His body convulsed, animal panic overriding conscious thought. Overturned, he found himself on the floor, thrashing wildly, heels drumming against the wooden boards as his oxygen-starved muscles seized and spasmed. Files scattered in his death throes, papers fluttering around him like macabre confetti.

As consciousness began to fade, his gaze fixed on a final terrible sight—his own reflection in a fallen picture frame, but with Thomas Harrington's eyes staring back from within his suffocating face, watching with cold satisfaction as justice claimed another architect of his destruction.

Mick came back to himself on his knees in the evidence room, gasping desperately for air, his hands clawing at his throat where phantom tape had been only moments before. Cold sweat soaked his shirt, and tears streamed involuntarily from his eyes. The LED lights had returned to normal, creating a small island of sterile illumination in the surrounding darkness.

The Morris file lay scattered around him where he'd dropped it during his vision. With trembling hands, he gathered the materials, unable to look at the photographs again. The visceral experience of Morris's death had left him shaken in a way that went beyond normal horror—he hadn't just seen it; he had lived it, felt every second of terror and suffocation as if it were happening to him.

Without Marchosias's presence to buffer such experiences, the supernatural intrusion had struck with full force, leaving him raw and vulnerable. He finished repacking the evidence box with unsteady hands, suddenly eager to be away from this place of catalogued deaths and preserved tragedies.

One image caught his attention—a close-up of Morris's desk showing a notepad with writing visible. Mick squinted, trying to make out the words. The handwriting was shaky, desperate, trailing off into illegibility at the edges: "The mirrors. This is justice for—" The rest was too scrawled to read.

Moving deeper into the file, Mick found witness statements from Morris's neighbours and former colleagues. One statement from a former partner described Morris as "increasingly paranoid" in the weeks before his death, claiming his flat was filling with evidence from old cases, speaking of voices coming from his bathroom mirror.

"Same pattern," Mick whispered. "Mirrors, hallucinations, then death."

He continued examining the contents of the box, finding a small evidence bag containing fragments of glass labelled "Found embedded in victim's hand." According to the notes, Morris had apparently smashed his bathroom mirror shortly before his death, the glass fragments still lodged in his skin when his body was discovered.

As he replaced the items in the box, a slight movement caught his eye—a shadow shifting at the end of the row where there shouldn't have been one. Mick froze, straining to hear any sound of another person in the evidence room. Nothing but the ambient hum of the lights and the distant murmur of the building's air handling system.

"Getting jumpy," he muttered to himself, closing the Morris box and resealing it with fresh evidence tape from his pocket.

Moving on to Section D, Mick located the evidence box for Samuel Wells. The materials inside largely confirmed what they'd already discovered at

Wells's home—ritual death disguised as suicide, preceded by increasing paranoia and hallucinations involving legal documents forcing themselves down his throat.

What was new, however, was a small pocket notebook found in Wells's desk drawer, its pages filled with increasingly desperate entries:

May 4, 2023: It's happening again. More papers appearing in my house that I never brought home. The taste of ink won't leave my mouth no matter how much I brush.

May 8, 2023: Found myself at the Old Bailey archives last night with no memory of going there. Security footage shows I was pulling Harrington files. I DON'T REMEMBER THIS.

May 12, 2023: They're coming through the glass now. Not just mirrors—windows, picture frames, even my watch face. Always watching, always waiting. Morris was right. Do I deserve this?

The final entry was dated June 13, 2023, the day before Wells's death: *I can't escape what's in the glass. It knows what I did. The truth will force itself into all of us eventually.*

A chill that had nothing to do with the room's temperature ran down Mick's spine. The pattern was unmistakable now—each victim experienced a personalised hell reflecting their role in Harrington's case before dying in a manner that symbolically mirrored their crimes against him.

With the Wells box resealed and replaced, Mick moved toward the archive room at the far end of the evidence storage area. Here, cases predating the digital system were stored in ageing cardboard boxes, organised by year and case number. The room smelled of dust and old paper, the lights flickering intermittently as if struggling against the weight of time contained within.

Finding the Harrington case would require the original case number. Mick approached a terminal in the corner of the room and entered “Harrington, Thomas” into the search field. The system churned for several seconds before returning a result: “Case #87-4429, Crown v. Harrington. Old Bailey, 1987.”

As he moved away from the terminal, the surrounding lights dimmed, leaving him in a pocket of illumination that seemed to shrink with each step into the older archives. Here, the motion sensors were spaced further apart, creating larger zones of darkness between each pool of light. The shadows between the shelves seemed to thicken as he moved deeper into the room, the darkness almost palpable against his skin. The intermittent rhythm of lights clicking on and off marked his progress like a mechanical heartbeat, each transition between darkness and light momentarily disorienting.

Following the archival organisation system, Mick located the corresponding shelf and began searching for the case number. The box, when he found it, was smaller than he’d expected, worn at the corners and covered in a fine layer of dust that suggested it hadn’t been accessed in years. The particles danced in the harsh LED beam, creating a momentary halo effect before settling back onto the cardboard surface.

Inside were the expected materials: arrest records, evidence logs, witness statements, and trial transcripts. But as Mick began examining the contents more carefully, inconsistencies emerged. Evidence logs showed items that were never presented at trial. Witness statements appeared to have been selectively included, with several marked “Not for disclosure” in what looked like Detective Morris’s handwriting.

Most damning was a folder marked “Confidential” containing photographs of the crime scene—an armed robbery at a jewellery store in Hatton Garden. The official case had Morris identifying Harrington from security footage, but the actual images in the folder showed a perpetrator whose build and features were markedly different from Harrington’s booking

photos. Someone had deliberately misidentified him, and the evidence suggested Morris had been instrumental in that deception.

As Mick continued piecing together the truth of Harrington's wrongful conviction, the temperature in the archive room seemed to drop. His breath fogged in front of him, and the motion-sensor lights began to malfunction, flickering erratically and triggering in areas where no movement should be detected. Sections of the room previously swallowed by darkness now pulsed with cold light, creating a disorienting strobe effect that made the shelves and their contents appear to shift and waver.

A soft rustling sound drew his attention to the far corner of the room, where case files had begun to slide from their shelves, landing on the floor with quiet thuds. One by one, the folders began to open, papers spilling out and arranging themselves across the floor like pieces of a puzzle seeking to form a complete picture.

Mick backed toward the door, his damaged leg protesting as he moved too quickly. The rustling intensified, more files joining the uncanny choreography of documents flowing across the concrete floor. They began to form a pattern—concentric circles of paper surrounding the spot where Mick stood, creating what looked disturbingly like a target.

The air grew colder still, his breath now clouding heavily with each exhalation. The door behind him seemed miles away, though logically he knew it was only a few metres. The papers continued their inexorable movement, forming layers that built upon one another until they began to rise from the floor, taking shape like a three-dimensional model being constructed by invisible hands.

What emerged was the rough outline of a room—a small, confined space with proportions Mick recognised immediately: a prison cell. Case files formed the walls, evidence bags the sparse furnishings. In the centre, incident reports coalesced into the shape of a narrow bed where a human figure seemed to be forming.

“Stop,” Mick said, his voice echoing strangely in the unnaturally cold room. “Thomas Harrington, I’m trying to help you.”

The papers paused in their movement, hovering momentarily as if considering his words. Then, with shocking suddenness, they collapsed, falling to the floor in a disordered heap. The temperature began to normalise, and the lights steadied their rhythm.

Taking advantage of the momentary calm, Mick gathered the materials he’d found in the Harrington box and shoved them into his jacket pockets. He wouldn’t have time to properly examine everything, but he could take enough to continue the investigation elsewhere.

As he turned to leave, a reflection in the glass panel of the archive room door caught his eye. For just an instant, he saw not himself but Harold Morris—his face contorted in terror, plastic evidence bags pulled tight over his head, eyes bulging as he clawed desperately at the evidence tape wound around his neck.

The vision lasted only a second before dissolving back into Mick’s own haggard reflection. But it was enough to send him lurching through the door and back into the main evidence storage area, his heart hammering against his ribs.

He had nearly reached Section C when a voice called out, stopping him cold.

“Oi! You there! What are you doing?”

A young evidence technician Mick didn’t recognise stood at the end of the row, his expression shifting from confusion to suspicion as he took in Mick’s visitor badge and dishevelled appearance.

“Official business,” Mick said, forcing authority into his voice despite the tremor running through him. “Inspector Reeves authorised my access.”

The technician frowned. “All visitors are supposed to be accompanied by staff. Where’s your escort?”

Before Mick could formulate a response, Reeves's voice cut through the tension. "He's with me, Phillips." She strode toward them, her posture radiating official purpose. "Special consultant on the Blackwood case. Commissioner's office is breathing down our necks."

The technician wavered visibly, caught between procedure and the implied pressure from above. "I should have been notified—"

"Paperwork's probably still making its way through the system," Reeves said dismissively. "You know how it is. Now, if you'll excuse us, we've found what we needed and have a briefing to attend."

She placed a hand on Mick's elbow, guiding him firmly toward the exit. They passed through the main security area where O'Malley was still at his post, now deeply engrossed in his crossword puzzle again.

"Find everything you needed?" he called without looking up.

"Just about," Reeves replied smoothly. "Thanks for your help."

They maintained a measured pace until they reached the car, where Mick collapsed into the passenger seat, his hands shaking as he removed the visitor badge.

"What happened in there?" Reeves asked, starting the engine. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Something like that," Mick replied, his voice rough. "The archive room... papers started moving on their own. Forming shapes. It was trying to show me something about Morris's connection to Harrington."

"Did you learn anything useful before the paranormal filing system activated?"

Mick nodded, pulling the documents from his pockets. "Morris deliberately falsified evidence to convict Harrington. The security footage they claimed identified him showed someone completely different. And Morris died the same way as the others—experiencing a personalised hell

reflecting his crimes before a staged ‘suicide’ that symbolically mirrored what he did to Harrington.”

“So that’s three confirmed victims: Keene, Wells, and Morris.” Reeves pulled away from the evidence facility, heading back toward the Yard. “And Blackwood makes four. Harrington mentioned five people who silenced him. We’re still missing one.”

“The witness,” Mick said, remembering the transcript page they’d found at Wells’s house. “James Patterson. The eyewitness whose testimony sealed Harrington’s fate.”

“If he’s still alive, he’s in serious danger,” Reeves said, accelerating through a yellow light. “We need to find him before Harrington does.”

As they drove, Mick sorted through the stolen documents, trying to construct a timeline of Harrington’s wrongful conviction and the subsequent deaths of those responsible. Without Marchosias’s perfect recall and pattern recognition, the task felt overwhelming, connections slipping away as soon as he thought he’d grasped them.

“Thirty years between the original crime and the first death,” he muttered, more to focus his own thoughts than to inform Reeves. “Why wait so long for vengeance?”

“Maybe something triggered it,” Reeves suggested. “Something that happened three years ago when Morris died.”

“Or someone,” Mick added, studying a notation in the file. “There’s a mention here of Harrington’s next of kin—his father, William Harrington. Listed as his only visitor during his time at Belmarsh.” He flipped through more pages. “His address at the time was in Stepney. We should see if he’s still alive, find out what he knows.”

He broke off as a searing pain lanced through his skull, momentarily blinding him. The documents slipped from his hands, scattering across the footwell as he pressed his palms against his temples.

“What happened?” Reeves asked, alarmed by his sudden distress.

“Headache,” Mick managed through gritted teeth. “Been getting them since...” He didn’t need to finish the sentence. Since the binding stone had silenced Marchosias, they both knew.

The pain subsided to a dull throb, leaving him drained but strangely focused. “William Harrington,” he repeated. “Father of an innocent man who died in prison. That’s a powerful motive for seeking justice, no matter how long it takes.”

“You think the father could be behind this somehow?” Reeves asked, sceptical but considering.

“Not directly. He’d be in his seventies or eighties now if he’s still alive. But he might know something that explains why the hauntings started recently instead of thirty years ago.”

Mick nodded, still reeling from the momentary pain. As if Marchosias was trying to break through the binding stone’s effects. Could it mean there was hope of restoring their link?

In the meantime, they had a name to pursue and potentially a life to save. James Patterson, the witness whose testimony had helped send an innocent man to prison and eventually to his death. If the pattern held, Patterson was experiencing the early stages of haunting now, seeing reflections that shouldn’t exist, hearing voices from empty rooms.

Time was running out, both for Patterson and for Mick’s hope of reconnecting with Marchosias before the binding became permanent. As London flashed by outside the car windows, Mick gathered the scattered documents, more determined than ever to uncover the full truth behind Thomas Harrington’s decades-old quest for justice.

The sun broke through the clouds as they approached New Scotland Yard, illuminating the car’s interior with harsh clarity. In the passenger window’s

reflection, Mick caught a glimpse of something behind him—a faint outline of a young man with hollow eyes, watching him with patient intent.

When he turned to look, there was nothing there but the empty back seat and the growing certainty that whatever force fuelled Harrington's vengeance, it was aware of their investigation and watching their every move with the cold, calculating patience of the long-dead who have nothing but time.

9 The Missing Piece

The magnetic whiteboard dominated Mick's cramped living room, transforming the space into an extension of the investigation. Black dry-wipe marker lines connected photographs, documents, and handwritten notes in a complex web that spilled beyond the board's boundaries onto the adjacent wall. In the centre hung Thomas Harrington's prison intake photo—a young man with defiant eyes that seemed to follow Mick as he moved around the room. Surrounding it were the faces of the dead: Blackwood, stern in his judicial robes; Wells, smiling at some legal function; Keene, stiff in his prison guard uniform; and Morris, receiving a commendation decades earlier.

An empty bottle of supermarket-brand bourbon sat on the coffee table beside a single tumbler, smudged with fingerprints from repeated use. The familiar ritual—pour, drink, repeat—no longer provided the comfort or clarity it once had. Without Marchosias, alcohol only dulled his already compromised senses. He needed to remain sharp, especially now that sleep had become an exercise in horror, filled with fragmented visions that might be Marchosias attempting to reach him or simply his mind processing the case in increasingly disturbing ways.

“Here's what we know,” Mick said, gesturing toward the board as Reeves entered with two cups of coffee. “Four deaths, all connected to Thomas Harrington's wrongful conviction in 1987. Each victim experienced hallucinations specific to their role in his case before dying in ways that symbolically mirrored their crimes against him.”

Reeves handed him a chipped mug of coffee that smelled strong enough to strip paint. “And all experienced some form of haunting through reflective surfaces before their deaths.”

The coffee scalded Mick's tongue, but he welcomed the pain—another anchor to reality in a case that kept slipping into the supernatural.

“Harrington mentioned five people who silenced him. We’re still missing one.”

“James Patterson.” Reeves tapped the photograph of a nervous-looking man in his twenties, testifying in court. “The witness who placed Harrington at the scene of the robbery. I’ve got officers trying to track him down, but he’s proving difficult to locate.”

“If he’s still alive, he’s in imminent danger.” Mick limped to the board and examined the timeline they’d constructed. “Morris died three years ago, initiating the pattern. Then Wells two years ago, Keene last year, and now Blackwood. The intervals are shrinking.”

“Which suggests Patterson doesn’t have much time,” Reeves concluded, studying the board. “Assuming he’s still in the UK. His last known address was in Reading, but that was five years ago. It’s like he’s disappeared.”

Mick’s damaged leg throbbed as he paced the small confines of his flat. Without Marchosias dulling the chronic pain, each step was a reminder of his limitations. “What about William Harrington? Any luck finding Thomas’s father?”

Reeves shook her head. “No death certificate on file, but no current records either. His last known address was a small flat in Stepney, but the building was demolished in 2010 for redevelopment. It’s like he simply vanished.”

“Or he’s hiding,” Mick suggested. “A father who watched his son die in prison for a crime he didn’t commit might have good reason to stay off the grid.”

He returned to the board, focusing on a newspaper clipping about Harrington’s conviction. The headline read: “ARMED ROBBER GETS 15 YEARS; JUDGE CITES ‘MENACE TO SOCIETY’.” Below it, a grainy photograph showed Harrington being led from court, his expression a mixture of confusion and terror.

Mick had seen countless defendants over the years, their faces cycling through predictable emotions: defiance, fear, resignation. But there was something in Harrington's eyes that transcended the usual—not the hardened look of a career criminal wrongly caught, but the raw panic of someone watching their life dissolve around them for reasons they couldn't comprehend.

"He knew," Mick said softly. "He knew exactly what was happening to him, and no one would listen."

"The ultimate violation of justice," Reeves agreed. "The system failing at every level, from investigation to prosecution to sentencing."

"And now those who failed him are paying the price." Mick turned away from the board, unable to bear the weight of Harrington's gaze any longer. "Which brings us back to Patterson. If he's next on the list, he's already experiencing the early stages of haunting."

"I've put out requests to access mental health records," Reeves said. "If he's been experiencing supernatural phenomena, he might have sought psychiatric help."

"Smart thinking," Mick acknowledged. "The others might have done the same before their deaths."

Reeves checked her watch and grimaced. "I need to get back to the Yard. Superintendent Grayson wants to see me about the Blackwood case."

"That doesn't sound good," Mick noted, hearing the tension in her voice.

"It isn't. There's pressure from above to close it as a suicide and move on." She gathered her coat, expression hardening. "Standard procedure when a member of the judiciary is involved—minimise scandal, protect the system's reputation."

"Even at the cost of the truth?"

“Especially then.” She paused at the door. “I’ll update you after the meeting.”

With Reeves gone, the flat seemed suddenly too quiet, the silence broken only by the occasional passing car outside and the persistent ticking of the wall clock. Mick turned back to the whiteboard, studying the connections they’d mapped. Five people who had silenced an innocent man, four now confirmed dead, and Patterson missing.

He needed more information on Patterson. If the man had truly been experiencing Harrington’s hauntings five years ago, it contradicted the timing pattern they’d established with the other victims. Did Harrington target Patterson first?

Mick pulled out his laptop and began searching through old newspaper archives. If Patterson had been a key witness in Harrington’s trial, there might be more information about him in contemporary reports. The search yielded little at first—brief mentions of “witness J. Patterson” in articles about the conviction, but nothing substantial about the man himself.

Switching tactics, Mick accessed one of the unofficial databases he still had access to through former police contacts—a resource that wasn’t strictly legal but had proven invaluable in his private investigations. He entered Patterson’s full name and last known address in Reading.

The results painted a picture of a man with a troubled past even before Harrington’s conviction. Minor convictions for theft and fraud in his early twenties, followed by a string of addresses across southern England, never staying in one place for more than a year or two. Employment history showed similar instability—retail jobs, warehouse work, security guard positions, all short-term.

Most interesting was a note from 2015—a police report filed by Patterson claiming someone was breaking into his flat in Reading and “moving things around.” The investigating officer had found no evidence of forced

entry and noted that Patterson appeared “paranoid and possibly intoxicated.” The case was closed without further action.

2015—seven years ago, and two years before Patterson was admitted to the psychiatric hospital. If Harrington’s hauntings had begun that early, it suggested a much longer timeline than they’d assumed. Perhaps the vengeful spirit had been hunting all five men simultaneously, only succeeding in killing them in the past three years.

As Mick was noting this new information, his phone rang—an unknown number. He hesitated before answering, remembering the mysterious text message in his dream.

“Hargraves,” he answered cautiously.

Silence greeted him, then a faint sound like static, or perhaps running water. Just as he was about to hang up, a voice spoke—distant and distorted, as if coming through layers of interference.

“He sees through the glass.”

The voice was male, elderly, trembling with either age or fear. Then the line went dead.

Mick stared at the phone, pulse quickening. He tried calling the number back, but it went straight to an automated message saying the number was not in service.

He added the call to his notes, unsure of its significance but certain it wasn’t coincidental. The phrase—“He sees through the glass”—echoed what they already knew about Harrington’s method of haunting his victims through reflective surfaces.

The remaining hours before Reeves’s return passed in a blur of research, note-taking, and growing unease. Every reflective surface in the flat seemed to hold potential danger, yet Mick found himself drawn to them, checking mirrors and windows for glimpses of Harrington—or perhaps Marchosias, trying to break through his supernatural silence.

Three hours later, Reeves returned to Mick's flat, her controlled demeanour barely concealing her fury. She closed the door with measured care that spoke of barely contained anger.

"That bad?" Mick asked, pouring her a generous measure of bourbon in his lone tumbler.

She accepted the glass and downed half its contents in one swallow. "Worse. Grayson has officially ordered me off the Blackwood case. Said I'm 'wasting valuable department resources on a clear-cut suicide.'"

"Department politics," Mick said, unsurprised. "They want it wrapped up neatly."

"It's more than that." Reeves sank onto his battered sofa. "When I mentioned the connection to Morris, Wells, and Keene, he shut me down immediately. Said any suggestion of a connection would 'unnecessarily complicate matters.'"

"Bureaucratic avoidance?"

"No, something else." She leaned forward, voice dropping. "He knew about Harrington's case—specifically. Mentioned him by name before I did."

Mick raised an eyebrow. "That's interesting. Grayson would have been what—a young constable in 1987?"

"Exactly. He claimed he barely remembered the case, but his reaction said otherwise. And when I pushed about Patterson's whereabouts, he became overtly hostile." She finished her drink, setting the glass down carefully. "Said if I pursued this further, I'd face disciplinary action. He practically threatened my career."

"You think he's connected somehow?" Mick asked, studying her expression.

“I don’t know. But his reaction was excessive for simple bureaucratic resistance.” She ran a hand through her hair, a gesture of frustration Mick rarely saw from her. “The department’s desperate to avoid any suggestion these deaths are connected.”

“This changes our approach. You can’t be officially involved any more—too risky for your career.”

“I’m not abandoning this investigation,” Reeves said firmly. “But I’ll need to be more careful. Create legitimate excuses for my absences. Any communication will need to be on personal devices, not department channels.”

Mick nodded, appreciating her commitment despite the professional risks. “We need to focus on finding Patterson. If Harrington’s pattern holds, he’s next.”

“My channels are limited now that Grayson’s watching me. But I did manage to get a colleague in Records to check recent hospital admissions—nothing for Patterson within the Greater London area.”

“What about further out?” Mick asked. “If he’s experiencing what the others did, he might have fled, tried to escape whatever’s haunting him.”

“I’ll discreetly expand the search radius,” Reeves promised, already making notes on her phone. “I have a few contacts in various hospitals and clinics who might help off the record.”

“I appreciate your help on this,” Mick said, “especially given the risk to your career.”

Reeves gathered her things. “I need to head out. I’ll check on a few leads that wouldn’t be wise to pursue from the office. I’ll update you later tonight if I learn anything.”

After she left, Mick returned to the whiteboard, focusing on the gaps in their knowledge. The pattern was clear but incomplete: five people connected to Harrington’s wrongful conviction, four now dead, each

experiencing supernatural vengeance tailored to their specific crimes against him.

But something was still missing—the trigger that had initiated the cycle after three decades of dormancy. Mick studied the dates they’d established: Morris died on March 28, 2022, Wells on June 14, 2023, Keene on December 7, 2024, and Blackwood most recently. The intervals were shrinking, suggesting an acceleration in the pattern.

He checked the original case files. Thomas Harrington was convicted on March 28, 1987. Exactly thirty-five years between conviction and the first death. An anniversary, but why wait thirty-five years?

A chill ran through the room, the temperature dropping suddenly as if responding to his realisation. The lights flickered once, then stabilised, but the coldness remained, seeping into his bones and intensifying the ache in his damaged leg.

“Thomas Harrington,” Mick continued, addressing the empty air. “I know what happened to you. I know they framed you for a robbery you didn’t commit. I’m trying to understand why you’ve returned now, after all these years.”

The silence stretched, broken only by the soft ticking of a wall clock and Mick’s own breathing. Then, so sudden it made him flinch, the bathroom door slammed shut with a force that rattled the walls. Water began running from the tap, the sound clearly audible through the closed door.

Mick approached slowly, each step deliberate. “I’m not your enemy, Thomas,” he called over the sound of running water. “I’m trying to uncover the truth.”

He reached for the doorknob, bracing himself for whatever might lie beyond. The metal was ice-cold against his palm, numbing his fingers as he turned it. The door swung open to reveal the small bathroom,

unchanged except for the sink taps running at full blast and the mirror above it completely fogged over.

As he watched, words began forming in the condensation as if traced by an invisible finger:

TOO LATE

The message was crude but unmistakable, the letters dripping like tears down the mirror's surface. Mick stepped closer, ignoring the instinct to retreat.

"Too late for what?" he asked, his breath clouding in the unnaturally cold air.

The water suddenly shut off, leaving an eerie silence. The mirror began to clear as the condensation evaporated, revealing not Mick's reflection but the face of Thomas Harrington—younger than in his prison photo, perhaps as he had been before his arrest. His eyes held none of the defiance from the prison intake photo, only a deep, hollow sadness that transcended death itself.

Harrington's reflection regarded him silently, then slowly raised a hand and pressed it against the glass from the other side. The mirror's surface rippled like water where his palm touched it, creating concentric circles that distorted the image.

Without thinking, Mick mirrored the gesture, placing his own hand against the glass. The cold was intense, burning his skin with its intensity, but he didn't pull away. For a brief moment, he felt something beyond the physical—a connection to the raw pain and rage that had fuelled Harrington's decades of waiting.

Images flashed through his mind like fragmented film clips: a small bookshop with shelves reaching to the ceiling; an old man with Thomas's eyes arranging volumes with trembling hands; a basement room filled with candles and symbols drawn on the floor; blood dripping onto aged paper.

The connection broke as suddenly as it had formed, leaving Mick gasping and disoriented. The mirror now showed only his own reflection, pale and shaken. But the experience had left him with a certainty that hadn't been there before—William Harrington was the key, the missing piece that would explain how Thomas had returned to claim his vengeance.

Mick stumbled back to the living room, his mind racing. The bookshop from the vision—he needed to identify it. He pulled out his laptop, searching for bookshops owned by anyone named Harrington. Nothing current appeared, but an archived newspaper article from 2015 mentioned “Ink and Antiquity”, owned and run by William Harrington, closing after nearly forty years in business, following the owner's sudden disappearance.

The shop had been located in Spitalfields, not far from the Stepney address they had for William Harrington. According to the article, William Harrington had operated the shop since the early 1970s, specialising in occult and metaphysical texts. After his son's conviction, the shop had become increasingly focused on darker materials, developing a reputation in certain circles for acquiring texts on communing with the dead.

The pieces were beginning to align—a grieving father with access to occult knowledge, dedicating decades to finding a way to avenge his son's wrongful death. But something still didn't make sense. If William had found a way to unleash his son's vengeful spirit, why wait until exactly thirty-five years after the conviction?

Unless it wasn't a choice but a requirement—a ritual that could only be performed at a specific anniversary. Or perhaps William himself had died recently, his death somehow freeing or empowering his son's spirit to seek vengeance.

While waiting on Reeves, Mick added the new information about William Harrington to the whiteboard, creating a section dedicated to the father's occult connections. The shop's address in Spitalfields provided a starting

point for tomorrow's investigation. If the building still stood, it might contain clues about William's research and possibly his current whereabouts.

As he worked, the room's temperature gradually normalised, the oppressive presence receding like a tide drawn back to sea. But Mick couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched, evaluated. Harrington's spirit hadn't attacked him as it had the others—instead, it seemed to be using him, allowing him to uncover the connections while staying just beyond his full understanding.

Why? What made him different from Blackwood, Wells, Keene, and Morris? He had no connection to the original case, no role in the miscarriage of justice that had claimed Thomas Harrington's life.

Unless Marchosias was the connection. The demon's mysterious silence coincided too perfectly with his investigation into Harrington's death. The binding stone in Blackwood's possession suggested the judge had been preparing defences against supernatural forces—defences that had failed him but had inadvertently silenced Marchosias instead.

Mick slumped onto the sofa, exhaustion finally catching up with him. The emptiness where Marchosias should be ached like a phantom limb, especially now when he needed the demon's ancient knowledge to make sense of what was happening. For all their initial antagonism, they had evolved into an effective partnership. The silence left by the binding stone was becoming increasingly unbearable.

"I know you're still there," Mick whispered, addressing the void in his mind. "I can almost feel you trying to break through."

No response came, not even the faintest impression of the demon's presence. The binding stone's effects showed no signs of weakening, the barrier between them as impenetrable as ever.

Pushing himself up from the sofa, Mick moved to the small kitchen and filled a glass with water. As he raised it to his lips, something in the glass caught his eye—a fleeting reflection that wasn’t his own. He lowered the glass slowly, staring at the distorted image visible in the curved surface.

For just a moment, he glimpsed a face looking back at him—not Thomas Harrington this time, but Marchosias, the demon’s black eyes filled with what might have been concern or anger. The image lasted only a second before dissolving back into ordinary water, but it left Mick shaken.

If Marchosias was trying to reach him through reflective surfaces, just as Harrington was, what did that mean? Were they both trapped somewhere beyond the veil, trying to break through using the same methods?

The implications were troubling, suggesting a connection between Marchosias’s binding and Harrington’s vengeful spirit that went beyond coincidence. Could something had happened on the thirty-fifth anniversary of Harrington’s conviction? Something that had set these events in motion—a ritual, perhaps, performed by William Harrington that had torn the veil between worlds just enough for his son’s spirit to reach through and claim vengeance.

His phone buzzed with a text from Reeves: “Found more on Patterson. Admitted to Woodlands Psychiatric Hospital five years ago. Acute paranoia and hallucinations about ‘the boy he lied about.’ Checked himself out ‘against medical advice’ after two weeks, said he was ‘going somewhere without reflections.’ Vacated flat, closed bank accounts. Last seen at Victoria Coach Station. Not surprisingly, no ticket purchase traced under his name. Will call with more details in the morning. Liverpool Street at 9?”

Mick replied quickly: “Confirmed. Liverpool St, 9AM. Patterson matches classic pattern for Harrington’s victims. Five years off-grid is concerning.”

He added the new information to the whiteboard, tracing Patterson's last known movements. Five years was a long time to be off the grid—either he'd been extremely careful, or Harrington had found him.

"The timing doesn't fit the pattern of the other deaths," Mick muttered to himself as he updated the timeline. "Morris, Wells, Keene, and Blackwood all died within the past three years, with decreasing intervals between. If Patterson disappeared five years ago, it breaks the sequence."

He considered the alternative. Perhaps Patterson wasn't dead then—just hiding. And Harrington had been hunting him this whole time, finally catching up to him recently. A visit to the bookshop in Spitalfields might provide answers about both William Harrington's occult research, but tomorrow they'd focus on Patterson.

As the evening wore on, Mick checked the locks on his doors and windows—a futile gesture against something that could materialise from reflective surfaces, but the routine provided a semblance of control. He covered the bathroom mirror with a towel, unplugged the television, and turned his phone face-down on the night-stand.

Sleep, when it finally came, brought fragmented dreams filled with distorted reflections. In one, he was running through endless corridors lined with mirrors, each showing a different face—Blackwood carving symbols into his flesh; Wells choking on legal documents; Keene hanging in a cell; and Morris suffocating under evidence bags.

Behind each victim stood Thomas Harrington, watching with those hollow, patient eyes. And behind Harrington, partially obscured but unmistakable, stood another figure—an old man with Thomas's features, aged by decades of grief and rage, his hands moving in ritualistic patterns as he chanted words in a language Mick couldn't understand.

Mick woke with a start, heart pounding, the dream fragments already fading. The room was dark except for the faint glow of street lights

filtering through the blinds. Something had disturbed his sleep—a sound or movement at the edge of perception.

He lay perfectly still, senses straining against the darkness. The flat was silent, yet the air felt charged with potential energy, like the moment before lightning strikes. Slowly, he turned his head toward the bedroom doorway.

A figure stood there—not fully materialised but visible enough to discern basic features. Thomas Harrington, as he might have looked had he lived to his mid-fifties, translucent in the dim light. His eyes held the same hollow sadness Mick had seen in the mirror, but now there was something else—urgency, perhaps, or warning.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and blinked, but the figure was gone. A imaginary fragment leaking from his dreams, or Harrington still following him outside his sleep?

Tomorrow they'd pursue the leads on Patterson, but Mick had a feeling that the puzzle led back to the bookshop in Spitalfields.

Spitalfields would have to wait. Saving Patterson came first, then seeking the last missing piece of the puzzle—William Harrington. Mick knew with bone-deep certainty that it would bring him closer to understanding both the nature of Harrington's vengeance and the means to free Marchosias from his supernatural silence.

As dawn began to lighten the sky, Mick rose and returned to the whiteboard. In the harsh morning light, the connections they'd mapped seemed both more substantial and more ominous—a pattern not just of vengeance but of calculated manipulation, with Mick himself as both investigator and unwitting participant.

The binding stone. The vengeful spirit. The occult bookshop. The grieving father. The missing witness. Somehow, they were all connected in ways he was only beginning to understand. And at the centre of it all, the silent void

where Marchosias should be—a void that might hold the key to everything else.

Mick added one final note to the whiteboard, circling it twice for emphasis: “What does Marchosias know that Harrington doesn’t want him to tell me?”

The question hung in the air like a challenge, unanswered but increasingly urgent as the minutes ticked away toward their morning meeting at Liverpool Street Station—and whatever awaited them in the abandoned bookshop in Spitalfields.

10 The Empty Mirror

The corridor of Woodlands Psychiatric Hospital stretched before them like a pale throat, the fluorescent lights flickering at irregular intervals. Each stutter of illumination momentarily transformed the sterile environment, casting shadows that seemed to move independently of their sources.

Mick suppressed a shiver. Hospitals had always unsettled him, but psychiatric facilities carried an additional weight—the invisible burden of thousands of fractured minds whose perceptions had warped beyond recognition. Without Marchosias’s presence to filter such impressions, the accumulated despair pressed against his consciousness like a physical force.

“Dr. Sharma’s office is at the end of the hall,” Reeves said, her voice pitched low despite the empty corridor. She’d pulled strings to arrange this meeting outside official channels, risking professional consequences if Superintendent Grayson discovered her continued involvement.

“You’re sure he was Patterson’s doctor?” Mick asked, limping slightly as they walked. The binding stone’s effects had intensified the chronic pain in his damaged leg, each step a reminder of Marchosias’s absence.

“According to the records, he personally admitted Patterson five years ago and oversaw his case until discharge.” Reeves checked her watch. “We’ve got twenty minutes before his next scheduled patient.”

The office door bore a simple nameplate: *Dr. Vikram Sharma, Consultant Psychiatrist*. Reeves knocked twice, and a gentle voice invited them inside.

Dr. Sharma was younger than Mick had expected, perhaps in his early forties, with kind eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. His desk was meticulously organised, case files arranged in perfect alignment alongside framed degrees from Edinburgh and London universities.

“Inspector Reeves,” he greeted, rising to shake her hand. “And this must be Mr. Hargraves. Please, sit down.”

They settled into chairs that were unexpectedly comfortable—designed, Mick supposed, to put anxious patients at ease. Sharma folded his hands on the desk, his expression professionally neutral but his eyes sharp with intelligence.

“Before we begin,” he said, “I should clarify that while I appreciate your urgency, patient confidentiality remains a concern. I’ve reviewed Mr. Patterson’s case specifically because Inspector Reeves mentioned potential danger to his life.”

“We believe he’s in imminent danger,” Mick confirmed. “Possibly connected to three recent deaths we’re investigating.”

Sharma nodded thoughtfully. “In that case, I can share certain details that might help safeguard his welfare. What specifically do you need to know?”

“His state of mind when admitted,” Reeves replied. “The nature of his paranoia, any unusual fixations, and what you observed during his stay.”

The psychiatrist opened a slim file folder, adjusting his glasses. “James Patterson was admitted on a voluntary basis in September 2020 following what appeared to be a severe psychotic break. He arrived in an extremely agitated state, claiming that ‘he’ was watching him through reflective surfaces.”

“He?” Mick leaned forward. “Did Patterson identify who was watching him?”

“Initially, he referred only to ‘the boy I lied about.’ Later, during treatment, he mentioned a name—Thomas. He believed this Thomas was pursuing him through mirrors, windows, even in puddles on the street.”

Mick and Reeves exchanged glances. The pattern was unmistakable.

“What else did he say about Thomas?” Mick asked, careful to keep his tone conversational.

Dr. Sharma flipped through his notes. “He described increasingly disturbing experiences. First seeing Thomas’s face in reflections instead of his own. Then hearing Thomas’s voice reciting testimony he’d given decades earlier—testimony Patterson admitted was false.”

“So he confessed to perjury?” Reeves asked.

“Not in legal terms, but yes. He spoke at length about a robbery case from the late 1980s where he claimed to have witnessed the perpetrator. According to Patterson, he identified the wrong man in exchange for having his own charges dropped.” Sharma’s expression remained professional, but disapproval flickered behind his eyes. “He was consumed by guilt over this man’s subsequent imprisonment and death.”

“Did he describe what he was experiencing with the reflections?” Mick pressed. “Anything about symbols, writing, or specific patterns?”

Sharma studied him curiously before answering. “As a matter of fact, yes. He claimed Thomas would write messages to him in condensation on mirrors—primarily the words ‘LIAR’ and ‘JUSTICE’. He also described his reflection sometimes appearing to... bleed from the mouth when he attempted to speak.”

The detail sent a chill down Mick’s spine, reminiscent of Wells’s death—choked on the legal papers that had contained his prosecutorial lies.

“How did Patterson respond to treatment?” Reeves asked.

“Poorly,” Sharma admitted. “Antipsychotics had minimal effect. He became increasingly resistant to looking at any reflective surface—refused to use toilets with mirrors, wouldn’t drink from glasses, avoided eye contact with the window during sessions.” He paused, removing his glasses to clean them with a cloth. “Most concerningly, he began what we call ‘mirror-avoidant behaviours’—covering his face when passing reflective surfaces, keeping his eyes closed during personal care, even attempting to bandage his own eyes at one point.”

Mick could imagine Patterson's growing terror as Harrington's presence manifested around him, the hospital offering no refuge from a vengeful spirit that travelled through reflections. "And he left against medical advice?"

"After only two weeks. We recommended continued inpatient treatment, but he became fixated on finding somewhere 'without reflections.' His exact words were: 'I need to go where he can't see me.'" Sharma replaced his glasses, expression troubled. "I was concerned enough to place him under a temporary hold, but he disappeared during shift change. Simply walked out."

"Do you have any information about where he might have gone?" Reeves asked. "Family, friends, previous addresses?"

"He had no listed next of kin. However..." Sharma hesitated, then opened his desk drawer and removed a small notebook. "He left this behind. Technically, I should have sent it to his last known address, but given his state when he left, I kept it in case he returned." He pushed it across the desk. "Perhaps it contains something useful."

The notebook was small and battered, its cover stained with what might have been coffee or tea. Mick opened it carefully, finding pages filled with increasingly chaotic handwriting. Diagrams of rooms with crosses over anything reflective. Lists of materials—"blackout paint," "thick curtains," "tape for mirrors." Addresses of remote locations, many crossed out with notes like "too many windows" or "stream nearby—reflective surface."

On the final page, Patterson had scrawled an address in Kent with the notation: "Stone cottage. No running water. No electricity. Broken mirrors already. SAFE??"

"This could be where he went," Mick said, showing Reeves the address. "Isolated location, no modern amenities that might create reflective surfaces."

“It’s worth checking,” she agreed, copying the address into her phone.

Dr. Sharma watched them with growing concern. “May I ask what exactly you believe is happening to Mr. Patterson? Your questions suggest something beyond standard psychiatric explanations.”

Mick considered how much to share. “Let’s just say his fears might not have been entirely delusional.”

“I see.” Sharma’s expression suggested he didn’t see at all but was too professional to press further. “Whatever the case, Patterson was genuinely terrified. If he’s still alive, he’s likely in a severely compromised psychological state.”

“Thank you for your help, Doctor,” Reeves said, rising. “You’ve given us a solid lead.”

As they prepared to leave, Sharma asked quietly, “The others you mentioned—the three recent deaths—did they experience similar symptoms? Visions in reflective surfaces?”

Mick paused at the door, struck by the psychiatrist’s perceptiveness. “Something like that.”

Sharma nodded slowly. “Then I hope you find Patterson quickly. In my professional opinion, prolonged exposure to that level of terror is unsustainable for the human mind. There are limits to what consciousness can endure before it simply... breaks.”

The drive to Kent took them through waning daylight, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows across the M20 motorway. Neither spoke much, both processing what they’d learned and preparing for what they might find. The pattern was unmistakable now—Patterson had experienced the same early symptoms as Blackwood, Wells, Keene, and Morris. His five-year disappearance suggested either remarkable resilience or that Harrington’s vengeance had already claimed him.

The GPS directed them off main roads onto increasingly narrow lanes. Buildings became sparse, separating into isolated farmhouses and occasional clusters of cottages. The landscape grew wilder, hedgerows pressing in on either side of single-track roads that wound through ancient woodland.

“Should be just ahead,” Reeves said, squinting at the GPS. “Patterson chose his location well—about as isolated as you can get in South-east England.”

They rounded a bend and the cottage appeared—a squat stone structure partially reclaimed by nature. Ivy climbed its western wall, the roof sagged ominously, and the small garden had long since surrendered to wilderness. No smoke rose from the chimney despite the evening chill, and the windows were dark, many boarded over with weathered planks.

“Doesn’t look like anyone’s been here for years,” Reeves observed, parking on the overgrown track that served as a driveway.

“Or they’ve been here but don’t want to advertise it,” Mick replied, his detective instincts prickling. He’d seen enough people in hiding to recognise the deliberate abandonment of the property—unmaintained but strategically obscured, designed to deter curious visitors.

They approached cautiously, gravel crunching beneath their feet. Up close, the cottage appeared even more dilapidated. The wooden door hung slightly askew on rusted hinges, and black paint covered most windows from the inside, visible where boards didn’t completely seal them.

“Patterson’s mirror-avoidant behaviour,” Mick noted, gesturing to the blackened windows. “Eliminating every reflective surface.”

Reeves tried the door, which creaked open with surprising ease. “No lock. Not much need out here, I suppose.”

The interior was colder than outside, a damp chill that suggested years without heating. Mick switched on his torch, the beam cutting through

gloom to reveal a small living area. Minimal furniture—a chair, a rickety table, shelves with canned goods. Most striking was the methodical elimination of anything reflective: picture frames emptied of glass, metallic surfaces covered with cloth or tape, a cast iron cooking pot with its interior coated in black paint.

“He was thorough,” Reeves observed, sweeping her own torch across the room. “Extreme paranoia made manifest.”

“Or extreme self-preservation,” Mick corrected, moving deeper into the cottage. Years of detective work had taught him to recognise the difference between madness and desperate adaptation. “If what haunted the others was real, his precautions make perfect sense.”

The cottage had only four rooms: the main living area, a tiny kitchen, a bathroom, and a bedroom. Each showed evidence of Patterson’s mirror-elimination efforts—walls painted matte black where windows would ordinarily be, reflective fixtures removed or covered, even metal doorknobs wrapped in cloth.

The bathroom was particularly telling. The mirror above the sink had been smashed, each fragment meticulously removed. The taps had been disconnected, with buckets placed nearby to hold water—preventing even that small reflective surface. Even the toilet tank lid was missing, presumably because its ceramic glaze might reflect under certain light.

“He really thought this through,” Reeves said, her voice hushed in the oppressive atmosphere. “Considered every possibility.”

The bedroom door was closed, unlike the others. As Mick reached for the handle, a wave of wrongness washed over him—that distinctive chill that had preceded each supernatural encounter since Marchosias’s silencing. Without the demon’s abilities to confirm what he was sensing, he hesitated, hand outstretched.

“Exactly why we should be prepared for what’s in there.”

Reeves drew her taser with practised efficiency, nodding for Mick to proceed. He pushed the door open slowly, torch beam revealing the room beyond inch by inch.

The stench hit them first—the unmistakable odour of decay, muted by years but still recognisable to anyone who'd worked homicide. The torch beam found its source on a narrow bed against the far wall.

What remained of James Patterson was little more than a mummified husk, preserved by the room's unusual dryness. He lay sprawled across the bed in a posture of final desperation—one arm outstretched as if reaching for escape, legs twisted in the sheets from his last frantic struggles. Nothing about his position suggested peace or preparation; this was a man who had died in the throes of absolute terror.

But it was Patterson's face that commanded their attention. Where his eyes should have been were two dark, hollow cavities—not the natural recession of decomposition, but deliberate, violent excavation. Deep gouges marked his desiccated cheeks, parallel furrows carved by his own fingernails in frantic clawing. His jaw hung unnaturally wide in a permanent scream, teeth bared and lips drawn back in a rictus of horror so profound that even death had failed to soften it. The desiccated tissue of his face remained stretched in an expression of such primal terror that it was difficult to look at directly.

"My God," Reeves whispered, her professional composure momentarily cracking.

Mick approached the body carefully, the beam of his torch revealing more details of Patterson's final moments. There was no note, no explanation of his demise—just the mute testimony of his self-mutilated corpse. On the floor surrounding the bed, hundreds of small mirrors broken into fragments created a protective circle—a last desperate barrier between Patterson and whatever he believed was hunting him.

“It didn’t help,” Mick observed grimly. “Breaking the mirrors just created more reflective surfaces.”

As he spoke those words, a searing pain lanced through his skull, driving him to his knees. The torch fell from his hand, rolling across the uneven floorboards to cast wild, dancing shadows across the walls. The room dimmed around him, reality peeling away like old wallpaper to reveal something else beneath—a memory not his own.

He was in the same room, but years earlier. The cottage was tidy though sparse, recently occupied. Patterson sat on the edge of the bed, trembling hands pulling blackout curtains across a window already painted black on the inside. His face was gaunt with exhaustion, eyes sunken and bloodshot from constant vigilance.

Patterson turned toward the small bedside table where a hammer lay beside a cloth-wrapped bundle. As he reached for it, his hand passed through a beam of light from a gap in the curtains.

The temperature plummeted instantly, frost crystallising on the window despite the season. Patterson froze, eyes widening as his breath clouded before him. Slowly, with the jerky movements of absolute terror, he turned toward the floor where the broken mirror fragments began to vibrate, tinkling softly against one another like wind chimes in a non-existent breeze.

The fragments rose, hovering at various heights, catching the meagre light and transforming the small bedroom into a kaleidoscope of refracted illumination. They moved with purpose, arranging themselves in the rough outline of a human figure—a constellation of glittering points that approximated a man standing at the foot of the bed.

As Mick watched, trapped in this vision of the past, the mirror-man’s form solidified. Each fragment rotated to catch the light just so, and within each tiny surface appeared the same face—Thomas Harrington. Hundreds of

identical eyes stared from a body composed entirely of broken reflections, the effect both beautiful and horrifying.

When it spoke, the voice seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere, each mirror fragment vibrating with the words:

“James Patterson. False witness.”

Patterson scrambled backward across the bed until his spine pressed against the wall. “Please,” he begged, voice cracking. “I was just a kid. They told me what to say, paid me, promised to drop my charges. I didn’t know what would happen to you.”

“You knew,” the mirror-man replied, hundreds of tiny mouths moving in perfect synchronisation. “You saw my face in court as you lied. You watched as they took me away.”

“I’m sorry,” Patterson sobbed, hands raised in futile supplication. “I’ve been sorry every day since.”

“Sorrow without consequence is meaningless.” The mirror-man stepped closer, each fragment maintaining its precise position in the human constellation. “As a false witness, you have no need of vision.”

Patterson’s hands suddenly jerked toward his own face, fingers curled into claws. His expression transformed to one of horrified realisation as he lost control of his movements.

“No!” he screamed, struggling against himself as his fingers pressed against his eyes. “Please, no!”

His body fought itself—head thrashing side to side, legs kicking uselessly against the mattress as his hands remained fixed to their terrible purpose. Blood began to stream between his fingers as they dug deeper, his screams rising to an inhuman pitch as he gouged at his own face.

“Stop!” Patterson shrieked, his voice raw with agony.

The mirror-man watched impassively, hundreds of reflective faces observing with identical expressions of cold satisfaction. Patterson slumped backward, hands falling away from his ruined face:

The vision released Mick as suddenly as it had seized him, dropping him back into the present moment. He found himself on his knees beside Patterson's bed, Reeves gripping his shoulder with one hand, her taser raised defensively with the other.

"Mick! What happened?"

He struggled to his feet, still reeling from the visceral horror of what he'd witnessed. "I saw it," he managed, voice hoarse. "Saw how he died. Harrington made him blind himself."

As he spoke, the temperature in the room dropped precipitously. Their breath clouded in the suddenly frigid air, and the torch beams dimmed as if something were drawing the light from them. The broken mirror fragments surrounding Patterson's bed began to tremble, the sound chillingly familiar after what Mick had just witnessed.

"We need to leave," Mick said, his voice surprisingly steady despite the cold dread flooding his system. "Now."

Reeves didn't argue, backing toward the door with her taser still raised, though they both knew it would be useless against what faced them. The mirror fragments rose from the floor, arranging themselves once more into the vague outline of a human figure—not as distinct as in Mick's vision, but unmistakably the same entity.

Within each fragment, Thomas Harrington's face watched them, multiplied across hundreds of reflective surfaces, his expression no longer vengeful but contemplative, as if evaluating their presence in this place of his first justice.

They backed through the doorway as the mirror constellation advanced, its movement accompanied by a sound like distant whispers—too faint to

discern words but unmistakably human in cadence. The temperature continued to drop until their breath emerged as white plumes, the unnatural cold penetrating clothes and skin to settle in their bones.

The cottage seemed to transform around them as they retreated—shadows deepening in corners, stretching along walls in defiance of their torch beams. The narrow hallway felt impossibly long, the front door receding with each step like a desert mirage. Every surface within the cottage—floorboards, walls, ceiling—began to glisten with a thin sheen of frost that captured and reflected fractured light from the pursuing mirror-man.

They burst outside, the evening air shocking after the cottage's supernatural coldness. Behind them, the mirror constellation halted at the threshold as if constrained by some invisible barrier. For a moment, it hovered in the doorway, hundreds of tiny Harringtons watching with identical, unreadable expressions.

Then, as suddenly as the manifestation had begun, the fragments fell to the ground, shattering into harmless dust that scattered in the gentle evening breeze.

Mick and Reeves stood in the overgrown garden, shaking not from cold but from the unnatural encounter they'd just survived. Nothing indicated the supernatural display they'd just witnessed—no unusual frost, no hovering glass, no constellation of a man formed from broken reflections.

"What the hell was that?" Reeves asked, holstering her taser with trembling hands.

"A message," Mick replied, still seeing Patterson's self-mutilation whenever he blinked. "Harrington showing us his story—and letting us know he's aware we're investigating."

They returned to the car in silence, each processing what they'd witnessed. The confirmation of Patterson's death completed the known victims on Harrington's list, but raised as many questions as it answered. If Patterson

had died five years ago, he must be the first victim, with the others following years later, what was the significance of the timing? And why did Harrington's vengeance escalate so dramatically in the past three years?

"We got this wrong" said Mick, "We were never going to save Patterson, he was the first."

"And Blackwood the last?" asked Reeves, "Or just the most recent?"

As Reeves started the engine, Mick glanced at the cottage one final time. In the rearview mirror, he caught a glimpse of movement at an upstairs window—a shadow passing behind blackened glass where no one should be.

"Spitalfields," he said abruptly. "We need to go to William Harrington's bookshop tomorrow. That's where this all started—where Thomas's father found whatever ritual unleashed his son's vengeance."

"You think William is still alive?"

"I don't know," Mick admitted. "But his shop is the missing piece. If we're going to understand how this began—and how to end it—that's where we'll find answers."

As they drove away, leaving Patterson's tomb behind, Mick found himself reaching instinctively for Marchosias's presence in his mind, seeking the demon's ancient knowledge to make sense of what they'd encountered. The silence that greeted him felt more profound than ever, a void that ached with absence.

Tomorrow they would pursue the Harrington thread to its source. But tonight, driving back through darkening countryside, Mick couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched through every reflective surface they passed—window glass, the car's mirrors, even their own eyes, reflecting the headlights of oncoming traffic.

In each reflection, just at the edge of perception, Thomas Harrington watched and waited, his patient vengeance approaching its culmination.

11 Ink and Antiquity

Dawn broke reluctantly over Spitalfields, watery sunlight filtering through a patchwork of clouds that hung low over London's ancient streets. The neighbourhood stirred with early deliveries to the market, white delivery vans double-parked as workers unloaded produce in a choreography of practised efficiency. The rumble of rolling metal cages and morning greetings provided a mundane counterpoint to the unsettling silence in Mick's mind where Marchosias should be.

Reeves parked her unmarked car on a side street off Commercial Road, the engine ticking as it cooled. "This is technically outside my jurisdiction," she said, checking her mobile one last time before switching it off. "Superintendent Grayson has eyes everywhere. If he discovers I'm still investigating..."

"I understand," Mick replied, his gaze fixed on the street ahead. "You've risked enough already."

"I'm seeing this through," she said firmly. "But we need to be discreet. Local officers won't appreciate City police on their turf without proper authorisation."

They walked the final two blocks to Brick Lane, where the remnants of Spitalfields' history as a haven for waves of immigrants was still visible in the architectural palimpsest. Victorian shopfronts housed Bengali restaurants beside vintage clothing boutiques, while converted Huguenot silk weavers' houses stood alongside remnants of the Jewish community that once dominated the area.

Ink and Antiquity was tucked into a narrow frontage between a coffee shop and a vintage record store. Unlike its neighbours, whose windows displayed carefully curated wares to entice passing trade, the bookshop's facade was deliberately nondescript—a weathered wooden door flanked by windows so grimy they obscured whatever lay beyond. The sign above was

faded to near illegibility, the gilt lettering that once proudly announced the shop's name now barely visible against splintered wood.

"Doesn't look like anyone's been here in years," Reeves observed, studying the padlocked door and the dust-caked windows.

Mick felt a familiar prickling at the back of his neck—not Marchosias's presence, but his own well-honed instincts warning of something beyond ordinary neglect. "Appearances can be deceiving."

He approached the window, using his sleeve to clear a small circle in the accumulated grime. The glass was cold beneath the fabric, colder than the morning air warranted. Peering through the makeshift viewport revealed shelves of books in various states of decay, their spines facing inward in the odd, defensive posture of a collection meant to conceal rather than display its contents.

"How do you want to handle this?" Reeves asked, glancing up and down the street. "I don't have a warrant, and breaking and entering isn't exactly by the book."

"Since when has that stopped us?" Mick moved to the door, examining the padlock. It was newer than it should have been for a property abandoned five years ago—the metal still showing a dull gleam beneath a light coating of dust. "Besides, we're investigating multiple suspicious deaths. Exigent circumstances."

Reeves gave him a sceptical look but didn't object as he produced a set of lock picks from his pocket. "Still carrying those, I see."

"Old habits." Mick knelt before the lock, tools moving with the precision of long practise. The Metropolitan Police frowned upon such skills, but the criminal investigation department had always operated in grey areas where official training intersected with necessary field adaptations.

The lock yielded with surprising ease, as if it had been primarily for show. Mick pocketed his tools and tested the door, which swung inward with a reluctant groan.

The smell hit them immediately—a complex olfactory assault that transcended simple abandonment. Beneath the expected mustiness of damp paper and decaying leather bindings lay something more disturbing: a metallic tang reminiscent of old blood, the acrid bite of burnt herbs, and an underlying sweetness like rotting fruit. The combination created a miasma that seemed to coat the inside of their nostrils and the back of their throats.

“Christ,” Reeves muttered, covering her nose and mouth with her sleeve.

Mick stepped across the threshold, the floorboards creaking beneath his weight. Without Marchosias’s enhanced senses, he couldn’t determine if the atmosphere’s wrongness was supernatural or merely the accumulated traces of William Harrington’s occult activities. Either way, the air felt heavy, pressing against their skin like a physical presence.

The interior was larger than the narrow frontage suggested, stretching backward into shadows that their torch beams couldn’t fully penetrate. Bookshelves created a labyrinth of narrow passages, their contents arranged with no discernible organisation. Dust motes danced in the torch light, swirling in patterns that seemed to catch the eye strangely, making him blink to clear his vision.

“Fan out?” Reeves suggested, already moving toward a section of shelves to their right.

“Stay within sight,” Mick cautioned. “This place feels... off.”

They moved deeper into the shop, torch beams revealing increasingly esoteric volumes. Books bound in materials Mick preferred not to identify, their spines embossed with symbols that hurt the eyes when viewed directly. Shelves organised not by author or subject but by what appeared

to be ritual purpose—one section dedicated to divination, another to binding, a third to communication across various metaphysical boundaries.

“Harrington wasn’t just a bookseller,” Mick observed, examining a glass case containing scrolls whose parchment had the yellowish translucence of ancient human skin. “He was a practitioner.”

“Of what exactly?” Reeves asked, her torch illuminating a collection of small metallic objects that resembled crude surgical instruments.

“Magic. The occult. Whatever you want to call it.” Mick ran his finger along a shelf, leaving a track in the dust. “The kind of knowledge that could allow a grieving father to reach beyond death.”

A counter stood at the back of the shop, its surface cluttered with ledgers and correspondence. Behind it, a door led to what must have been William Harrington’s private office. Unlike the rest of the shop, this area showed signs of more recent occupation—less dust, papers arranged in deliberate patterns rather than abandoned haphazardly.

“Look at this,” Reeves called, her torch focused on a framed photograph hanging askew on the wall. It showed a younger William Harrington standing proudly beside a teenage boy who could only be Thomas. Both smiled at the camera, the father’s hand resting on his son’s shoulder in a gesture of easy affection. “Must have been taken years before the conviction.”

“Before everything went wrong,” Mick agreed, studying the faces preserved in a moment of ordinary happiness. It was almost more disturbing than the occult paraphernalia surrounding them—this evidence of the simple life that had been destroyed by corruption and injustice.

As they navigated through the narrow passages between bookshelves, Mick’s attention was so focused on the strange volumes that he failed to notice a stepladder partially covered by a dust sheet. His foot caught in the fabric as he tried to step around it, throwing him off balance. He pitched

forward, arms windmilling, and fell heavily into a small pile of paint supplies stacked against the wall. Paint cans clattered loudly as he landed, bruising his shins and scraping his knuckles against the rough floor. “Bloody hell,” he muttered, disentangling himself from the sheet. “Looks like Harrington was in the middle of redecorating when he disappeared.” Reeves helped him up, her torch beam revealing several unopened cans of paint, brushes still in their packaging, and a roll of masking tape.

The office door opened with minimal resistance, revealing a space that contrasted sharply with the cluttered bookshop. Here, organisation reigned with obsessive precision. A large desk dominated the centre, its surface clear except for a single leather-bound journal. Bookshelves lined the walls, their contents arranged by subject and author. A reading chair sat angled toward a window that had been covered with a heavy curtain, drawn shut to block all natural light.

Most striking was the floor, where a faded pattern had been drawn in what appeared to be chalk or paint, mostly scrubbed away but with remnants still visible. Concentric circles with traces of symbols marked specific points in the design, suggesting a ritual space approximately two metres in diameter. Candle stubs sat at various points on the floor, their wax drippings suggesting repeated use over many years.

“This is where he worked,” Mick said softly, kneeling to examine the faded markings without stepping into the circle. “Where he conducted his research.”

Reeves approached the desk, drawn to the solitary journal. “Should I...?”

“Careful,” Mick warned, still studying the floor pattern. “Nothing here is likely to be innocuous.”

She pulled on latex gloves before touching the journal, a reflexive precaution from years of evidence handling. The leather cover was unmarked except for a small symbol embossed in the lower right corner—a simple rendering of a set of scales, perfectly balanced.

The journal contained page after page of meticulous notes in William Harrington's precise handwriting. Dates spanning decades, each entry documenting his research into vengeance rituals from dozens of cultures. Early passages expressed academic interest, gradually giving way to increasingly desperate searching as the years passed following Thomas's death. Citations from obscure texts were interspersed with personal observations and experimental variations.

"Listen to this," Reeves said, reading from an entry dated March 2017:

'Time grows short. The cancer spreads despite the doctors' interventions. Three months, they say, perhaps six with aggressive treatment. Not enough to see justice through conventional means. The courts failed Thomas in life; I cannot trust them to right this wrong after my death. I must act now, with whatever strength remains. My research suggests there are other means of securing justice when human systems fail.'

"Cancer," Mick repeated. "That's why the timing was significant. He knew he was dying and couldn't wait for the legal system to correct its mistakes."

Reeves continued reading: *'Found references to vengeance rituals in the Mesopotamian texts. The concept of "speaking beyond the veil" appears repeatedly. If the living cannot secure justice, perhaps the dead might. Thomas deserves to be heard. They silenced him in life—the police, the prosecutor, the witness, the judge, the guard. Each played their part in crushing an innocent soul. Each deserves to face what they've done.'*

Mick's attention sharpened. "He was methodically cataloguing everyone involved in his son's case. Building a list of those responsible."

"And planning something beyond conventional justice," Reeves added, looking up from the journal. "Seeking supernatural intervention when the legal system failed."

They continued exploring the office, uncovering more evidence of William's obsessive research. File boxes contained newspaper clippings about each of the five men involved in Thomas's case, meticulously organised and annotated. Medical records documented William's declining health—terminal cancer diagnosed in late 2016, with a prognosis of months rather than years.

Most significant was a collection of books on a dedicated shelf behind the desk, each focused on a specific aspect of vengeance spirits and their manifestations. Mick selected one titled "The Reflective Gateway: Summoning Through Mirrored Surfaces," its pages heavily annotated in William's handwriting.

"Here," he said, finding a passage circled and starred. "William discovered that vengeful spirits can use reflective surfaces as conduits between worlds. The more significant the reflection to the victim, the stronger the connection."

"That explains the mirrors, windows, even water surfaces," Reeves noted, joining him to examine the text. "Each victim experienced haunting through reflections before their deaths."

As they pieced together William's actions, Mick found himself drawn to a particular section of shelving where the books seemed older, their bindings crafted from materials that appeared to shift subtly in the torchlight. These volumes were written in languages he couldn't identify—not Latin or Greek or any other script he recognised from his education. The lettering seemed to flow across the pages like liquid, refusing to remain fixed when viewed directly.

"Look at this," he called to Reeves, carefully removing a slim volume bound in what appeared to be pale leather. The title was inscribed in silver lettering that caught the light oddly, seeming to glow from within rather than merely reflecting the torch beam.

"Can you read it?" she asked, peering over his shoulder.

“Not entirely. Some parts are in English, others...” he gestured to passages of text that seemed to shift between alphabets. “This section here appears to be about binding rituals. Specifically, binding demons or spirits to objects rather than banishing them completely.”

“That might explain what happened with Marchosias,” Reeves suggested.

“Exactly.” Mick carefully turned pages, finding diagrams that depicted objects similar to the obsidian sphere they’d encountered in Blackwood’s study. “This book might contain information on how to break such bindings.”

He continued examining the shelves, selecting several volumes that appeared relevant to their situation. One particularly ancient tome bound in midnight-blue leather revealed extensive information on vengeance spirits—their nature, manifestation, and the rituals used to summon them.

“According to this,” Mick said, scanning a page of cramped text, “vengeance spirits require an anchor in the physical world—usually an object connected to their death or the injustice they suffered.”

“So Thomas’s spirit would need something to bind it to this world,” Reeves reasoned. “Something William provided as part of his ritual.”

“And that anchor is likely still somewhere in London, allowing Thomas to continue hunting those responsible.” Mick closed the book, adding it to the small collection he’d set aside. “We need to understand what William did exactly, and how to end it before anyone else gets hurt.”

As they gathered the most relevant materials, Mick found himself frustrated by his limited comprehension. Without Marchosias’s ancient knowledge, many of the texts remained indecipherable—not just linguistically, but conceptually. The occult principles described existed outside human frames of reference, involving energies and dimensions beyond conventional understanding.

“Taking these?” Reeves asked, nodding toward the books he’d selected.

“We need to understand what we’re dealing with,” Mick replied, carefully stacking the volumes. “These might help us figure out how Thomas’s spirit operates—and how to break Marchosias’s binding.”

“Can you make sense of them?” she asked, picking up one book whose text seemed to shimmer and shift under direct observation.

Mick sighed, the emptiness where Marchosias should be aching like a phantom limb. “Not entirely. Some passages are clear enough, but others...” He gestured to pages filled with symbols and formulations that defied conventional logic.

They carefully packed the selected books, securing them in Reeves’s shoulder bag. As they prepared to leave, Mick took one final look around the office, absorbing the remnants of William Harrington’s desperate attempt to secure justice for his son. The faded ritual circle, the meticulously organised research, the journal chronicling his descent from grieving father to occult practitioner—all of it painted a portrait of a man driven beyond conventional boundaries by love and rage.

“He tried to make it right,” Mick said softly. “When the system failed, he found another way.”

“By unleashing something that’s killed five people,” Reeves reminded him.

“Five corrupt people who escaped conventional justice,” Mick countered. “People who knowingly sent an innocent man to his death and never faced consequences.”

Reeves studied him carefully. “Sounds almost like you approve.”

Mick didn’t answer immediately, considering the complexity of his own response. “I understand it,” he said finally. “The impulse to seek justice outside a system that’s failed. To make someone pay for taking an innocent life.”

They both knew he wasn’t just talking about Thomas Harrington any more. The Jamie Matthews case hung between them unspoken—the child murder

that had broken Mick professionally and spiritually, driving him to vigilante impulses not so different from William's.

As they left the bookshop, carefully relocking the door behind them, Mick felt the weight of the occult texts in Reeves's bag—alien knowledge that might hold the key to both ending Thomas's supernatural vengeance and restoring his connection to Marchosias. But deciphering that knowledge would require venturing back into the Crossroads Club and dealing with Lilaeth without the demon's protection.

The day had brightened considerably, the morning crowds of Brick Lane thickening as tourists and locals alike drifted between artisanal coffee shops and vintage clothing stores. The normality of it all created a jarring contrast with what they'd just discovered—a father's desperate attempt to summon his dead son's spirit for vengeance, evidence of successful supernatural intervention, and arcane texts that defied ordinary human comprehension.

"What are you thinking?" Reeves asked as they navigated through the growing crowd.

Mick considered the question, his detective's mind trying to assemble the disparate pieces into a coherent whole. "William Harrington lost his son to a corrupt system. In his grief and rage, he turned to the occult for justice the courts wouldn't provide. Supernatural vengeance against the men responsible."

"And now we're caught in the middle," Reeves observed, absently touching the small cut on her cheek from their encounter with Harrington's spirit in Wells's basement. "Five men responsible for Thomas's conviction, five confirmed dead, and a vengeful spirit that shows no sign of stopping."

The risk was substantial, but as they walked back toward the car, Mick found himself oddly resolute. In William Harrington's desperate actions, he recognised a reflection of his own struggles—a man using whatever means

available to secure justice when conventional systems failed. The parallel left him unsettled but determined.

“The books might help us understand what William did,” Mick said, glancing at Reeves’s bag where the occult volumes were carefully stowed. “But without Marchosias, I’m working blind. These texts operate on principles beyond human understanding—concepts and energies that exist outside conventional reality.”

“So we need an expert,” Reeves concluded. “Someone who can interpret what we can’t.”

“Someone who understands the supernatural from the inside,” Mick confirmed grimly. “Unfortunately, the only such being I know who might help us is Lilaeth.”

Reeves frowned as they reached her car. “The same entity who tried to entrap you in a bargain the last time you met? Is that wise?”

“Wise? No.” Mick settled into the passenger seat, wincing as his damaged leg protested. “Necessary? Probably. Lilaeth knows about binding stones—she told me that much during our last encounter. She might know how to reverse what happened to Marchosias.”

“At what cost?” Reeves asked, starting the engine. “Entities like her don’t give information freely.”

“I’ll worry about that when the time comes,” Mick replied, though the prospect of negotiating with Lilaeth without Marchosias’s protection sent a chill through him that had nothing to do with the morning air. “Right now, we need answers more than we need safety.”

As they pulled away from Brick Lane, Mick gazed back at the narrow store front of Ink and Antiquity, its grimy windows revealing nothing of the secrets hidden within. William Harrington had gone to extraordinary lengths to secure vengeance for his son—researching ancient rituals, acquiring occult knowledge, potentially sacrificing his own soul in the

process. The question remained: what exactly had he unleashed, and how could it be stopped?

“The Crossroads Club, then?” Reeves asked as they merged into the morning traffic.

“Tonight,” Mick confirmed, his mind already rehearsing potential negotiations with Lilaeth. “We need Marchosias back if we’re going to have any chance of stopping this.”

What remained unspoken was the price such help might demand—and whether he was prepared to pay it.

12 The Devil You Know

The Crossroads Club looked different in late afternoon—more subdued, its predatory energy muted like a nocturnal creature caught in unwelcome daylight. The matte black doors stood slightly ajar, allowing a sliver of interior darkness to spill onto the pavement.

Mick hesitated before the entrance, acutely aware of his vulnerability. Without Marchosias's presence, he was walking into a den of supernatural predators with nothing but his human wits and the occult texts from William Harrington's shop tucked into a worn messenger bag. His last visit had ended with his refusal of Lilaeth's open-ended bargain—a favour to be claimed at her discretion in exchange for information about breaking the binding. Now, five days later and with no other options remaining, he was returning to accept those same dangerous terms.

"I'm going in alone," he told Reeves, who stood beside him, tension evident in her posture.

"Same deal as before," Reeves said with a tight smile, checking her watch. "You've got one hour before I come in guns blazing... well, unleashing the CS gas, at least." Her attempt at humour barely masked her concern. "Last time you looked half-dead coming out. Try for a little less dead this time, would you?"

"I'll do my best to maintain appropriate vitality," Mick replied dryly. "But if I'm not out in an hour—"

"I know. I'll cause enough human commotion to disrupt whatever supernatural nonsense is happening." She tapped her coat pocket. "Got my full kit this time. Baton, spray, taser. Not that any of it would do much good in there, but it's something."

Mick appreciated her pragmatism, even knowing how futile conventional weapons would be against entities like Lilaeth. The gesture itself meant

more than its practical value—Reeves refused to be sidelined, regardless of the dangers.

“One hour,” he confirmed, then crossed the threshold into the club’s interior, immediately engulfed by its unnatural atmosphere. Without Marchosias’s enhanced senses, the wrongness was less precise but somehow more disturbing—a hundred subtle cues his human perception could detect but not fully process. The music pulsed at frequencies that made his fillings ache, the lighting shifted in patterns designed to disorient, and the air itself seemed to resist his lungs as if reluctant to sustain human life.

The main floor was sparsely populated at this hour—a few patrons lounged in booths along the perimeter, their forms shifting subtly when viewed from his peripheral vision. A bartender with too-long fingers polished glasses that occasionally appeared to bleed dark liquid before returning to normal. In one corner, what appeared to be a young couple spoke in hushed tones, their whispers somehow carrying across the room in fragments that made no linguistic sense yet left Mick with an inexplicable sense of dread.

“Mr. Hargraves,” a voice purred from behind him. “Back so soon? And still... incomplete.”

He turned to find the same server who had greeted him during his previous visit—androgynous, impossibly symmetrical, with a smile that revealed teeth just slightly too sharp to be human.

“I need to see Lilaeth,” Mick said simply.

“Of course you do.” The server’s smile widened fractionally. “She’s been expecting you. Third floor, as before.” They gestured toward the spiral staircase, which Mick could have sworn had been on the opposite side of the room during his last visit.

The climb seemed longer this time, each step requiring more effort than simple physical exertion could explain. By the time he reached the third

floor, his damaged leg throbbed with a pain that went beyond the merely physical—as if the club itself were amplifying his vulnerabilities, feeding on his discomfort.

The obsidian doors to Lilaeth's private salon stood open, revealing the same unsettling space with its breathing velvet walls and furniture that resembled organic tissue more than crafted objects. Lilaeth herself reclined on her chaise lounge, looking exactly as before—porcelain skin, impossibly black hair, eyes that shifted between deep blue and fathomless black depending on the angle of observation.

"The detective returns," she said, her voice carrying those strange harmonics that made the air vibrate unnaturally. "And still without your passenger. How... desperate you must be."

Mick remained just inside the doorway, wary of venturing deeper into her territory. "I need information about binding stones and vengeance spirits," Mick said, remaining just inside the doorway. "And I'm ready to accept your terms."

Lilaeth's perfect lips curved into a smile that held no warmth. "How delightful. I wondered how long it would take for desperation to overcome your caution." She gestured to the messenger bag slung across his chest. "Brought me some reading material, have you?"

Mick hesitated, then removed William's journal and several of the occult texts they'd recovered from the bookshop. He approached cautiously, placing them on a small table that materialised beside her chaise.

"William Harrington performed some kind of ritual to avenge his son," Mick said, watching her carefully. "The timing matches the deaths we've been investigating."

Lilaeth examined the materials with elegant fingers that occasionally seemed to elongate beyond human proportions. Her touch left faint frost patterns on the leather bindings that faded within seconds.

“Fascinating,” she murmured, opening William’s journal to entries detailing his research into vengeance rituals. “A father’s love transformed into something far more potent. Such dedication to learn these arts from scratch, and while dying, no less.”

“He summoned his son’s spirit to seek vengeance,” Mick pressed.

Lilaeth’s laughter was like ice cracking in deep winter. “Is that what you believe? How charmingly human.” She closed the journal and fixed him with a gaze that seemed to penetrate beyond flesh. “William Harrington did perform a ritual, but what he summoned wasn’t his son.”

A chill that had nothing to do with the room’s temperature ran down Mick’s spine. “Explain.”

“Humans,” Lilaeth sighed, the sound like silk tearing. “Always so demanding without offering anything in return.” She studied him with renewed interest. “Yet I find myself inclined toward... generosity today.”

Mick knew better than to trust her apparent benevolence. Entities like Lilaeth never gave without taking something of greater value in return. Yet he needed what she knew—needed it desperately enough to risk whatever game she was playing.

“The spirits of the dead are rarely accessible, detective,” Lilaeth continued, tracing one perfect finger along the edge of William’s journal. “The truly departed move beyond the reach of most magics. What mortals call ‘ghosts’ are typically echoes or impressions—psychic residue rather than conscious entities.”

“Then what did William summon?”

“A vengeance demon.” Lilaeth’s eyes gleamed with something between amusement and hunger. “An entity that specialises in retribution, taking the form and memories of the wronged dead to hunt those responsible for injustice.”

The revelation struck Mick with the force of physical impact. Not Thomas's spirit but something older, something that merely wore his face and memories like a costume.

"It calls itself Nemathrel," Lilaeth continued, the name emerging with a sibilant quality that made the air ripple visibly. "An ancient entity that feeds on the rage of the wrongfully dead and the terror of the guilty living. Quite specialised, even among my kind."

"Your kind?" Mick repeated, the implications settling like lead in his stomach.

"We're not all created equal, detective." Her smile revealed teeth that were momentarily too numerous before returning to human appearance. "Nemathrel occupies a particular niche—binding itself to human grief and rage, offering vengeance in exchange for... sustenance."

"William made a deal," Mick concluded, the pattern becoming clearer. "His son's vengeance in exchange for what?"

"What vengeance demons typically require—a living anchor." Lilaeth's expression held something almost like admiration. "William Harrington offered himself as vessel and power source, binding Nemathrel to this realm through his own living body. Quite committed, especially for a terminal cancer patient."

The horror of it unfolded in Mick's mind—a dying father so desperate for justice that he'd tied a demon to his own failing flesh, likely extending his suffering in the process.

"But why appear as Thomas?" Mick asked. "Why the elaborate haunting through reflections?"

"Efficiency," Lilaeth replied with a dismissive wave. "Nemathrel takes the form of the wronged dead because it's effective. The guilty see the face of the person they harmed, and their own terror feeds Nemathrel's power. The

reflective surfaces serve as conduits—liminal spaces where reality thins, allowing easier manifestation.”

She leaned forward slightly, her dress rippling like liquid darkness. “And William Harrington’s ritual was remarkably specific. He named those responsible, detailed their crimes, and bound Nemathrel to exact retribution reflecting the nature of each man’s guilt. Quite elegant, really.”

“So it’s not Thomas Harrington we’ve been encountering,” Mick said slowly, “but this vengeance demon masquerading as him.”

“Precisely.” Lilaeth’s smile widened fractionally. “Though ‘masquerading’ isn’t quite right. Nemathrel has absorbed Thomas’s memories, his pain, his rage—becoming, in a sense, the vengeance Thomas himself might have sought had he the power.”

Mick’s detective instincts stirred through his exhaustion. Lilaeth was being unusually forthcoming, which meant she had an agenda beyond mere amusement at human suffering.

“Why tell me this?” he asked bluntly. “What do you gain from explaining Nemathrel’s nature?”

Lilaeth’s expression shifted to one of calculated innocence that looked utterly wrong on her perfect features. “Perhaps I simply find your investigation entertaining. It’s not often I witness humans stumbling through the supernatural with such... determination.”

“Bullshit,” Mick said flatly. “You want something.”

Her laughter this time was genuine, a sound like crystal shards falling on marble. “Perceptive, even without your demon to guide you. Very well.” She rose from her chaise in a single fluid motion that contained too many subtle wrongnesses to catalogue. “Nemathrel is... problematic. It operates in territory that overlaps with my own interests.”

“Territorial dispute?” Mick suggested, watching her carefully.

“Something like that.” Lilaeth circled him slowly, her proximity sending waves of cold rippling across his skin. “Vengeance demons are messy, detective. They fulfil their contracts with excessive enthusiasm, often spilling beyond their specified targets to claim additional victims. Bad for business when potential clients find themselves collateral damage.”

The pieces clicked into place. “You’re worried Nemathrel might target your clients or contacts.”

“I maintain a delicate ecosystem here,” she confirmed, completing her circle to stand before him again. “Balanced arrangements, mutually beneficial agreements. Nemathrel’s blunt approach to vengeance disrupts those arrangements.”

“So you want it gone,” Mick concluded. “And you want me to do your dirty work.”

Lilaeth’s smile was razor-sharp. “Let’s call it a convergence of interests. You want to stop the killings and free your demon. I want Nemathrel contained before it interferes further in my territory. We both get what we want.”

“At what cost?” Mick asked, knowing there would be one.

“Nothing beyond what you already owe me,” she replied with artificial sweetness. “Consider this information a gesture of goodwill toward our existing arrangement.”

The mention of their previous deal—his promise of a future favour in exchange for information about the binding stone—sent cold dread through Mick’s veins. That debt still hung over him, unclaimed and potentially devastating when Lilaeth eventually decided to collect.

“And the binding stone?” he pressed. “You mentioned knowing how to break its effects.”

“Ah, yes.” Lilaeth moved to a cabinet that emerged from the darkness of the wall, withdrawing a small wooden box inlaid with silver symbols that

hurt the eye when viewed directly. “The ritual is relatively simple, though the components are... specific.”

She opened the box to reveal a collection of objects: a small silver knife with a blade that seemed to drink light rather than reflect it; a vial of liquid that moved with unnatural viscosity, neither completely solid nor liquid; a bundle of herbs bound with what appeared to be human hair; and a piece of chalk that left faint glowing marks when handled.

“All necessary for the unbinding,” Lilaeth explained, closing the box and extending it toward him. “A small ritual requiring your blood, some incantations, and proximity to the binding stone itself.”

Mick hesitated before taking the box, its weight disconcertingly variable, as if the contents were constantly shifting. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch beyond our existing arrangement,” Lilaeth replied, her tone suggesting this was the most reasonable thing in the world. “Though I should mention that the ritual must be performed soon. Binding stones strengthen their hold over time—after a week, the effects become irreversible.”

The implication settled like ice in Mick’s stomach. Six days had already passed since touching the stone. If Lilaeth was telling the truth—and that was a significant if—he had less than twenty-four hours to perform the ritual before losing Marchosias permanently.

“So to clarify the terms,” Mick said, forcing his voice to remain steady despite his desperation, “you provide me with the means to break the binding stone’s effect, and in return, I owe you a single favour to be claimed within one year, involving no harm to my family, no surrender of my soul, and nothing that would directly result in human death.”

“Precisely.” Lilaeth extended her hand, palm up. “Do we have an agreement, Detective?”

Every instinct screamed at him to refuse—to find another solution, any solution that didn't involve binding himself to an entity as dangerous and manipulative as Lilaeth. But six days of searching had yielded nothing else, and the clock was running out. Without Marchosias, he stood no chance against whatever was masquerading as Thomas Harrington's vengeful spirit.

"We have an agreement," Mick said, placing his hand in hers.

Her skin was cold as ice, and at the moment of contact, Mick felt something intangible pass between them—a metaphysical connection forming, binding their agreement in ways that transcended mere words. For a brief, terrifying instant, he glimpsed Lilaeth's true nature behind her perfect human façade—something ancient and predatory, with too many eyes and limbs arranged in patterns that human anatomy was never meant to comprehend.

"Excellent," she purred, withdrawing her hand. A small, intricate symbol briefly glowed on Mick's palm before fading from visibility—though he could still feel it, a subtle pressure just beneath his skin. "Our compact is sealed."

"Why help me free Marchosias at all?" Mick asked, suspicion warring with desperate hope. "You two clearly have history."

A shadow of something genuine flickered across Lilaeth's perfect features—an emotion Mick couldn't quite identify, gone before he could analyse it properly.

"Marchosias and I have... unfinished business," she said, her voice suddenly lacking its usual artificial melody. "His current predicament offers certain advantages, but not if it becomes permanent. What fun is a game when your opponent can't play?"

It was the most honest thing she'd said since he'd entered—a glimpse of the ancient, complex relationships between supernatural entities that transcended human understanding.

"So I free Marchosias, confront Nemathrel, and you benefit regardless of the outcome," Mick summarised.

Lilaeth's smile returned to its calculated perfection. "Precisely. Our interests align beautifully."

Mick knew he was almost certainly walking into a trap of some kind, but his options were limited. Without Marchosias, he stood no chance against a vengeance demon capable of the deaths he'd investigated. And if the binding truly became permanent after a week...

"What happens if I fail to stop Nemathrel?" he asked, tucking the ritual box into his messenger bag.

"Then the vengeance demon completes its contract, leaving a trail of bodies and terror in its wake, free to seek others in this realm." Lilaeth replied with a casual shrug that looked rehearsed, as if she'd studied the human gesture but couldn't quite master its natural execution.

"And William Harrington? What happens to him when this is over?"

Something like genuine pity crossed Lilaeth's features. "William Harrington ceased to exist as you would understand it the moment he bound Nemathrel to himself. His consciousness lingers, I imagine, trapped within the demon's essence—aware of what his vengeance has wrought but powerless to control it."

The horror of William's fate struck Mick anew—not just sacrificing his life for vengeance, but his very self, condemned to witness every act of violence without the power to intervene.

"How do I find Nemathrel?" Mick asked, already mentally preparing for what lay ahead.

“It will be where it all began,” Lilaeth replied cryptically. “Vengeance demons are ritualistic creatures, drawn to the places where their contracts were formed. When not actively hunting, Nemathrel will return to the site of William’s original summoning.”

“The bookshop in Spitalfields,” Mick concluded. “Where we found William’s research.”

Lilaeth nodded, her perfect hair moving with unnatural grace. “One final piece of advice, detective.” Her voice dropped to a tone almost resembling concern. “Vengeance demons feed on guilt. If you face Nemathrel with your own unresolved culpability—say, regarding a certain child you failed to save—it will sense that weakness and exploit it mercilessly.”

The reference to Jamie Matthews struck like a physical blow. Mick’s hand moved instinctively to his pocket where he normally kept his flask, encountering only empty fabric.

“Your demon protected you from more than you realised,” Lilaeth continued, watching his reaction with calculated interest. “Without Marchosias, your own guilt radiates from you like a beacon—quite delicious to entities like Nemathrel.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Mick replied stiffly, turning to leave before she could pick at more of his psychological wounds.

“Oh, and detective?” Lilaeth called after him, her voice carrying that unsettling harmonic quality again. “Do give Marchosias my regards when you free him. Tell him I’m looking forward to our reunion.”

The threat beneath her pleasantries was unmistakable, but Mick didn’t respond as he made his way back through the club. The patrons seemed more interested in him now, tracking his movements with hungry eyes that occasionally reflected light in ways human eyes shouldn’t. Without Marchosias’s protection, they sensed his vulnerability, like predators catching the scent of injured prey.

Outside, the cold autumn air was a relief after the club's oppressive atmosphere. Reeves straightened from where she'd been leaning against her car, tension visible in every line of her body.

"You're out early," she observed, scanning him for signs of injury or supernatural influence. "Productive meeting?"

Mick opened his messenger bag enough to show her the ritual box. "Very. I know what we're dealing with, and I have what we need to free Marchosias."

As they drove toward Mick's flat to prepare for the unbinding ritual, he explained what Lilaeth had revealed—the vengeance demon masquerading as Thomas, William Harrington's terrible bargain, and the ritual components needed to break Marchosias's binding.

"You trust her?" Reeves asked sceptically, navigating through evening traffic. "Seems convenient that she's suddenly helpful."

"Trust? No," Mick admitted. "But her explanation fits the evidence better than our ghost theory. And she has her own reasons for wanting Nemathrel contained."

"Supernatural politics," Reeves muttered, shaking her head. "Wonderful."

The sky darkened as they reached Mick's building, the early winter sunset bleeding red across the London skyline. Time was running short—both for the unbinding ritual and for stopping Nemathrel before it claimed more victims.

As Mick gathered the necessary materials for the ritual, he felt a renewed sense of purpose cutting through his exhaustion. Soon he would either have Marchosias back or lose the demon permanently. And beyond that lay the confrontation with Nemathrel—a battle he couldn't hope to win as a mere human.

Everything hinged on the ritual box from Lilaeth—a gift that almost certainly concealed layers of deception. But as Mick had learned during his

years with the Met, sometimes the devil you know is preferable to the one you don't.

And right now, he needed his devil back.

13 **Breaking the Binding**

The obsidian binding stone rested in the centre of Mick's kitchen table, its perfectly spherical surface drinking light rather than reflecting it. A strange sigil marked its surface, positioned perfectly at the top of the sphere despite Mick having rolled and turned it several times since retrieving it. Surrounding the stone, drawn in glowing chalk that left faint luminescent trails when applied, was a complex pattern of interlocking symbols—some resembling ancient Sumerian cuneiform, others appearing more like mathematical formulae that operated on principles beyond conventional geometry.

“Are you sure about this?” Reeves asked, watching as Mick arranged the components from Lilaeth's ritual box with methodical precision. Her hand rested instinctively near her extendable baton, though both knew it would be useless against whatever might emerge from the ritual.

“Not remotely,” Mick admitted, carefully placing small stone markers at key intersections in the chalk pattern. “But we're out of options and time.”

The flat's windows had been covered with black bin bags taped to the frames, sealing out both prying eyes and ambient light from the streetlamps below. The only illumination came from seven black candles—another component from Lilaeth's box—positioned at specific points around the ritual space. Their flames burned with unnatural steadiness, neither flickering nor consuming the wax, casting long shadows that seemed to move independently of their source.

“How did you retrieve the binding stone from evidence?” Reeves asked, eyeing the obsidian sphere with undisguised apprehension. Her fingers traced the air above the strange sigil, not quite daring to touch it. “That marking... I swear it looks like a spiral to me now, but earlier it appeared more triangular.”

Mick allowed himself a small, grim smile. "I'm not totally without charm and charisma." At her sceptical look, he relented. "Alright, I distracted the duty officer with an old shoe in an evidence bag with a non-existent reference number. Poor bloke scrambled off to find what case it belonged to while I helped myself to our spherical friend here."

He nudged the binding stone with a pencil, and they both watched as it failed to roll properly, moving slightly then stopping dead the instant the pencil was removed, as if inertia simply didn't apply to it. "Strange thing doesn't behave like normal matter. Put it on an incline and it stays put unless the slope is significant. Give it a push and it stops the moment you stop touching it. And that marking always stays on top, no matter how you position it."

"And after?" she asked, nodding toward the stone. "When this is over, what's your plan for returning it?"

"One problem at a time," Mick replied, consulting the ritual instructions transcribed from one of William Harrington's books. "First, we break the binding and get Marchosias back. Then we deal with Nemathrel."

He glanced at his watch—11:43 PM. According to Lilaeth, the binding would become permanent at precisely 9:17 AM tomorrow, the exact time he'd touched the stone six days earlier. The specific hour hardly seemed coincidental; such precise timing suggested there was more to the stone's function than she'd revealed.

"Everything's ready," he announced, setting the silver ritual knife beside the stone. "You should wait in the other room."

Reeves crossed her arms, her expression hardening. "Not a chance. I've come this far. I'm seeing it through."

Mick wanted to argue, to protect her from whatever consequences might follow, but time was too short and her determination too evident. Instead, he nodded once in acknowledgment.

“Stay behind the outer circle,” he instructed, pointing to a chalk line that enclosed the entire ritual space. “No matter what happens, don’t cross it until I say it’s safe.”

With Reeves positioned safely outside the boundary, Mick took a deep breath and began the ritual. He lifted the silver knife, its blade seeming to bend light around it rather than reflect it, and drew it across his palm. The cut was surprisingly painless, as if the knife separated flesh on some level beyond the merely physical. Blood welled immediately, viscous and dark in the candlelight.

Following the instructions, he let seven drops fall onto the binding stone’s surface. Each drop sizzled upon contact, neither spreading nor rolling off the perfect sphere but remaining fixed where it landed, slowly sinking into the seemingly solid obsidian like stones into a tar pit.

Mick began reciting the incantation he’d memorised, the syllables feeling wrong in his mouth, as if his tongue and palate weren’t designed to form such sounds. The air in the flat grew heavy, pressing against their eardrums with increasing pressure. The candle flames stretched taller, their light dimming even as they elongated to impossible heights, nearly touching the ceiling.

As Mick continued the recitation, the chalk markings began to glow more intensely, pulsing in rhythm with the words. The temperature plummeted, their breath clouding before them despite the flat’s heating running at full capacity. Frost patterns formed on the table’s surface, intricate crystalline structures spreading outward from the ritual circle like frozen fractals.

The binding stone began to vibrate, at first subtly, then with increasing intensity until it hummed at a frequency that made their teeth ache. The strange sigil atop it started to rotate slowly, then faster, blurring into a swirl of dark energy. The blood drops that had vanished into its surface reappeared, now forming counter-rotating patterns that spiralled around the sigil like living things, rearranging themselves with deliberate purpose.

Mick felt something tear—not physically, but on some other level of perception, as if reality itself was being parted like a curtain. The sensation was nauseating, a fundamental wrongness that made his vision swim and his equilibrium falter. He gripped the table’s edge to steady himself but continued the incantation, each syllable now echoing strangely as if spoken in a vast cavern rather than his cramped kitchen.

The sigil on the binding stone suddenly flared with dark light, then began to fade, the swirling patterns of blood contracting toward the centre like water down a drain. With each syllable of the final incantation, the marking grew fainter, the stone’s deep obsidian surface becoming more uniform.

Mick spoke the final words of the ritual, his voice barely audible over the high-pitched keening that now emanated from the vibrating stone. Behind him, he heard Reeves inhale sharply, but didn’t dare turn to look at her. The ritual was reaching its climax, the binding stone now pulsating with visible waves of energy that distorted the air around it like heat shimmer.

With a sound like reality tearing at the seams, the sigil vanished completely from the stone’s surface. In the same instant, the air above the table seemed to split open, darkness pouring through the rift like liquid shadow, coalescing into a vaguely humanoid shape that towered over the ritual space.

For a terrible moment, Mick feared he’d been deceived—that the ritual hadn’t released Marchosias but something else entirely. The shadow figure seemed to expand, filling the kitchen from floor to ceiling, its form constantly shifting as if struggling to settle on a shape appropriate to this realm.

Then it spoke, its voice carrying the familiar harmonic qualities Mick had missed for six agonising days:

“That,” Marchosias said, *“was exceedingly unpleasant.”*

Relief flooded Mick with such intensity that his knees nearly buckled. “Welcome back,” he managed, his voice hoarse from the ritual’s exertion.

The shadow contracted, condensing into a more defined form—still not physical in the conventional sense, but less chaotic, more focused. Tendrils of darkness retracted into the main mass until the shape approximated a tall, lean human silhouette with eyes that burned like distant stars.

“That,” Marchosias continued, “was like being buried alive with my eyes forced open. Conscious of everything, yet unable to speak or act. Quite the exquisite torment, even by demonic standards.”

“I tried everything I could think of,” Mick said, lowering himself carefully into a chair as exhaustion from the ritual began to set in. “Until we found —”

“Lilaeth,” Marchosias interrupted, the name emerging with such controlled fury that the air itself seemed to flinch. “Yes, I was there for that particularly ill-advised visit. I saw everything, Mick. I simply couldn’t intervene.”

The temperature, which had been gradually normalising, plummeted again. The shadow that was Marchosias contracted further, its edges becoming sharp and defined, the burning points of light that approximated eyes flaring with sudden intensity.

“What I don’t understand is WHY you would accept her terms. A favour to be claimed at her discretion? Have I taught you nothing about dealing with entities like her?”

Mick’s palm burned suddenly where Lilaeth’s invisible mark had been left, a phantom pain that made him wince. “I had no choice,” he replied defensively. “The binding was becoming permanent. We were facing a vengeance demon with nothing but human resources.”

“You FOOL.”

The shadow expanded violently, darkness lashing against the ritual circle's boundaries like a caged beast. The candles extinguished simultaneously, plunging the kitchen into absolute darkness save for Marchosias's burning eyes, now multiplied and arranging themselves in concentric rings that rotated in opposing directions.

"Those terms leave her a thousand loopholes. A THOUSAND ways to destroy you without technically violating the agreement. 'No harm to your family' doesn't prevent her from harming everyone else you care about. 'No surrender of your soul' doesn't prevent her from trapping you in eternal servitude with your soul technically intact. 'Nothing that directly results in human death' leaves endless indirect methods!"

"I had to get you back," Mick shot back, finding his own anger rising to meet the demon's. "What would you have done? Let the binding become permanent while Nemathrel continued its hunt? I made the best choice available."

The darkness contracted again, Marchosias's form returning to its previous approximation of a human silhouette, though still shifting at the edges like smoke in a wind too subtle for human perception.

"Nemathrel," he repeated, the fury in his voice giving way to something closer to calculation. *"That was unexpected. I knew something was manipulating reflective surfaces, but I couldn't identify the specific entity while bound. Its methods matched several possibilities."*

As his connection with Marchosias gradually re-established itself, Mick felt the demon's consciousness flowing back into the shared space in his mind—a sensation both intensely invasive and oddly comforting after days of silence. With it came the familiar enhancement of his senses, the chronic pain in his leg fading to a dull background ache, and the return of that subtle layer of perception that revealed the hidden aspects of reality.

“So you know what we’ve learned about William Harrington?” Mick asked, finding it easier to speak now that their mental connection was returning.

“I witnessed your investigations, yes,” Marchosias replied. “Though experiencing it through your limited perception was like watching a chess match through a keyhole—fragmented and incomplete. Some of your deductions were... surprisingly sound, given your human limitations.”

“High praise,” Mick said dryly.

Reeves, who had been watching this exchange with a mix of caution and curiosity, stepped forward but remained outside the ritual circle. “So he knows everything we discovered?”

“He was there the whole time,” Mick confirmed. “Just unable to communicate.”

“Nemathrel is indeed ancient,” Marchosias’s tone shifted, his form solidifying further as their connection strengthened. “And dangerous in its particular domain. It specialises in justice through mirrors and reflective surfaces—the perfect instrument for William Harrington’s vengeance.”

“You’ve encountered it before?” Reeves asked, her natural wariness of Marchosias temporarily overridden by the need for information.

“Our paths have crossed over millennia. Nemathrel is what humans might call a specialist—extraordinarily powerful within its niche, but limited outside it. Its strength lies in exploiting guilt and manipulating reflections. Outside those parameters, it has vulnerabilities.”

“Can we defeat it?” Mick asked, the question that had been burning in him for days.

Instead of answering immediately, Marchosias’s form began to coalesce further, darkness gathering and compressing until it took on a more substantial appearance—still not fully physical, but more defined than Mick had ever seen outside of full manifestation. The burning points that

served as eyes reduced to two, set in a face that suggested sharp angles and ancient knowledge rather than human features.

“Nemathrel will be difficult to defeat,” Marchosias said finally. “It’s ancient and powerful within its domain. We would need something capable of disrupting its connection to William Harrington, something that could interfere with its ability to manifest in this realm. Perhaps if we could find a way to—”

“Could we use the binding stone?” Mick interrupted, the idea suddenly crystallising in his mind.

Marchosias’s presence in his consciousness went momentarily still, like a predator surprised by unexpected movement. *“The binding stone? You kept it?”*

“Of course I kept it,” Mick replied, retrieving the obsidian sphere from where he’d set it aside after the ritual, its surface now unmarked where the sigil had been. “If it could silence you, I thought it might be useful against other entities.”

A sensation that might have been surprise—or perhaps reluctant admiration—rippled through their shared consciousness. *“We could,”* Marchosias said slowly, the mental equivalent of turning an object to examine it from all angles. *“The binding stone without its sigil still holds power. It couldn’t completely silence something as ancient as Nemathrel, but...”*

“But it could disrupt its connection to William,” Mick finished. “Trap it inside him.”

For the first time since his return, Marchosias’s form suggested something like amusement. *“Perhaps you didn’t require quite as much of my guidance as I assumed. Your detective work was... adequate in my absence.”*

“Adequate?” Mick raised an eyebrow. “I tracked down a vengeance demon masquerading as a ghost, discovered its connection to William Harrington,

identified all five victims and their connections to Thomas's case, and figured out how to free you from an ancient Sumerian binding artefact. I'd call that a bit better than 'adequate.'"

"I was attempting to be generous," Marchosias replied dryly. "Though I should note that your progress was not entirely of your own making. I was attempting to guide you, even while bound."

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"Guide me?" Mick questioned, glancing at Reeves, who could no longer hear Marchosias's side of the conversation. "What are you talking about?"

"Your dreams, detective. Those weren't mere nightmares or your subconscious processing trauma. I was attempting to communicate through the only channel the binding stone didn't completely sever—your dreaming mind."

Mick froze, remembering the fragmented nightmares that had plagued him throughout Marchosias's silence—visions of darkened corridors lined with mirrors, figures watching from reflective surfaces, a bookshop with endless shelves. Not random fear-images, but deliberate messages.

“The bookshop,” he said aloud. “You were trying to point me toward William Harrington.”

“With limited success, evidently,” Marchosias replied, a note of sardonic amusement returning to his mental voice. *“Though I will concede that your conventional investigation methods proved... unexpectedly effective, considering your human limitations.”*

“Marchosias is back to his old self, I see,” Reeves observed dryly, noting Mick’s expression.

“Claims he was trying to send me messages through my dreams while bound,” Mick explained. “Guiding me toward the bookshop.”

“Did it work?” she asked, already gathering her coat and checking her equipment—baton, CS spray, and handcuffs secured to her belt, with her warrant card and taser in their usual pockets.

“Not as well as good old-fashioned detective work,” Mick replied with a faint smile. “But it explains some of what we experienced. The binding stone didn’t create complete separation—just enough to prevent direct communication.”

“Your primitive investigative methods would have taken weeks longer without my subtle guidance,” Marchosias grumbled internally. *“But by all means, continue basking in your perceived self-sufficiency.”*

“What if we offered Nemathrel a choice?” Mick suggested, returning to their strategy. “Either it voluntarily returns to the infernal realm, or we use the binding stone to trap it inside William, silenced for eternity.”

The temperature in the kitchen dropped several degrees as Marchosias considered this, frost patterns forming briefly at the edges of the windows before fading. “*A binding imprisonment versus banishment,*” he mused. *“Nemathrel would find neither option appealing, but eternal imprisonment in a decaying vessel would be particularly abhorrent.”*

“Could it work?” Reeves asked, following the half-conversation as best she could.

“Marchosias thinks it might,” Mick confirmed. “We use the binding stone to threaten Nemathrel with eternal imprisonment, forcing it to choose banishment instead.”

“A calculated gamble,” Marchosias cautioned. *“If Nemathrel calls our bluff, we would need to follow through. The binding process would be considerably more difficult than what you just performed to free me, and would require William’s willing participation.”*

“So we need to find William first,” Mick concluded, “and hope there’s enough of his consciousness left to assist us.”

“A reasonable strategy,” Marchosias acknowledged, *“if extremely dangerous. Nemathrel will sense our approach, particularly mine. It will defend its anchor with considerable force.”*

As they prepared to leave for the bookshop, Mick carefully wrapped the binding stone in a silk cloth from Lilaeth’s ritual box, placing it in a small cushioned case he’d originally bought for transporting evidence. The stone felt heavier than its size suggested, as if it contained densities beyond normal matter. Without its sigil, it appeared to be nothing more than a perfectly formed obsidian sphere, though its unnatural resistance to physics remained—when he tilted the case experimentally, the stone stayed precisely in place until the angle became steep enough to overcome whatever force held it stable.

“Remember,” Reeves said, checking her watch, “we’re looking for William Harrington and a way to break his connection to Nemathrel. No unnecessary risks.”

Mick nodded, feeling more complete than he had in days—the silence in his mind replaced by Marchosias’s familiar presence, his physical senses enhanced once more by their connection. Yet something had shifted during

their separation, subtle but undeniable. The balance between them felt different, their previously established boundaries less defined.

Whether that change would prove beneficial remained to be seen. For now, they had a vengeance demon to confront, a grieving father to free, and the consequences of Mick's bargain with Lilaeth hanging over them like a sword waiting to fall.

"Ready?" Reeves asked, hand on the door.

"As we'll ever be," Mick replied, feeling Marchosias's consciousness align with his own in shared purpose despite their lingering tensions.

They stepped out into the London night, leaving behind the remnants of the ritual—chalked symbols already fading from reality, candles reduced to puddles of black wax, and the lingering scent of something ancient and other that had briefly torn the veil between worlds.

In Mick's pocket, the case containing the binding stone seemed to pulse with residual energy—a reminder of both Marchosias's return and the price that had made it possible. A price that would eventually come due, when Lilaeth decided to collect on her bargain.

But that was tomorrow's problem. Tonight, they had a vengeance demon to confront.

14 The Father's Price

The bookshop looked different in darkness. Mick stood across the street, studying the dilapidated storefront of Ink and Antiquity. Moonlight caught on the grimy windows, transforming ordinary dirt into cryptic patterns that seemed almost deliberate in their arrangement. The faded sign creaked gently in the night breeze, its hinges protesting with a sound like distant, pained whispering.

"Different atmosphere than our daytime visit," Reeves observed quietly, checking her torch before switching it off to preserve their night vision. Her service-issue extendable baton hung at her belt, a reassuring weight though they both knew conventional weapons would offer little protection against what they might encounter.

"Places have different faces depending on when you visit," Mick replied, feeling Marchosias's consciousness align with his own, their perceptions merging to reveal layers of reality invisible to ordinary human senses. "And this one's nocturnal nature is... concerning."

"The building is aware," Marchosias's voice resonated within their shared mind. *"Not sentient in the human sense, but sensitised by decades of William's occult activities. The walls have absorbed energies they were never meant to contain."*

With Marchosias restored, Mick's perception had sharpened beyond merely human capabilities. The bookshop's outline seemed to waver slightly, its boundaries less fixed than they should be, as if the structure existed simultaneously in multiple dimensional states. Dark currents of energy circulated around the building like spectral serpents, coiling and uncoiling in hypnotic patterns that made his eyes water when he tried to track their movements.

They crossed the deserted street, their footsteps unnaturally loud in the pre-dawn stillness. London never truly slept, but this particular corner of

Spitalfields felt suspended in a pocket of unnatural silence, isolated from the city's perpetual hum. No distant traffic sounds penetrated here, no sirens or rumbling night buses—just the unsettling quiet of a place that existed slightly out of sync with the surrounding world.

“Watch for the decorating equipment,” Mick murmured as they approached. “Made a proper mess of myself last time.”

Reeves raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t mention that.”

“Didn’t seem relevant.” Mick shone his torch briefly toward the corner near the front counter. “Stepladder with a dust sheet caught on it. Sent me straight into a stack of paint cans. Still got the bruises on my shins to prove it.”

“Always the graceful one,” she replied with a hint of amusement that did little to mask her tension.

The padlock they’d carefully replaced during their previous visit hung from the front door, appearing undisturbed. Mick removed his lock picks, working by touch and memory rather than risking the torch beam that might attract unwanted attention—either from passing patrol cars or from whatever might be watching from the shop’s interior.

The lock yielded with the same suspicious ease as before, falling open after only minimal resistance. As Mick removed it from the hasp, the metal felt unnaturally cold against his skin, drawing heat from his fingers with hungry urgency.

“Ready?” he asked Reeves, who stood with her back to him, scanning the empty street with the habitual vigilance of an experienced officer.

She nodded once, her expression professionally neutral despite the tension evident in the set of her shoulders. “Let’s find William.”

The door swung inward with a protracted creak, the sound stretching for several seconds longer than physics should allow. Darkness spilled out from the interior, not the passive absence of light but something active and

grasping, tendrils of shadow reaching toward them before reluctantly retreating as Mick switched on his torch.

The smell hit them immediately—that complex miasma they’d encountered during their daytime visit, but now intensified. Beneath the expected mustiness of damp paper and decaying leather bindings lay something more disturbing: the metallic tang of old blood, the acrid bite of burnt herbs, and a new element—a biological odour that reminded Mick of hospital wards, of bodies sustained by machines long after natural processes had begun to fail.

“You smell that?” he whispered, stepping cautiously over the threshold.

Reeves nodded, her own torch beam joining his to carve twin tunnels through the unnatural darkness. “Like a hospital palliative care ward. Someone’s dying in here.”

“Or being prevented from dying,” Marchosias added internally. *“Nemathrel would need William alive to maintain its anchor in this realm.”*

They moved deeper into the shop, the torch beams creating islands of visibility surrounded by impenetrable darkness. The bookshelves loomed around them like monoliths, their contents shifting subtly when viewed from peripheral vision—book spines elongating, titles rearranging themselves, leather bindings pulsing with gentle movements that resembled shallow breathing.

Mick carefully navigated around the stepladder he’d encountered on their previous visit, its silhouette just visible in the torch beam. The dust sheet still hung partly from its frame, billowing slightly in air currents that shouldn’t have existed in the closed shop. Several paint cans remained clustered at its base, their lid colours ranging from eggshell white to a deep burgundy that looked uncomfortably like congealed blood in the dim light.

“Previous owner must have been renovating when...” Reeves trailed off, gesturing vaguely at their surroundings.

“When something more urgent came up,” Mick finished, rubbing absently at the still-tender bruise on his shin where he’d collided with the paint cans days earlier.

The floor creaked beneath their weight, each board seeming to protest more loudly than natural acoustics should allow. The sound echoed oddly in the confined space, bouncing back from angles that didn’t align with the room’s visible architecture, suggesting hidden spaces or impossible geometries lurking just beyond perception.

“The shop seems bigger than I remember,” Reeves murmured, her torch illuminating rows of shelves that stretched further than the building’s external dimensions should have permitted.

“Spatial distortion,” Marchosias explained, his voice a cool current through Mick’s consciousness. *“Common side effect of prolonged occult activity in a confined location. Reality becomes... flexible where the veil thins.”*

They passed the counter where transactions would once have been conducted, its surface now covered with a thick layer of dust undisturbed except for a single path of fingerprints—their own from the previous visit. Behind it stood the door they’d identified earlier as leading to William’s office and, presumably, to the cellar below.

Mick reached for the handle, then hesitated as Marchosias’s presence surged forward within him, a warning pressure against his consciousness.

“Wait,” the demon cautioned. *“Something’s changed since our last visit.”*

Mick pulled his hand back, studying the door more carefully. At first glance, it appeared identical to when they’d examined it previously—a simple wooden door with peeling green paint and a tarnished brass handle.

But as he looked more closely, focusing with Marchosias's enhanced perception, he noticed subtle anomalies.

The grain of the wood didn't flow in natural patterns but formed complex whorls that seemed to rotate slowly when not directly observed. The hinges, which had appeared ordinary in daylight, now revealed tiny engravings—symbols too small for human craftsmanship, their lines precise to microscopic tolerances.

Most disturbing was the handle itself. What had seemed like ordinary tarnish now revealed itself as an intricate patina, discolouration arranged in deliberate patterns that formed a sigil of protection and confinement.

"It's warded," Mick said quietly, pointing out the details to Reeves. "Someone—or something—has locked it from the other side."

"Nemathrel?" Reeves suggested, leaning closer to examine the handle without touching it.

"Possible," Marchosias acknowledged. "Though these particular wards have William's essence woven into them. He may have created them himself, either to keep Nemathrel contained... or to keep intruders like us out."

Mick considered their options. Forcing the door might trigger whatever protective mechanisms were encoded in the wards. Attempting to disarm them without proper knowledge could be equally dangerous.

"Is there another way down to the cellar?" he asked, directing the question both to Reeves and to Marchosias.

"Old buildings like this often had multiple access points to below-ground levels," Marchosias replied. "Coal chutes, service entrances, connecting passages to adjacent properties. Look for architectural inconsistencies—spaces that don't align with the building's exterior dimensions."

They began a methodical search of the ground floor, checking behind bookshelves and under the worn carpet for any sign of alternative access.

The torchlight cast strange shadows as they worked, elongating and contracting in ways that didn't correspond to their movements, occasionally forming silhouettes that resembled watching figures before dissolving back into formless darkness.

As Mick moved a particularly heavy bookcase, his torch beam caught on something metallic beneath—a paint can opener that must have fallen during his previous accident. The light reflected sharply off its curved edge, momentarily blinding him with unexpected brightness. As his vision readjusted, he noticed the fresh scratches on the floorboards beneath—regular grooves suggesting the bookcase had been moved repeatedly and recently. Together, they shifted it completely aside, exposing a trapdoor set flush with the floor, its outline nearly invisible against the surrounding boards.

“Good spot,” Reeves acknowledged, crouching to examine the find. “No visible lock or handle.”

Mick knelt beside her, running his fingers along the edges of the trapdoor. The wood felt unnaturally warm beneath his touch, almost feverish, as if the floor itself were suffering from some architectural illness.

“Press the fourth board from the right edge,” Marchosias instructed. *“I can sense a mechanism beneath.”*

Following the demon's guidance, Mick applied pressure to the specified plank. It depressed slightly with a soft click, and the trapdoor rose a few centimetres, released from whatever latch had held it secure. Stale air wafted up from the opening, carrying that same unsettling hospital odour, now stronger and unmistakable.

“Someone's definitely down there,” Reeves said, her expression hardening with professional concern. “And they need medical attention.”

The trapdoor opened to reveal a narrow staircase descending into absolute darkness—not the ordinary absence of light but something deeper and

more absolute, as if this particular darkness had never known illumination at all. Their torch beams penetrated only a few steps before being swallowed completely, unable to reveal what waited below.

“Proceed with caution,” Marchosias advised. “The concentration of occult energy increases significantly beyond that threshold.”

Mick went first, testing each step before committing his weight. The wood creaked ominously beneath him, the sound suggesting these stairs were rarely used—a secondary access route rather than the primary entrance to whatever waited below. The air grew colder as they descended, their breath clouding before them despite the mild autumn night above.

The staircase seemed to descend much further than the building’s height above ground would suggest, another spatial impossibility to add to the growing list of architectural anomalies. After what felt like several stories’ worth of steps, they finally reached solid ground—a narrow passage with rough stone walls that bore no resemblance to the wood-framed structure above.

“This isn’t part of the original building,” Reeves observed, her torch beam revealing ancient brickwork slick with condensation. “Looks medieval, maybe older.”

“London is built upon London,” Marchosias commented. “Layer upon layer of history, much of it forgotten. This passage likely predates the bookshop by centuries.”

The narrow corridor extended before them, curving gradually to the left in a spiral that suggested they were moving deeper underground with each step. The floor was uneven, worn smooth in the centre by centuries of footsteps. Niches had been carved into the walls at irregular intervals, each containing fragments of what might once have been statuary but had degraded beyond recognition, leaving only vaguely anthropomorphic shapes crumbling into dust.

As they proceeded, Mick became aware of a sound at the edge of audibility—a slow, laboured rhythm that might have been distant machinery or perhaps something biological. The tempo matched the cadence of a struggling heartbeat, each pulse separated by progressively longer intervals, as if whatever generated it was gradually failing.

“We’re getting closer,” Marchosias confirmed. *“I can sense William’s life force—dim but present.”*

The passage eventually opened into a larger space that defied immediate comprehension. Their torch beams seemed inadequate to illuminate its full dimensions, revealing only fragments that the mind struggled to assemble into a coherent whole. What was clear, however, was that this wasn’t merely a cellar but something far more specialised—a ritual space designed for specific occult activities.

The floor had been laid with irregular flagstones, their surfaces inscribed with symbols that formed overlapping patterns too complex to decipher at a glance. A central area had been left clear, creating a perfect circle surrounded by concentric rings of text in languages Mick couldn’t identify—some resembling ancient Sumerian or Akkadian, others appearing to be mathematical formulae operating on principles beyond conventional geometry.

Most striking, however, were the mirrors.

Dozens of them—perhaps hundreds—covered the walls in a haphazard gallery that defied conventional interior design. Antique pier glasses stood beside modern bathroom mirrors, ornate Victorian hand-mirrors hung alongside simple reflective surfaces that might have been salvaged from cosmetic compacts. Some were cracked or tarnished, others pristine, their surfaces catching and distorting the torchlight in unsettling ways.

“Jesus,” Reeves whispered, her torch beam darting from one reflective surface to another. *“It’s like a fun house gone wrong.”*

“A conduit gallery,” Marchosias explained, his mental voice tight with recognition. *“Each mirror connected to a different location or person. Windows through which Nemathrel could reach its victims.”*

Mick approached one of the larger mirrors, an ornate piece in a heavy gilt frame that looked salvaged from a stately home. The glass within was clouded with age, its silvering deteriorated in places, yet it reflected the chamber with unnatural clarity. As he studied it, the reflected version of the room seemed to shift subtly, angles changing in ways that defied Euclidean geometry.

“Don’t look too closely,” he warned Reeves. “These aren’t ordinary reflections.”

They moved carefully through the mirrored chamber, searching for any sign of William Harrington. The sound they’d been tracking—that laboured, struggling rhythm—grew louder here, emanating from somewhere beyond the forest of reflective surfaces. Following it led them deeper into the gallery, navigating between freestanding mirrors arranged in patterns that seemed deliberately maze-like.

At the centre of this labyrinth stood a single mirror unlike the others—a full-length piece in a frame of dark wood that appeared to absorb rather than reflect the surrounding light. Its surface didn’t show their approaching figures but remained opaque, like a window opening onto absolute void.

“There,” Marchosias said suddenly. *“Behind the black mirror. William’s life force is strongest directly behind that surface.”*

Mick studied the mirror carefully, noting how the surrounding air seemed to distort around its edges, creating a subtle wavering effect like heat haze. The frame was carved with intricate patterns that drew the eye in uncomfortable ways, creating optical illusions that suggested movement where none existed.

“How do we get through?” he asked, directing the question both to Reeves and Marchosias.

“The mirror isn’t a physical barrier but a perceptual one,” Marchosias explained. *“It creates the illusion of solid glass while actually serving as a doorway. You need only step through, though the transition may be... disorienting.”*

Mick extended his hand cautiously toward the mirror’s surface. Instead of meeting resistance, his fingers passed through as if dipping into viscous liquid, the sensation accompanied by a momentary vertigo as his perception attempted to reconcile the impossible physics of the transition.

“It’s a doorway,” he confirmed to Reeves. “I’m going through. Wait ten seconds, then follow if I don’t return.”

Before she could protest, he stepped forward into the mirror’s surface. The transition felt like moving through heavy syrup, a momentary resistance followed by release as he passed completely through. For a disorienting instant, his senses fragmented—vision separating from hearing, touch disconnecting from proprioception—before reassembling on the other side.

He found himself in a small chamber hewn from rough stone, its walls slick with condensation that caught his torch beam in a thousand tiny reflections. The air was thick with the smell of illness and decay, that hospital odour now unmistakable and overwhelming.

The struggling rhythm they’d been following revealed itself at last—the laboured breathing of a figure seated in an ornate chair at the chamber’s centre. At first glance, it appeared to be nothing more than a desiccated corpse, the remains of someone who had died in that seated position and mummified naturally in the chamber’s unique atmospheric conditions.

Then its eyes opened.

William Harrington was alive—technically. His emaciated body resembled a anatomical model with skin stretched over it, each bone and tendon

visible beneath tissue that had thinned to translucence. His limbs were secured to the chair not with rope or chains but with what appeared to be his own veins and arteries, extracted from beneath the skin and wound around the armrests and chair legs in a grotesque parody of circulatory function. In places, the blood vessels had fused with the wooden structure, creating a hybrid organic-inorganic system that pulsed weakly with his remaining life force.

Most horrifying was his face—gaunt beyond human endurance, skin pulled so tight across his skull that it had split in places, revealing the bone beneath. His eyes sat in cavernous sockets, the surrounding tissue atrophied to near-nothingness. Yet those eyes—impossibly, terribly—were alert and aware, fixing on Mick with painful clarity that transcended his physical condition.

Reeves emerged from the mirror behind him, her entry sending ripples across its surface like disturbed water. Her sharp intake of breath as she registered the grotesque tableau was the only sound besides William's laboured breathing.

"Mr. Harrington," Mick said gently, moving closer to the bound figure. "William. Can you hear me?"

William's mouth opened with visible effort, his jaw working mechanically as if he'd forgotten the natural coordination of speech. When his voice emerged, it was barely audible, a dry rasp like paper being crumpled:

"You... shouldn't... have come."

"We're here to help you," Mick replied, kneeling to bring himself to eye level with the seated figure. "To understand what happened with Thomas and Nemathrel."

At the mention of the vengeance demon's name, William's body convulsed, his spine arching against the chair in a spasm of apparent terror.

The blood vessels binding him tightened visibly, constricting around his limbs like living restraints responding to some unspoken command.

“Can’t... talk about... it,” he gasped when the seizure subsided. “Hears... everything. Sees... through every... reflection.”

“The mirrors,” Marchosias observed internally. “They’re not just conduits for attacking victims—they’re surveillance devices. Nemathrel can observe through any reflective surface connected to its network.”

Reeves had circled behind the chair, her torch revealing the full extent of William’s biological integration with the wooden structure. The chair’s back had partially separated, wooden slats opening like ribs to accommodate protrusions from William’s spine—bony growths that had fused with the furniture, creating a horrific symbiosis of human and object.

“What happened to you?” she asked, professional detachment failing to completely mask her horror.

William’s eyes found hers, his gaze surprisingly steady despite his physical deterioration. “Made... a deal. For Thomas.” His words came between increasingly laboured breaths, each one visibly depleting his minimal reserves of strength. “Needed... living anchor. Vessel... for vengeance.”

“You offered yourself,” Mick said, understanding dawning with sickening clarity. “Your living body as Nemathrel’s anchor in our realm.”

William managed the barest nod, the movement sending fresh cracks spiderwebbing across his parchment-like skin. “Only way... to get justice. System... failed him. Everyone... failed him.”

“So you summoned a vengeance demon,” Reeves said, her tone caught between compassion and judgment. “Gave it your son’s face and memories to hunt down those responsible.”

“Didn’t... understand,” William whispered, his voice strengthening momentarily through what must have been tremendous effort. “Thought I

was... summoning Thomas's spirit. Directing it. But Nemathrel... had other plans."

Mick shared a glance with Reeves, both recognising the tragic irony—a father so consumed by grief and rage that he'd turned to forces he couldn't possibly control, believing he was summoning his son while actually unleashing something far more ancient and malevolent.

"The contract specified five targets," Mick prompted. "The police detective, the prosecutor, the prison guard, the judge, and the witness?"

William's eyes widened fractionally, surprise registering despite his limited capacity for expression. "You... know them? All of them?"

"We've been tracking the deaths," Reeves explained. "Connecting them back to Thomas's case."

A sound emerged from William's throat—a dry, rasping noise that took Mick a moment to identify as laughter. "Clever... detectives. Nemathrel... underestimated you."

"We know what it did to them," Mick said. "The mirrors, the reflections, the personalised vengeance. We know it was using Thomas's face to terrorise them before their deaths."

William's expression shifted, something like shame flitting across his features. "Wanted them... to suffer. To know why. To see his face... before they died." He drew a rattling breath. "But Nemathrel... went beyond. Contract said... justice. Not torture."

"And now?" Reeves asked. "The contract is fulfilled. Five deaths, five acts of vengeance. Why are you still bound?"

William's emaciated body trembled, fresh cracks appearing along his forearms as muscles contracted beneath tissue too fragile to contain the movement. "Nemathrel... exceeded terms. Won't release me. Using me... to stay here. Planning... more."

“As I suspected,” Marchosias commented internally. “Vengeance demons rarely honour the strict letter of their contracts. They find loopholes, exploiting the summoner’s desires to establish more permanent footholds in this realm.”

“Can you break the binding?” Mick asked William directly. “Withdraw your consent for the arrangement?”

Hope flickered briefly in William’s sunken eyes, quickly replaced by resignation. “Tried. Many times. Contract... has no exit clause.” His gaze drifted to something behind them, focus sharpening. “It’s coming. Can feel it... approaching. You need... to go.”

The temperature in the chamber dropped suddenly, condensation on the walls freezing into intricate frost patterns. The black mirror through which they’d entered rippled like disturbed water, its surface clouding with a darkness that seemed to extend infinitely beyond the frame.

“The binding stone,” Mick said urgently, reaching for his messenger bag. “We have something that might help. A way to break Nemathrel’s connection to you.”

William’s eyes widened, genuine hope replacing resignation. “Binding stone? You have... Sumerian binding stone?”

“We need to move quickly,” Marchosias warned, his presence surging forward protectively within their shared consciousness. “Nemathrel is aware of our presence now. It won’t allow interference with its anchor.”

The chamber began to tremble, dust and small fragments of stone raining down from the ceiling. The mirror’s surface contorted violently, darkness boiling within its frame like a storm front approaching. The air thickened, becoming difficult to breathe, tasting of metal and ozone.

“We have to get him out of here,” Reeves said, already examining the grotesque fusion of William with the chair. “But I’m not sure we can move him in this state without killing him.”

“I’m already... dead,” William rasped, his voice suddenly stronger, fuelled by desperation. “Just my body... kept functioning. For the contract.” His eyes locked with Mick’s, burning with unexpected intensity. “Use the stone. Free me. Stop Nemathrel... before it finds... new targets.”

The chamber shuddered more violently, cracks spreading across the stone floor. The mirror’s surface bulged outward as if something were pressing against it from the other side, the darkness within taking on vague suggestions of form—limbs that bent at impossible angles, eyes arranged in patterns nature never intended.

“We have to go,” Reeves urged, moving toward the mirror. “We can come back with better equipment, a proper plan.”

“No time,” William gasped, blood trickling from the corners of his mouth as internal damage manifested. “It knows... what you plan. Won’t let you... return.”

Mick made his decision, reaching into his messenger bag for the binding stone. The obsidian sphere felt unnaturally heavy in his hand, its perfect surface absorbing rather than reflecting the torchlight. As he held it, he felt Marchosias’s consciousness align with his own, the demon’s ancient knowledge flowing through their shared mind.

“We’ll be back,” he promised William. “With a way to free you and stop Nemathrel. Hold on just a little longer.”

William’s lips curved in what might have been a smile, the movement opening fresh cracks in his desiccated skin. “Been holding on... thirty years. What’s one more day?”

The mirror’s surface bulged further, the darkness within taking on more defined form. The chamber’s temperature plummeted to freezing, their breath emerging as white clouds. The walls themselves seemed to contract, the space physically shrinking around them as if the room itself were attempting to crush them.

“NOW, Mick,” Marchosias urged. “We need to retreat while we still can.”

With a final nod to William, Mick backed toward the mirror, following Reeves who had already begun the transition. The passage back felt different—resistance much stronger, as if something were attempting to prevent their escape. For a terrifying moment, he felt caught between states, neither fully in the chamber nor successfully through the mirror.

Then Marchosias’s presence surged forward, the demon’s essence creating a protective barrier that enabled their final push. They emerged into the mirrored labyrinth beyond, the black mirror’s surface solidifying behind them with the sound of ice cracking.

“Run,” Mick said simply, already moving toward the passage that would lead them back to the stairs.

They navigated the mirror maze quickly, not looking too closely at any of the reflective surfaces where shadows seemed to move independently of their sources. The chamber trembled around them, mirrors rattling in their frames, some cracking spontaneously as pressure built within the space.

The narrow passage beckoned, offering escape from the labyrinth of reflections. As they reached it, Mick cast one final glance back at the central area where the black mirror stood. For a brief moment, he thought he saw William’s face in its surface—not the emaciated horror they’d just left, but the man as he must have appeared decades earlier. Young, vital, with eyes that communicated a single emotion: gratitude.

Then darkness boiled across all the reflective surfaces simultaneously, and they fled up the winding staircase, leaving the chamber and its prisoner behind—but not forgotten.

William Harrington had made a terrible bargain to secure justice for his son. Now they needed to find a way to free him from its consequences, and stop Nemathrel before its vengeance extended beyond the original contract.

But first, they needed a plan—and a better understanding of exactly what they were facing.

15 Behind the Glass

The black mirror's surface rippled like disturbed water as they fled through it, emerging back into the labyrinth of reflective surfaces. The obsidian binding stone felt unnaturally heavy in Mick's pocket, its weight a constant reminder of what they'd discovered and what they still had to face.

"What's the plan?" Reeves whispered as they paused at the edge of the mirrored chamber, her torch beam darting nervously from one reflective surface to another. Each mirror captured and distorted their image in subtly wrong ways elongating limbs, deepening shadows, creating momentary after images that lingered when they moved. "We can't leave William trapped like that."

"We need to break Nemathrel's connection to this realm," Mick replied, instinctively keeping his voice low despite the apparent emptiness of the chamber. "Free William from his bargain."

"And how exactly do we do that?" Reeves asked, her practical nature asserting itself despite the horror of their situation. "We're talking about a vengeance demon using a dying man as an anchor. Not exactly standard police procedure."

"The binding stone is our best option," Marchosias advised internally. "Not as originally intended, but as leverage. Nemathrel fears imprisonment more than banishment."

Mick relayed this to Reeves, whose expression shifted from scepticism to cautious consideration. She surveyed the chamber thoughtfully, her trained detective's eye cataloguing details they'd missed in their initial shock at discovering William's condition.

"These mirrors," she said suddenly. "They're Nemathrel's conduits, right? Its way of reaching victims?"

“According to what we’ve learned, yes,” Mick confirmed. “It uses reflective surfaces to manifest and observe.”

“So what if we...” Reeves began, then broke off as the temperature in the chamber plummeted without warning.

Frost patterns crawled across the floor with unnatural speed, forming complex geometries that mirrored the ritual symbols carved into the flagstones. The mirrors surrounding them began to vibrate in their frames, a discordant harmonic rising from dozens of reflective surfaces resonating at different frequencies.

“It’s coming,” Mick said, feeling Marchosias’s consciousness surge forward protectively within their shared mind.

“It knows we’ve found William,” the demon confirmed, his mental voice tense with anticipation. “And it won’t surrender its anchor willingly.”

The black mirror through which they’d escaped from William’s prison convulsed violently, its surface bulging outward before imploding into a shower of obsidian shards that hung suspended in the air for an impossible moment. Where the mirror had been, darkness boiled like liquid shadow, coalescing into a vaguely humanoid form.

Thomas Harrington stepped through the empty frame or rather, something wearing Thomas’s face. The resemblance to the prison photograph was striking, but subtly wrong in ways that transcended mere physical appearance. His skin had the waxy translucence of a corpse imperfectly preserved, and his movements combined the jerky hesitation of stop-motion animation with the fluid grace of something that had never been constrained by human anatomy.

“Detective,” the entity said, its voice layered with harmonics that made the air vibrate painfully against their eardrums. “You’ve been quite persistent.” Its gaze shifted to include Reeves. “Both of you. Interfering in matters beyond your comprehension.”

“We understand plenty,” Mick replied, feeling Marchosias’s power gathering within him like a storm front. “You’re using William Harrington as an anchor to remain in this realm. You’ve completed your contract five deaths, five acts of vengeance. It’s time to release him.”

Nemathrel smiled with Thomas’s face, the expression splitting his features unnaturally wide, revealing teeth too numerous and sharp to be human. “Our arrangement is more complex than you realise. William offered himself as permanent vessel, not merely temporary anchor.” The thing that wasn’t Thomas circled them slowly, each step leaving momentary after-images that trailed behind like echoes. “His rage and grief were quite extraordinary decades of festering resentment, cultivated like a precious garden. Such concentrated emotion is... nourishing.”

As it spoke, the surrounding mirrors began to change. Within each reflective surface, Thomas Harrington’s face appeared not the demonic version standing before them, but variations showing him at different ages and in different emotional states. A frightened teenager in his police mugshot. A bewildered young man in court. A hollowed shell in his prison uniform. Dozens of iterations of the same person, watching from every angle.

“Quite the gallery you’ve created,” Reeves observed, her voice steadier than her expression. Her eyes darted around the chamber, assessing, calculating. Mick recognised that look she was formulating a plan.

“Nemathrel doesn’t just use mirrors for access,” she continued, deliberately drawing the entity’s attention. “It collects them. Creates a network. Each reflection another window.”

The entity inclined its head, a gesture of acknowledgment that bent its neck at an impossible angle. “Clever observation, Detective Inspector. Reflective surfaces are doorways between realms liminal spaces where reality thins.” It gestured expansively at the surrounding gallery. “Each

mirror connected to many others. Each reflection a potential conduit for justice.”

While Nemathrel was focused on its monologue, Mick caught Reeves’ subtle glance toward the stairs leading back up to the bookshop. Her eyes flicked meaningfully toward the ceiling, then back to him. The implications clicked instantly.

She had formulated a plan.

Mick gave an almost imperceptible nod, understanding her intention. She needed a distraction to slip away and retrieve the supplies.

“A *desperate gambit*,” Marchosias commented internally, following Mick’s train of thought. “*But potentially effective. Nemathrel’s power in this realm depends on reflective surfaces.*”

“You’re trapped here now,” Mick said, deliberately provocative as he positioned himself to become the centre of Nemathrel’s attention. “Five victims designated by contract, all dead. No more conduits to the surface world.”

Nemathrel’s borrowed face contorted with something between amusement and disdain. “You misunderstand the nature of reflective surfaces, detective. Every window, every puddle, every polished surface offers potential. William’s mirrors simply provided... convenience.” It approached one of the larger mirrors, running fingers that subtly elongated as they moved across its silvered surface. “I’ve developed quite a taste for human terror. Why limit myself to just five?”

While Nemathrel continued its self-aggrandising speech, Reeves carefully edged toward the stairs. Mick kept the entity engaged, drawing its attention with each question.

“So you’re violating the terms of your agreement with William,” Mick pressed, positioning himself to block Nemathrel’s line of sight to the staircase. “The contract specified five targets.”

“Contracts evolve,” Nemathrel replied with dismissive confidence. “William’s desire for vengeance created the opening. My continued presence is simply... renegotiation.”

As it spoke, the temperature dropped further, frost now covering every surface in the chamber. The mirror Nemathrel touched began to transform, its reflection shifting to show an ordinary London street Brick Lane, Mick realised, the view from directly outside the bookshop. Pedestrians passed by, oblivious to being observed from another realm.

“So many potential witnesses,” Nemathrel said softly, its voice lingering on ‘witnesses’ with hideous significance. “So many reflections waiting to be... corrupted.”

Mick registered movement from the corner of his eye Reeves had successfully reached the staircase and was silently ascending, her practised movements soundless against the ancient stone steps. Now he needed to keep Nemathrel’s attention fixed firmly on him.

“Ambitious,” Mick commented, deliberately moving to the centre of the chamber. “But risky. More victims mean more attention. Eventually, someone would notice the pattern.”

Nemathrel turned toward him fully, Thomas’s appropriated features twisted into something that attempted to be a smile but missed by disturbing margins. “Humans are remarkably adept at ignoring patterns they don’t wish to see. How many died before you connected the deaths to Thomas Harrington?”

The entity took a step closer, its form beginning to shift and expand as shadows boiled outward from its human disguise. “But perhaps it’s time for a more direct demonstration of my capabilities.”

“*Here it comes,*” Marchosias warned, his presence surging forward within their shared consciousness. “*Get ready.*”

Nemathrel's form suddenly exploded outward, darkness lashing toward Mick like living whips. Marchosias manifested partially, creating a barrier of shadow and cold that intercepted the attack. The collision sent shockwaves through the chamber, causing several smaller mirrors to crack spontaneously.

But Nemathrel was prepared for this response. Even as Marchosias solidified his defensive barrier, the vengeance demon was already melting back into the mirror network, its form dissolving into the nearest reflective surface like smoke being drawn through a keyhole.

An instant later, it emerged from a mirror directly behind Marchosias, claws extending from what had been Thomas's fingers razor-sharp talons that gleamed with unnatural light. The attack came so quickly that even Marchosias's supernatural reflexes couldn't fully compensate.

The claws raked across the demon's partially materialised form, tearing through shadow-stuff with the sound of reality being shredded. Marchosias roared a sound that bypassed human hearing to resonate directly in the bones and spun to face his attacker, but Nemathrel was already gone, vanishing back into the mirror network.

"Clever," Marchosias acknowledged grudgingly, reforming his wounded essence. *"It's using the mirrors for tactical advantage."*

The pattern repeated immediately Nemathrel emerging from a different angle, slashing with those terrible claws before retreating into another reflective surface. Each attack left fresh tears in Marchosias's manifested form, dark ichor spattering across the chamber floor like liquid night.

Marchosias attempted to corner his opponent, shadows lashing out to block access to nearby mirrors, but Nemathrel's mobility was too great. The vengeance demon could emerge from any reflective surface in the chamber, attack from any angle, retreat before effective retaliation was possible.

“You’re outmatched here, fallen one,” Nemathrel taunted, its voice echoing from multiple mirrors simultaneously as it flickered between them. “This is my domain, connected to my power source. Your vessel’s binding stone may have freed you, but you’re still weakened from imprisonment.”

Another slashing attack, this time from above Nemathrel dropping from a tilted mirror mounted near the ceiling. The claws caught Marchosias across what approximated his shoulder, sending him staggering. The demon tried to grab his attacker, but Nemathrel flowed like water back into the reflective surface before solid contact could be made.

“It’s right,” Marchosias admitted internally, his mental voice strained with effort and pain. *“The binding stone’s effects haven’t fully dissipated. I’m operating at perhaps sixty percent of normal capacity.”*

“Can you hold it off?” Mick asked silently, watching the supernatural battle with growing concern.

“For a time. But each exchange favours Nemathrel. The mirror network gives it too many advantages.”

As if to prove his point, the vengeance demon launched a sustained assault emerging from multiple mirrors in rapid succession, each attack coming from a different angle, keeping Marchosias constantly off-balance. The fallen angel’s form began to show serious damage, cracks appearing in his shadowy substance like fissures in obsidian.

Then, over the sounds of supernatural combat, Mick heard something beautiful the crash of paint cans hitting the floor above, followed by Reeves’s voice calling down the stairs.

“Mick! Catch!”

A paint tin sailed through the air toward him burgundy-coloured, its lid already loosened. Behind it came Reeves herself, arms full of dust sheets and more paint cans, taking the stone steps two at a time in her haste to reach the battle.

“The mirrors!” she shouted, already shaking out a dust sheet. “Cover them all!”

Mick caught the paint tin as Marchosias and Nemathrel crashed into a nearby mirror, their combined impact spider-webbing the glass. Nemathrel immediately tried to retreat into another reflective surface, but Reeves was already there, casting a sheet over it with practised efficiency.

The effect was immediate and dramatic. The covered mirror emitted a high-pitched keening, like crystal subjected to unbearable pressure. Nemathrel staggered, its form momentarily destabilising Thomas’s features melting and reforming in rapid succession, glimpses of something else showing through the human disguise.

“What are you... ?” it began, then shrieked as understanding dawned.

Mick wrenched off the paint tin’s lid completely and grabbed a brush from the pile of supplies Reeves had brought. The burgundy paint unsettlingly similar to fresh blood in the dim light splashed against the nearest reflective surface with a wet, satisfying sound. The mirror shuddered in its frame as if in pain, its reflection disappearing beneath the viscous coating.

Nemathrel howled, the sound containing harmonics no human throat could produce. It lunged toward Mick, movements now jerky and disjointed, as if its control over Thomas’s form was faltering. But with its mobility restricted by the covered mirrors, Marchosias was finally able to intercept effectively.

The two supernatural entities collided with renewed force, their battle now more evenly matched as Nemathrel’s tactical advantages diminished. Marchosias’s claws met Nemathrel’s, shadow-stuff clashing against borrowed flesh in exchanges that sent concussive waves through the chamber.

“Don’t break them!” Reeves shouted as another mirror cracked from the shock-waves, already covering another section with a fresh sheet. “That just creates more reflective surfaces!”

She was right, Mick realised with horror. The shattered fragments lay on the floor, each shard now showing Nemathrel’s face, multiplying its presence rather than diminishing it. He redoubled his efforts with the paint, choosing larger mirrors to neutralise first.

The chamber became a chaos of activity Mick and Reeves frantically covering mirrors with paint and fabric while Marchosias and Nemathrel engaged in combat that transcended physical limitations. But now the momentum was shifting. With each covered mirror, Nemathrel’s ability to retreat and reposition decreased.

The vengeance demon’s form flickered more violently between locations, its movements becoming increasingly desperate. Where it had once attacked with calculated precision, now it lashed out wildly, its strategy reduced to pure aggression as its options narrowed.

Marchosias pressed his advantage, his own form stabilising as he no longer needed to defend from multiple angles simultaneously. His claws found their mark more frequently, each successful strike sending ripples of disruption through Nemathrel’s stolen form.

“It’s working!” Reeves called, abandoning finesse entirely as she hurled paint across multiple surfaces in broad, messy arcs. “It’s getting weaker!”

They had covered perhaps two-thirds of the reflective surfaces when Nemathrel changed tactics. Instead of continuing its increasingly futile hit-and-run attacks, it retreated to the centre of the chamber, drawing power from the ritual markings carved into the floor. The symbols began to glow with sickly luminescence, pulsing in rhythm with what might have been William’s heartbeat somewhere below.

“You cannot defeat me here,” Nemathrel snarled, Thomas’s voice now overlaid with something ancient and inhuman that seemed to bypass their ears and resonate directly in their bones. “This is my domain, connected to my anchor. So long as William Harrington lives, I remain.”

The entity’s form expanded, darkness boiling outward to fill the central space of the chamber. Thomas’s features stretched and distorted across a shape that no longer attempted to maintain human proportions. Limbs elongated, joints reversed direction, and eyes multiplied across surfaces where no sensory organs should exist.

Marchosias gathered himself for another assault, but Mick stepped forward, withdrawing the obsidian sphere from his pocket.

“Actually,” he said, his voice cutting through the supernatural turbulence with unexpected authority, “you have a choice.”

Nemathrel’s expansion halted abruptly, its attention fixing on the binding stone with unmistakable recognition. The darkness comprising its form contracted slightly, Thomas’s features reasserting themselves as a focal point amidst the chaotic mass.

“The Sumerian binding stone,” it hissed, the harmonics in its voice taking on a note of genuine concern. “Where did you... ?” It broke off, understanding dawning. “Blackwood. The old fool thought it would protect him.”

“But instead, it trapped Marchosias temporarily,” Mick confirmed, turning the stone slowly to catch what little light remained in the chamber. “Now properly prepared for you. Specifically attuned to your essence through William’s connection.”

This last part was pure fabrication, but delivered with such conviction that uncertainty flickered across Nemathrel’s borrowed features. The vengeance demon contracted further, its form solidifying into a more humanoid shape as it visibly reconsidered its position.

“You’re bluffing,” it said finally, but with noticeable hesitation. “You’re no scholar of the occult. You’ve had no time to prepare the stone properly.”

“Are you certain?” Reeves interjected smoothly, moving to stand beside Mick. “We’ve been investigating for days. Found William’s research, his notes on binding rituals.” She gestured to their surroundings. “Had access to this chamber before you were aware of our presence.”

Doubt crept more visibly into Nemathrel’s expression, Thomas’s features contorting with calculation and concern. The entity understood the stakes perfectly banishment would merely return it to the infernal realm, while binding would trap it within William’s dying body, silent and immobile for however long the old man’s failing flesh could be sustained.

“Press the advantage,” Marchosias advised, his presence coiled and ready behind Mick’s consciousness. *“Vengeance demons fear imprisonment above all else the inability to fulfil their fundamental purpose.”*

“Release William from his contract,” Mick demanded, stepping closer with the binding stone now held directly before him. “Return to your realm willingly, or spend eternity trapped in a decaying vessel, unable to answer calls for vengeance, unable to fulfil your purpose.”

The chamber trembled as Nemathrel considered its options, reality fluctuating around the entity as its power affected the physical environment. The few remaining uncovered mirrors cracked spontaneously, but the fragments fell normally now, without the supernatural manipulation that had previously kept them suspended.

Finally, the vengeance demon’s form contracted completely, settling back into the perfect replica of Thomas Harrington, but now the resemblance seemed hollow, a mask worn without conviction.

“Others will call on me,” it said, its voice still layered but diminished, the harmonics less painful to human ears. “I will return.”

“Not through William,” Mick insisted. “His contract is terminated. His debt paid.”

For a long moment, Nemathrel remained motionless, its borrowed features unreadable. Then it inclined its head in a gesture that might have been resignation or merely acknowledgment.

“The contract is dissolved,” it announced formally.

The effect was immediate and dramatic. The chamber shuddered violently, dust and small debris raining down from the ceiling. The ritual markings carved into the floor flared with sudden, blinding intensity, then faded to ordinary stone. The temperature, which had been fluctuating wildly throughout the confrontation, stabilised abruptly at something approaching normal.

Most significantly, a wailing cry echoed from somewhere beneath them William’s voice, raised in either agony or release as the supernatural binding that had preserved his failing body for decades suddenly dissolved.

“It is done,” Nemathrel said, its form already beginning to lose cohesion, Thomas’s features blurring like a photograph left in water. “But remember, detectives vengeance always finds a way. Where there is injustice, I will be called.”

The entity began to dissolve, darkness dissipating like smoke in strong wind. As it faded, Mick grinned and tossed the binding stone directly at the retreating form.

“Here’s a parting gift!” he called out.

The obsidian sphere passed harmlessly through Nemathrel’s diminishing essence, but the psychological effect was immediate and devastating. The vengeance demon’s dissolution became a frantic scramble, its form scattering like frightened birds as it shrieked in pure panic.

“YOU WOULDN’T DARE!” it wailed, the sound rising to frequencies that made their teeth ache.

“Wouldn’t I?” Mick replied with dark satisfaction.

Nemathrel’s final scream was one of genuine terror as it fled completely from the chamber, banished not just by their threat but by the sheer audacity of Mick’s gesture. The supernatural pressure that had permeated the space lifted entirely, leaving only ordinary silence.

“That was... unnecessarily theatrical,” Marchosias observed, though his mental voice carried distinct amusement. *“And potentially unwise.”*

“But effective,” Mick pointed out, tucking the binding stone back into his pocket.

“Indeed. Though I should caution you vengeance demons have long memories, and you’ve just given one cause to consider you a personal enemy rather than merely an obstacle.”

“I’ll worry about that tomorrow,” Mick replied. “Today, we won.”

The chamber felt suddenly, blessedly ordinary just an underground room filled with covered mirrors and paint-splattered furniture. The oppressive wrongness that had permeated the space lifted, leaving only the mundane mustiness of a long-neglected cellar.

“William,” Reeves said urgently, already moving toward where the black mirror had stood. “We need to check on him.”

The frame remained, but the glass was gone, leaving an open doorway back to the chamber where William had been imprisoned. They passed through without resistance, the transition now nothing more supernatural than stepping from one room to another.

They found William Harrington still in his chair, but transformed. The grotesque biological integration with the wooden structure had dissolved, leaving only a frail, emaciated human body. His eyes were closed, his expression peaceful for perhaps the first time in decades.

Mick approached cautiously, kneeling beside the chair to check for vital signs. There were none no pulse, no breathing, no lingering spark of life. William Harrington had finally been allowed to die, released from the unnatural suspension that had preserved him as Nemathrel's anchor.

"He's gone," Mick said softly. "The contract's dissolution released him."

"After thirty years of torment," Reeves added, her professional composure momentarily cracking to reveal genuine compassion. "All to secure justice for his son."

"Was it worth it?" Mick wondered aloud, studying William's peaceful features. "Five corrupt men dead, decades of personal suffering, and his own soul potentially forfeit."

"He believed it was," Marchosias observed internally, his presence settled back into their shared consciousness now that the immediate threat had passed. *"Humans will endure extraordinary suffering to right perceived wrongs against those they love. It's perhaps your species' most comprehensible and most alien quality, simultaneously."*

They stood in silence for a moment, absorbing the conclusion of William Harrington's desperate vengeance. The bookshop above, the mirror chamber, the hidden prison all of it testament to a father's love and rage, twisted into something terrible by supernatural forces beyond human comprehension.

"We should contact the coroner," Reeves said finally, her practical nature reasserting itself. "Report finding his remains. Give him a proper burial after all this time."

"And say what exactly?" Mick asked with a raised eyebrow. "That he made a demonic pact for vengeance and spent decades as a living anchor for a supernatural entity?"

"Heart failure," Reeves suggested simply. "Reclusive bookshop owner, died alone of natural causes. No suspicious circumstances." She surveyed

the chamber thoughtfully. “We’ll need to seal off this level, though. The mirror gallery is too dangerous to leave accessible.”

“A wise precaution,” Marchosias agreed. “Even with Nemathrel banished, the mirrors themselves have been altered by decades of use as supernatural conduits. They could potentially serve as doorways for other entities.”

“We’ll need to deal with the binding stone too,” Mick said, picking it up and carefully putting it into his pocket. “Lock it away somewhere secure.”

As they made their way back through the now-quiet mirror chamber, avoiding looking directly at any of the few surfaces that remained uncovered, Mick felt a complex mix of satisfaction and unease. They had succeeded in banishing Nemathrel and freeing William from his terrible bargain, but Marchosias’s warning about vengeance demons and long memories lingered in his thoughts.

They walked away from Ink and Antiquity for the final time, Mick caught a glimpse of their reflection in a shop window across the street. For just a moment---so briefly he might have imagined it---a third figure seemed to stand with them, a young man with Thomas Harrington's features but unburdened by rage or supernatural manipulation. Then the image was gone, leaving only Mick and Reeves, a detective and his colleague, walking away from another impossible case somehow resolved.

The binding stone weighed heavy in Mick's pocket, a reminder that some things remained unfinished. Marchosias was restored, Nemathrel banished, but questions lingered---about William's soul, about the stone's future, about Lilaeth's unclaimed favour.

But those were, as Reeves had said, tomorrow's problems. Today, justice---however imperfect, however terrible---had been served.

16 The Truth is Out There

The LED lighting of New Scotland Yard cast its unnatural bright white glare in the small conference room. Detective Inspector Diana Reeves stared at the stack of files before her, each one carefully compiled, cross-referenced and annotated with meticulous precision.

Five files. Five deaths. One connected narrative that nobody wanted to acknowledge.

She reached for her coffee, grimacing at the taste. It had grown cold during the hours she'd spent preparing for this meeting, transforming from merely poor quality to actively unpleasant. The wall clock showed 7:43 AM—seventeen minutes until her scheduled meeting with Superintendent Grayson. Seventeen minutes to decide exactly how much career suicide she was willing to commit.

The door opened without a warning knock, and Mick entered, looking considerably more intact than she'd expected given their encounter with Nemathrel just two days earlier. The familiar signs of his connection with Marchosias had returned—that subtle wrongness to his shadow, the occasional reflective quality to his eyes when the light caught them at specific angles. More significantly, he moved without the pained stiffness that had marked his gait during the demon's absence, once again partially insulated from his chronic injuries.

“You look better,” she observed, pushing the second coffee she'd brought toward him. “Marchosias settling back in?”

“Like he never left.” Mick took the offered cup without comment, having long since abandoned any pretence of refusing her small gestures of normalcy. “Though he's been extraordinarily smug about how poorly I apparently function without him.”

Reeves raised an eyebrow. “You were a disaster.”

“Careful. My ego’s fragile enough as it is.” Mick pulled out a chair and settled across from her, eyeing the stack of files. “That’s all of it?”

“Everything we have on the five deaths connected to Thomas Harrington.” She tapped the top file, labelled ‘BLACKWOOD, A. – SUSPICIOUS DEATH’. “All the evidence, all the connections, all documented according to proper procedure.”

“And Grayson wants them buried.”

It wasn’t a question. The evidence they’d gathered pointed inexorably toward a conclusion that the Met would find highly uncomfortable—that five men connected to the wrongful conviction of Thomas Harrington had died under suspicious circumstances that could only be explained as connected homicides. The political and institutional ramifications would be seismic.

“He hasn’t said it explicitly,” Reeves replied, “but the message was clear enough during our last conversation. Five separate cases, five unrelated conclusions. No mention of Harrington.”

“Covering up a cover-up,” Mick observed, his tone caught between bitter amusement and genuine anger. “Very meta.”

Reeves allowed herself a small, tight smile that contained no real humour. “Institutional self-preservation is practically an art form at the Met. They’ve had decades to perfect it.”

“So what’s your plan? Seventeen minutes isn’t much time for a revolution.”

She studied him for a moment, appreciating that he didn’t bother asking if she had a plan. Their partnership, unconventional as it had become, was built on a foundation of mutual respect that had only strengthened through their shared experiences with the supernatural.

“I’ve prepared two reports,” she said, separating the top document from the stack. “The first is what Grayson expects—five separate incident reports,

each concluding with natural causes or suicide. Minimal cross-referencing, no mention of pattern or motive.”

“And the second?”

She placed her hand on a significantly thicker document beside the first. “The truth. A comprehensive report connecting all five deaths to Thomas Harrington’s wrongful conviction. Timeline correlations, witness statements, forensic connections—all of it documented according to proper procedure and department standards.”

Mick leaned back, studying her with newfound appreciation. “You’re actually going to do it. Submit the full report.”

“I’m going to try.” She paused, choosing her next words carefully. “The Met failed Thomas Harrington thirty years ago. The system that should have protected him instead conspired to convict him. I won’t be party to perpetuating that injustice, even posthumously.”

“Grayson won’t accept it,” Mick warned, though his expression suggested support rather than discouragement. “Best case, he buries it. Worst case, he buries your career along with it.”

“I’m aware of the risks,” she acknowledged. “But there are lines I won’t cross, even for the job.” She hesitated, then asked the question that had been burning in her mind since their last supernatural encounter. “Did you see something, when we were in that chamber with William? Something that made Marchosias react?”

Mick’s expression shifted subtly, a combination of surprise and wariness crossing his features. “What makes you ask?”

“You had a moment,” she said. “When we were leaving, you looked back at the black mirror, and something changed in your face. Like you saw something the rest of us didn’t.”

He was silent for a long moment, his gaze fixed on some middle distance as if consulting with the presence inside him. When he finally spoke, his voice was softer than usual.

“I saw Thomas—not Nemathrel wearing his face, but Thomas himself as he might have been if he’d lived. Older, unburdened. And I felt...” he struggled for the words, “...gratitude. Not just relief at escaping with our lives, but genuine gratitude that someone had finally acknowledged what happened to him.”

Reeves nodded slowly, processing this. “Thirty years without justice,” she said finally. “Even in death, the system tried to erase him.”

“And now you’re going to fight that system with a report?” Mick asked, though without mockery. “Armed with nothing but documentation and procedure?”

“The weapons I have,” she replied simply.

Mick reached for his coffee, the gesture deliberately casual in contrast to the gravity of their conversation. “Marchosias says it’s appropriate. Nemathrel sought vengeance through supernatural means when the system failed. You’re seeking justice through the system itself.”

“Poetic, even if it won’t work,” she acknowledged.

The clock on the wall showed 7:52 AM. Eight minutes remaining.

“What’s your best-case scenario here?” Mick asked, studying her with newfound intensity. “What do you actually hope to accomplish?”

“Realistically?” She paused, considering. “Force official acknowledgment of the connection between these deaths. Create a paper trail that proves the pattern. Make it impossible to dismiss Thomas Harrington’s case as an unfortunate mistake rather than deliberate corruption.”

“And your worst-case scenario?”

“I submit my resignation along with the report,” she said simply. “I can live with career consequences. I can’t live with being complicit in burying the truth a second time.”

The certainty in her voice was absolute. Whatever happened in the next hour would redefine her professional trajectory, but she had already reconciled herself to the potential cost.

Mick nodded, a gesture of respect rather than agreement. “Want me there?”

“No,” she said firmly. “This needs to be by the book, official channels only. Grayson’s already suspicious about your involvement. Having you there would just give him another reason to dismiss the report.”

“Fair enough.” He hesitated, then asked, “Does the report mention the supernatural elements?”

“Of course not,” she replied with a faint smile. “I may be willing to risk my career, but I’m not planning to appear mentally unstable in the process. The report sticks to verifiable evidence, established connections, and documented facts. No vengeful spirits, no ancient demons, no occult rituals.”

“Just good solid police work,” Mick finished, raising his cup in a mock toast. “The system’s last chance to correct itself.”

“Something like that.”

They fell into companionable silence as the minutes ticked away. Reeves made a final check of her comprehensive report—over sixty pages of meticulously documented evidence establishing the undeniable connection between five deaths and the thirty-year-old miscarriage of justice that had claimed Thomas Harrington’s life. Every assertion supported by evidence, every conclusion drawn from established fact.

It was a masterpiece of detective work, regardless of whether anyone would ever officially acknowledge it.

At precisely 7:59 AM, she gathered both reports and rose from her chair. “Wish me luck,” she said, attempting lightness despite the gravity of what she was about to do.

“You don’t need luck,” Mick replied, his expression serious. “You have the truth.”

Superintendent Grayson’s office projected exactly the image he wanted to convey—organised, professional, with just enough personal touches to appear human without revealing anything genuinely personal. His desk was polished wood, expensive but not ostentatious. The framed commendations on the wall spoke of a career built on competence and ambition in equal measure. The family photograph was turned at an angle that made it visible to visitors without allowing them to clearly see the faces it contained.

He didn’t rise when Reeves entered, merely gestured to the chair across from his desk while finishing a phone call with terse, monosyllabic responses. The performance was so transparently designed to establish dominance that Reeves might have found it amusing under different circumstances.

“Inspector,” he acknowledged finally, setting down his phone with deliberate precision. “I trust you’ve completed the task as discussed.”

She placed both reports on his desk, the thinner one on top. “I’ve prepared the incident reports as requested, sir. Five separate files, each with its own conclusion.”

Grayson nodded, satisfied. “Good. We need to close these cases properly, without unnecessary complications.”

“I’ve also prepared a comprehensive report,” she continued, indicating the thicker document beneath. “Documenting the connections between the deaths and their relation to the Thomas Harrington case from 1987.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees. Grayson's expression hardened, his eyes narrowing as he processed what she was saying—and what she was doing.

"We discussed this, Inspector," he said, his voice dangerously quiet. "Five separate cases. No connected report."

"With respect, sir, the evidence doesn't support that approach." Reeves kept her voice steady, professional. "These deaths are clearly connected through their relationship to the Harrington case. The pattern is undeniable."

"Patterns can be misleading," Grayson countered, leaning back in his chair. "What you're suggesting would require revisiting a thirty-year-old conviction, questioning the integrity of multiple officers and judicial officials, and creating a public relations nightmare for the department."

"What I'm suggesting," Reeves replied carefully, "is following the evidence to its logical conclusion, regardless of institutional discomfort. That's our job."

Grayson studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he sighed, a calculated sound designed to convey disappointment rather than anger.

"You're a good detective, Reeves. One of my best. But you need to understand how things work at this level." He gestured vaguely toward the window, where New Scotland Yard stretched around them. "The Met isn't just about solving cases. It's about maintaining public confidence, managing resources, balancing competing priorities."

"It's about justice," she corrected quietly. "Everything else is secondary."

"That's an admirably idealistic perspective," he replied, with the faintest note of condescension. "But the reality is more complex. Reopening the Harrington case would require enormous resources, generate negative

publicity, and likely end with inconclusive results, given how much time has passed.”

“I’m not asking to reopen the case,” Reeves clarified. “I’m submitting a report that documents the connection between five recent deaths and a historical miscarriage of justice. What happens after that is an administrative decision.”

“A decision I’m making now,” Grayson said firmly. “I’ll accept the individual incident reports as submitted. The comprehensive report will remain unofficial.”

The moment had arrived—the cliff edge she’d been walking toward since discovering the connections between the deaths. Reeves took a deep breath, steadying herself for what came next.

“Sir, I must respectfully insist that both reports be entered into the official record. The comprehensive report contains vital information about a pattern of deaths connected to a demonstrable miscarriage of justice.”

“You’re insisting?” Grayson’s tone sharpened, genuine anger breaking through his professional facade. “This isn’t a negotiation, Inspector. I’ve given you a direct order regarding the handling of these cases.”

“An order that contradicts both department procedure and my professional obligation to document evidence as discovered,” she replied, keeping her voice level despite the adrenaline now coursing through her system. “Five men connected to Thomas Harrington’s wrongful conviction have died under suspicious circumstances. That pattern deserves official acknowledgment.”

Grayson’s expression darkened further. “You’re treading on dangerous ground, Reeves. I understand you feel strongly about this case, but your primary loyalty should be to the department.”

“My primary loyalty is to the truth,” she countered. “The department’s purpose is to serve justice, not to conceal inconvenient facts.”

“Facts?” Grayson scoffed. “You’re building a conspiracy theory around coincidental deaths separated by years. Deaths already properly investigated and classified.”

“Deaths connected by a common thread that points directly to institutional failures in the Harrington case,” Reeves insisted. “Failures that the department has a moral obligation to acknowledge, even if we can’t remedy them after thirty years.”

The superintendent rose from his chair, anger now plainly visible in his rigid posture. “This isn’t about morality, Inspector. It’s about procedure, resources, and departmental priorities. I’m ordering you to submit the five separate incident reports and nothing more. That’s final.”

Reeves remained seated, refusing to be physically intimidated. “If that’s your order, sir, then I have no choice but to submit my resignation along with the comprehensive report.”

The declaration hung in the air between them, transforming the already tense atmosphere into something approaching electric. For a moment, neither spoke, the only sound the faint hum of the building’s ventilation system and the muted noise of the department beyond the office door.

“You would throw away your career over this?” Grayson asked finally, genuine disbelief colouring his tone. “Fifteen years of service discarded for a thirty-year-old case with no living victims?”

“Thomas Harrington was a living victim,” Reeves corrected. “Until he died in prison for a crime he didn’t commit. The least we can do is acknowledge the pattern of deaths connected to his case, even three decades later.”

“This is about Hargraves, isn’t it?” Grayson demanded suddenly. “He’s been filling your head with conspiracy theories since you started consulting him. An alcoholic ex-detective with PTSD and delusions is hardly a reliable source.”

“This is about evidence,” Reeves replied firmly. “Evidence I’ve personally gathered and verified according to department standards. Mick Hargraves provided initial insights, but every connection in that report is established through proper investigative procedure.”

Grayson shook his head, visibly struggling to reconcile her intransigence with his understanding of department hierarchy. “You’re making a mistake, Reeves. One that will end your career at the Met.”

“If documenting the truth ends my career,” she said quietly, “then perhaps it’s not a career worth preserving.”

With deliberate movements, she reached into her jacket pocket and removed her warrant card. The small leather folder contained her official identification and badge—the tangible symbols of her authority as a police officer. She placed it on Grayson’s desk with a soft but decisive sound.

“My formal resignation will follow,” she said, rising from her chair. “But I wanted you to understand that this isn’t an impulsive decision. I’ve considered the consequences carefully.”

Grayson stared at the warrant card, his expression shifting through a complex sequence of emotions—anger, disbelief, calculation, and finally, something approaching respect. When he spoke again, his voice had lost some of its authoritative edge.

“You truly believe this is worth sacrificing your career.”

It wasn’t a question, but Reeves answered anyway. “I believe the integrity of our justice system depends on acknowledging its failures, not just its successes. Covering up these connections perpetuates the same injustice that claimed Thomas Harrington’s life.”

For several long moments, Grayson remained silent, studying her with an intensity she’d rarely experienced. Then, with unexpected suddenness, he sat back down and motioned for her to do the same.

“Sit down, Inspector.”

“Sir, I’ve made my decision—”

“Sit. Down.” The words were clipped but not hostile. “I haven’t accepted your resignation.”

Reeves hesitated, then slowly returned to her chair, uncertain where this new development might lead. Grayson reached for the comprehensive report, opening it to the executive summary on the first page. His eyes scanned the document with professional efficiency, taking in the meticulously organised evidence and logical progression of conclusions.

“This is excellent work,” he acknowledged finally. “Thorough, methodical, properly sourced. And I notice there’s no mention of Nemathrel.”

The name hit Reeves like a physical blow. She stared at Grayson, momentarily robbed of speech, her professional composure cracking for perhaps the first time in her career.

“You... know about Nemathrel?” she managed finally, her voice barely above a whisper.

Grayson’s expression remained carefully neutral, but something shifted in his eyes—a momentary glimpse behind the mask of bureaucratic authority. “Let’s just say I’m somewhat attuned to these... situations. Have been for longer than you might imagine.”

He closed the report and set it deliberately on his desk, aligning its edges with precise movements that seemed designed to give him time to choose his next words carefully.

“You’ve demonstrated a remarkable ability, Inspector. The capacity to encounter things beyond conventional understanding while maintaining your footing in the real world. That’s exceedingly rare.”

Reeves found herself in the disorienting position of being completely wrong-footed in a conversation she’d thought she understood. “Sir, I—”

“You’re principled,” Grayson continued, as if she hadn’t spoken. “Conscientious, and have integrity. Honest to a fault. And apparently capable of handling situations that would break most officers.” He tapped the report with one finger. “Precisely what I’ve been looking for.”

“Looking for?” Reeves echoed, struggling to realign her understanding of both the conversation and the man before her.

“The Metropolitan Police regularly encounters cases of an... unusual nature,” Grayson explained, his tone deliberately matter-of-fact. “Situations requiring specialist handling. Cases that need to be resolved without drawing public attention to certain details.”

Understanding dawned. “You’ve been watching our investigation.”

“Monitoring,” Grayson corrected. “From a necessary distance. I needed to see how you’d handle it without interference. Whether you could navigate the intersection between what can be officially acknowledged and what must remain... off the record.”

“And did I pass your test?” Reeves asked, an edge entering her voice.

“With distinction,” Grayson replied, apparently unperturbed by her tone. “The report before me documents the connections between five deaths and a historical miscarriage of justice with impeccable adherence to procedure and evidence. Not a single line references vengeful spirits, binding stones, or entities from beyond conventional reality. You’ve demonstrated exactly the balance I’m looking for.”

Reeves felt as if the conversation was happening on two levels simultaneously—the explicit discussion of her report and the implicit acknowledgment of supernatural realities that should, by all conventional understanding, be impossible.

“What exactly are you proposing, sir?” she asked, deciding direct questions were her only path through this conversational minefield.

“I’m establishing a special investigations unit,” Grayson said. “Very small, discreet, reporting directly to me. Focusing on cases that fall outside standard categorisation but require official resolution.” He studied her with renewed intensity. “I want you to head it.”

“And Hargraves?”

“Your civilian consultant has proven his value, despite his... unusual circumstances. I’d like him formally attached to the unit, with appropriate clearances and compensation.”

The implications were dizzying. Official sanction for their investigations. Resources. Legitimacy. But also, undoubtedly, constraints and oversight.

“You’re suggesting the Met formally investigate supernatural occurrences,” Reeves said, testing the boundaries of what Grayson was willing to explicitly acknowledge.

“I’m suggesting,” he replied carefully, “that the Met formally investigate unusual occurrences, documenting their resolutions in ways that maintain public confidence while preserving the actual truth for those with appropriate clearance.” He leaned forward slightly. “The distinction matters, Inspector.”

Reeves nodded slowly, recognising the careful balance Grayson was proposing—acknowledgment without institutional exposure, truth without public revelation.

“And my report?” she asked, indicating the document on his desk.

“Will be entered into the official record exactly as submitted,” Grayson confirmed. “A testament to your investigative thoroughness and attention to both evidence and procedure.” He extended her warrant card across the desk. “So. Are you interested in heading this new unit?”

Reeves regarded the card for a long moment before accepting it. “I’ll need to discuss the details. Parameters. Resources. Expectations.”

“Of course,” Grayson agreed readily. “But the fundamental question remains—are you willing to operate in this space? Between conventional understanding and what truly exists beyond it?”

“I’ve been doing that for months,” Reeves observed dryly.

“Unofficially, yes. I’m offering official sanction, with all the advantages and constraints that entails.”

Reeves tucked her warrant card into her pocket, a simple action that felt unexpectedly significant. “I’ll discuss it with Hargraves,” she said finally. “He values his independence.”

“Don’t we all,” Grayson replied with unexpected dryness. “But there are advantages to institutional support when dealing with forces beyond conventional understanding.” He gestured toward the door, signalling the conversation was concluding. “Have him contact my office when you’ve decided. We’ll need to discuss the specifics.”

“Yes, sir,” Reeves said, rising from her chair. As she reached the door, a final question occurred to her. “Sir? How long have you known? About these... unusual occurrences?”

Grayson’s expression remained carefully neutral, but something flickered in his eyes—a memory, perhaps, or a remembered fear. “Long enough to know what I don’t know, Inspector. And to recognise those rare individuals who can function effectively despite that uncertainty.” He picked up her report, effectively dismissing her. “We’ll speak again soon.”

As she closed the door behind her, Reeves felt a complex mix of emotions—relief that her career remained intact, satisfaction that the truth would be officially documented, and cautious optimism about the possibility of a more formalised arrangement for Mick’s involvement in future cases.

The system had bent rather than broken, acknowledging truth while preserving its own functioning. It wasn’t perfect justice, but it was a step in the right direction.

In his office, Superintendent Grayson remained seated, staring at the comprehensive report with conflicted feelings. His reflection in the window behind his desk showed a man approaching his fifties with the calculated professionalism of someone who had navigated departmental politics successfully for decades.

For just a moment—so brief he might have imagined it—a second reflection seemed to appear beside his own. A younger man with hollow eyes and an expression of patient watchfulness. Then it was gone, leaving only Grayson alone in the room, reaching for the report with hands that suddenly felt less steady than they had moments before.

The truth, once acknowledged, had a way of spreading beyond anyone's control. And some truths had been waiting a very long time to be heard.

17 The Final Reflection

The dusk light painted long shadows across the Thames embankment as Mick stood watching the river's sluggish flow. The obsidian binding stone weighed heavy in his pocket, a constant reminder of both Marchosias's temporary silence and the debt that had secured his return. One problem solved, another created—the story of his life since the demon had taken up residence in his consciousness.

“Brooding doesn’t become you,” Marchosias commented dryly, his presence a cool current through Mick’s mind. *“And it certainly doesn’t alter our situation.”*

“I’m not brooding,” Mick muttered, aware that speaking aloud to the voice in his head made him indistinguishable from the genuinely mentally ill to passing strangers. “I’m thinking.”

“A distinction without difference in your case,” Marchosias replied. *“The debt to Lilaeth remains whether you stare mournfully at dirty water or not.”*

Three days had passed since their confrontation with Nemathrel. Three days of paperwork, official statements, and the careful construction of plausible explanations for five deaths that had supernatural causes. Reeves had handled most of it, culminating in her dramatic meeting with Superintendent Grayson yesterday—the one where she’d put her warrant card on his desk after he’d insisted she submit five separate, unconnected case files rather than acknowledge the truth.

William Harrington’s body had been discovered by “anonymous tip,” his cause of death recorded as natural causes after decades of reclusive living. The subterranean chambers remained sealed, the mirror gallery secured behind heavy locks and official warnings about structural instability. The binding stone had been carefully wrapped and hidden in Mick’s flat,

neither destroyed nor surrendered to authorities who wouldn't understand its significance.

All very neat. All very tidy.

Except for Lilaeth's unclaimed favour, hanging over him like Damocles' sword.

"She'll come for it eventually," Mick said, watching a tourist boat churn past, its recorded commentary drifting across the water in fragmented phrases about historic London. "Question is when."

"And what she'll demand," Marchosias added. "Lilaeth's creativity in interpreting bargains is legendary even among my kind."

The evening had brought a damp chill that worked its way through layers of clothing to settle in bones and joints. Mick felt it less acutely than he would have without Marchosias, but it remained a reminder of human frailty—one of many the demon had helped him transcend, at least partially.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. Reeves.

"How's unemployment treating you?" Mick asked by way of greeting.

"About that," Reeves replied, her voice carrying a mixture of bewilderment and urgency. "Grayson knows about Nemathrel."

Mick froze, his gaze suddenly sharp. "He knows what?"

"Nemathrel. Specifically. By name." Even through the phone connection, Mick could hear her struggling to maintain her composure. "He mentioned it casually, like he was discussing the weather. Said he was 'attuned to these situations' and has been for 'longer than I might imagine.'"

"Interesting," Marchosias murmured internally. "Very interesting."

"What exactly did he say?" Mick asked, finding a quieter spot along the embankment.

“He praised my report for documenting the connections between the deaths without mentioning Nemathrel or binding stones or ‘entities from beyond conventional reality’—his exact words.” Reeves paused, and Mick could almost see her running a hand through her hair, a rare gesture of agitation. “Mick, he’s establishing a special investigations unit for cases like ours. Cases that ‘fall outside standard categorisation but require official resolution.’ He wants me to head it, working with a formal civilian consultant, with ‘appropriate clearances and compensation.’ His words again.” She took an audible breath. “He seems to have been watching our investigation all along, testing how we’d handle it.”

“Well,” Mick said after a moment, genuinely surprised. “That’s... unexpected.”

“Understatement of the year,” Reeves replied. “He spoke about navigating ‘the intersection between what can be officially acknowledged and what must remain off the record.’”

“Did he say how long he’s known? About these ‘unusual occurrences’?”

“I asked. He gave me some cryptic answer about knowing long enough to understand what he doesn’t know.” She paused. “And recognising people who can function despite that uncertainty. I got the distinct impression he’s had his own encounters.”

“So the Met has been aware of supernatural activity for years and just... what? Documenting it behind closed doors?” Mick couldn’t keep the edge from his voice. Years of struggling alone with the impossible, only to discover the institution had known all along.

“I don’t think it’s that organised,” Reeves said. “More like isolated pockets of awareness. Individual officers who’ve encountered something they can’t explain and found others with similar experiences. Grayson seems to be trying to formalise that network.”

“Not surprising,” Marchosias commented internally. “Large institutions develop antibodies to threats they can’t acknowledge publicly. This ‘special investigations unit’ is merely the latest iteration of a very old pattern.”

“That’s actually why I’m calling,” Reeves continued. “We should discuss this. I told him I’d need to talk to you first, given your... unique circumstances.”

“And independent streak,” Mick added with a hint of irony.

“That too,” she agreed. “The Fox and Hound in an hour? This isn’t a conversation for the phone.”

Mick checked his watch. “Make it The Crossed Keys instead, and you’ve got a deal.”

“Done. First round’s on me.”

After ending the call, Mick remained by the river for a few minutes longer, cataloguing the events of the past week. The binding stone and his temporary separation from Marchosias. The discovery of William Harrington’s decades-long imprisonment. The confrontation with Nemathrel in the mirror gallery. Each experience had changed him in ways he was still processing.

“We have company,” Marchosias announced suddenly, his presence sharpening with alert focus.

Mick turned, scanning the embankment. At first, he saw nothing unusual—just evening commuters making their way home, a couple of tourists photographing the sunset over the water, an elegant woman in a deep blue dress leaning against the railing. Then his enhanced perception registered the wrongness of that last figure.

Lilaeth.

She didn't approach immediately, maintaining a careful distance as she gazed out over the Thames. Her perfect profile caught the fading light in ways that defied natural physics, shadows falling at impossible angles across features too symmetrical to be human. To ordinary passers-by, she would appear merely beautiful—to Mick's Marchosias-enhanced vision, she was a predator barely contained within human form.

"Interesting," Marchosias observed internally. *"She usually prefers more dramatic entrances."*

"Maybe she's going for subtlety this time," Mick muttered, already moving toward her with reluctant inevitability.

As he approached, Lilaeth turned slightly, acknowledging his presence without fully facing him. "Beautiful evening, detective," she greeted, her voice carrying those unsettling harmonics that bypassed the ear to resonate directly in the bones. "London wears twilight well."

"What do you want?" Mick asked bluntly, stopping several paces away.

Lilaeth smiled, the expression perfectly formed yet utterly empty of warmth. "Such directness. No preliminaries, no casual conversation. Humans are always in such a hurry." She turned fully toward him, her dress moving with subtle independence from her body, responding to currents no human could perceive. "I simply wished to speak with you. And with my old acquaintance, of course."

"Let me," Marchosias requested internally. After Mick's slight nod, the demon took partial control, his voice emerging with subtle harmonics layered beneath Mick's own.

"Lilaeth," Marchosias acknowledged through Mick's lips. *"This is unexpected. The bargain specified a year before collection."*

"Oh, I'm not here to collect," she replied, something almost like amusement flickering across her perfect features. "Not yet. Consider this a

courtesy visit—a professional acknowledgment of a successful resolution to your recent troubles.”

“Since when do you make courtesy visits?” Marchosias asked, suspicion evident in his tone.

Lilaeth laughed, the sound like crystal breaking in slow motion. “We weren’t always enemies, Marchosias. Or have you forgotten the eons before your Fall?”

The reference clearly meant something significant to Marchosias, whose presence in Mick’s mind went momentarily still, like a predator surprised by unexpected movement.

“I forget nothing,” he replied finally, an unfamiliar weight to his words. *“But those times are long past.”*

“Are they?” Lilaeth moved closer, her scent a complex blend of cinnamon, exotic flowers, and something metallic that might have been blood. “Time is circular for beings like us. What was comes again, what will be, has already happened.”

Mick reasserted control, uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. “If you’re not here to collect your favour, why the visit? Somehow I doubt it’s pure nostalgia.”

Lilaeth’s eyes shifted from deep blue to fathomless black as she regarded him with something between amusement and genuine curiosity. “You’re an unusual human, Detective Hargraves. Most would break under the strain of what you’ve witnessed, yet you adapt. You integrate the impossible into your reality with remarkable resilience.”

“Is that a compliment?” Mick asked warily.

“An observation,” she corrected. “You interest me. Few humans do.”

“Lucky me,” Mick muttered.

Lilaeth smiled again, this time with a hint of genuine emotion behind it. “Indeed. Though ‘luck’ had little to do with it. When Marchosias chose you as his vessel, he selected more carefully than perhaps even he realised.”

“I did not choose him,” Marchosias interrupted, briefly taking control again. *“Circumstance brought us together.”*

“Did it?” Lilaeth’s perfect eyebrow arched sceptically. “Out of all the humans in London, all the potential vessels, you just happened to encounter this specific detective at that specific moment? How remarkably convenient.”

The implication hung between them, disturbing in its possibilities. Had their initial meeting truly been as random as Mick had always believed? Or had Marchosias somehow engineered their encounter for reasons of his own?

“Whatever the case,” Lilaeth continued smoothly, “your partnership has proven uncommonly effective. The binding stone incident could have ended quite differently.”

“Thanks to your help,” Mick acknowledged cautiously. “At a price yet to be determined.”

“Everything has a price, detective,” Lilaeth replied, her tone suddenly serious. “Even inaction. Even ignorance. You’ll understand that more clearly when I eventually collect my due.”

A chill that had nothing to do with the evening air ran down Mick’s spine. “And when might that be?”

“When the time is right,” she said with deliberate vagueness. “Not today, not tomorrow, but also not a full year hence. The binding contract specified a time frame, not a specific date.”

“How helpful,” Mick said dryly.

“I’m not your enemy, detective,” Lilaeth said, surprising him with what seemed like genuine sincerity. “At least, not at present. We exist in different spheres with occasional intersection. When those intersections occur, it’s best to maintain... professional courtesy.”

She glanced over his shoulder, her perfect features briefly registering something that might have been distaste. “Your colleague approaches. Our conversation should conclude.”

Mick turned to see Reeves walking along the embankment toward them, her trained detective’s eye already cataloguing the unnaturally perfect woman speaking with her former partner.

“One last thing,” Lilaeth said quietly. “A word of genuine advice, freely given: when I do come to collect, remember that the precise wording of our agreement matters more than its spirit. Consider that a professional courtesy.”

Before Mick could respond, Lilaeth stepped backward, her form blurring slightly at the edges. Then she was simply gone—not walking away, not fading gradually, but completely absent between one moment and the next, as if she’d stepped sideways out of reality.

“Was that who I think it was?” Reeves asked as she reached him, her gaze scanning the now-empty space where Lilaeth had stood.

“Unfortunately,” Mick confirmed. “Just a ‘courtesy visit,’ apparently.”

“That doesn’t sound ominous at all,” Reeves noted sarcastically.

“*With Lilaeth, everything has multiple purposes,*” Marchosias commented internally. “*The question is what she gains from forewarning us.*”

“Ready for that drink?” Reeves asked, tactfully changing the subject. “I’d say we’ve earned it after the week we’ve had.”

Mick nodded, falling into step beside her as they walked toward the pub. “How are you really doing with the whole warrant card situation? It’s not every day you dramatically resign only to find out it never happened.”

Reeves shrugged, a complex mix of emotions crossing her features. “Honestly? I’m relieved. I didn’t actually want to leave the force—I just couldn’t stay if it meant burying the truth.” She glanced at him.

“Welcome to my world,” Mick replied with grim humour. “Where reality is flexible, and the truth is whatever powerful entities decide it should be.”

They walked in companionable silence for a few moments, each processing the events of the past week in their own way. The evening crowds had thinned, most commuters now safely ensconced in pubs or headed home on packed trains and buses.

“So what happens now?” Reeves asked finally. “Official supernatural investigations with departmental backing?”

“Is that what you want?” Mick countered, watching her expression carefully.

She considered this, her detective’s mind weighing pros and cons with characteristic thoroughness. “Part of me wants to run screaming from the whole thing,” she admitted. “Go back to ordinary cases with ordinary explanations. But...”

“But we’ve seen too much,” Mick finished for her.

“Exactly.” She shook her head slightly. “I keep thinking about what would have happened if we hadn’t been there. If no one had connected these deaths back to Harrington. How many more people might have died because nobody understood what was happening.”

“So you’re considering Grayson’s offer seriously?”

“I am,” she confirmed. “The resources would help. Official sanction would make accessing information easier. And honestly, having departmental

backing when we inevitably end up explaining why we're investigating some obscure occult ritual would be a welcome change."

"A basement office at the Yard," Mick mused. "Files no one else wants to touch. Cases that defy conventional explanation." He glanced at her sideways. "Sounds like career suicide."

"Says the man who left the force to become a private detective specialising in the supernatural," Reeves retorted with a hint of a smile. "Besides, Grayson seems to understand the nature of these cases. He's offering legitimacy without exposure—the ability to investigate properly while documenting results in ways that don't reveal the full truth to the public."

"And you're comfortable with that? The selective truth-telling?"

Reeves considered this. "I think I am, yes. The full truth would create panic, not understanding. What matters is stopping harmful forces like Nemathrel, not convincing the world they exist." She studied him carefully. "The real question is whether you're interested. Grayson specifically mentioned you as a civilian consultant."

"I find the prospect intriguing," Marchosias commented internally. *"Official sanction provides opportunities for access that would otherwise require more... creative solutions."*

"You're actually considering this?" Mick asked the demon silently, surprised by his apparent interest.

"Why not? We've been operating in the shadows by necessity, not preference. Official standing, with appropriate boundaries, could be advantageous."

"I'm thinking about it," Mick said aloud to Reeves. "Though I have concerns about Grayson. Anyone who's kept knowledge of the supernatural hidden within the department for years has their own agenda."

“Undoubtedly,” Reeves agreed. “But that doesn’t mean the arrangement can’t benefit both sides. We get resources and legitimacy; he gets results without public exposure of uncomfortable truths.”

The Crossed Keys appeared ahead, its warm lights and muted conversation spilling onto the pavement. Through the window, Mick could see it was relatively empty—a quiet evening crowd rather than the usual after-work crush.

“About that drink,” Mick said suddenly, an idea forming. “What if we did something different tonight? A proper celebration before we decide anything.”

Reeves eyed him suspiciously. “Different how?”

“Oh, I like where this is going,” Marchosias commented internally, his presence brightening with unexpected enthusiasm.

“There’s a place about two blocks from here,” Mick explained. “Best ice cream in London, according to a... reliable source.”

Reeves blinked in surprise. “Ice cream? That’s your big celebratory alternative to a proper pint?”

“Trust me on this,” Mick insisted. “Some victories call for beer. Surviving possession, binding stones, and vengeful demons calls for ridiculous amounts of sugar and dairy.”

“Yes!” Marchosias’s internal voice carried unusual enthusiasm. *“The cold sweetness! The varying textures! The absurd human combinations of flavours!”*

Mick had discovered early in their partnership that ice cream produced a disproportionate pleasure response in Marchosias. The demon experienced physical sensations through their shared consciousness, and for reasons neither fully understood, frozen desserts provided him with what Mick could only describe as childlike delight.

“Fine,” Reeves conceded with bemused resignation. “Ice cream it is. Lead the way.”

The shop was exactly as Mick remembered—small, family-owned, with a counter displaying dozens of home-made flavours in metal tubs. The elderly Italian proprietor greeted them warmly, clearly recognising Mick from previous visits.

“Ah! The gentleman who enjoys our special sundaes! It has been too long!”

“*The Vesuvius*,” Marchosias urged internally. “*With extra chocolate and the cherries. So many cherries.*”

“Two Vesuvius specials, please,” Mick ordered. “Extra chocolate sauce on both.”

Reeves examined the monstrous creation with sceptical awe when it arrived—an architectural marvel of ice cream featuring no fewer than six flavours, chocolate and caramel sauces, whipped cream, nuts, cherries, and what appeared to be edible gold leaf.

“You can’t possibly be serious,” she said, eyeing the towering dessert. “This is a heart attack in a glass.”

“Oh, I’m deadly serious,” Mick replied, already digging in. “Some terrors can only be defeated with excessive sugar.”

“*Glorious*,” Marchosias sighed as the first spoonful hit Mick’s tongue. The demon’s consciousness practically vibrated with pleasure, an emotion Mick rarely detected from him. “*The temperature differential! The textural complexity! The sweetness!*”

They ate in companionable silence, the absurdity of their celebration perfectly fitting the surreal nature of the case they’d just concluded. Two professionals who had witnessed horrors beyond human comprehension, now attacking ice cream sundaes like excited children.

“You know,” Reeves said eventually, pausing with her spoon halfway to her mouth, “if anyone had told me a year ago that I’d be celebrating solving a supernatural murder case with ice cream, alongside a former colleague possessed by an ancient demon...”

“Life takes unexpected turns,” Mick agreed.

“Speaking of unexpected,” Marchosias interjected, his mental voice still suffused with ice cream-induced pleasure, “Lilaeth’s warning about precise wording was surprisingly forthright.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Mick muttered, quiet enough that only Reeves could hear. “Why warn us at all?”

“Maybe it’s part of some larger game,” Reeves suggested, scraping the last of the chocolate sauce from her glass. “Or maybe even supernatural entities have their own code of ethics.”

“Lilaeth has always appreciated elegant solutions,” Marchosias offered internally. “She prefers victory through cleverness rather than brute force. A defeat made possible by the victim’s own oversight would appeal to her sense of... aesthetics.”

“So basically she wants a worthy opponent,” Mick summarised. “Not much comfort when the time comes.”

“But useful information nonetheless,” Reeves pointed out. “Knowledge is power, even against something like her.”

They finished their sundaes, paid, and stepped back into the London evening. The streets had grown quieter, the city settling into its nighttime rhythm. Above them, stars struggled to be seen through the urban light pollution, a few of the brightest managing to pierce the veil.

“One question,” Reeves said as they prepared to part ways. “Why does Marchosias get so excited about ice cream? Of all things.”

Mick smiled. “Demons experience physical sensations differently. Something about the combination of cold, sweet, and complex textures creates an unusually strong pleasure response. Like how certain music affects humans more intensely than other sounds.”

“Fascinating,” Reeves mused. “The all-powerful demonic entity has a sweet tooth.”

“I reject that characterisation,” Marchosias protested with mock indignation. *“It is a sophisticated appreciation for a pinnacle of human culinary achievement.”*

“He disagrees with your assessment,” Mick relayed, amusement evident in his tone. “Claims it’s ‘sophisticated appreciation.’”

“Of course it is,” Reeves replied with a knowing smile. “Well, whatever it is, I’m glad we celebrated. Killing vengeful spirits and starting mysterious new jobs at the Met calls for something special.” She checked her watch. “I should go. Meeting with Grayson first thing tomorrow to discuss the unit’s parameters. Want me to set up a meeting for you too?”

“Give me a day to think about it,” Mick replied. “Some due diligence on our potential new employer seems prudent.”

“Wise,” she agreed. “I’ll call you after I’ve had a chance to draw up some boundaries of my own. This might be a good opportunity, but I’m not walking in naively.”

“Never thought you would,” Mick said with genuine respect.

After they parted ways, Mick walked slowly back toward his flat, enjoying the relative peace of London after dark. The binding stone weighed heavy in his pocket, a tangible reminder of both the supernatural world they’d glimpsed and the debt that remained unclaimed.

But for tonight, those concerns could wait. They had survived, and had stopped a vengeful entity from claiming more victims. They had given

William and Thomas Harrington a measure of peace after decades of suffering.

It was enough. For now.

Late that evening, Mick stood alone in his flat's small bathroom, studying his reflection in the mirror above the sink. Without Marchosias's enhanced perception, he would have seen nothing unusual—just a tired detective with too many supernatural cases and not enough sleep. With the demon's senses, however, he noted the subtle changes accumulating over months of shared consciousness.

His eyes occasionally caught light at angles they shouldn't. His shadow sometimes moved a fraction of a second too late. The surrounding space seemed slightly distorted, as if reality itself had trouble fully containing whatever he was becoming.

"What did Lilaeth mean when she implied you chose me specifically?" he asked the mirror, knowing Marchosias would hear regardless. "Was our meeting really just coincidence?"

Marchosias's presence shifted uncomfortably within their shared consciousness. *"Does it matter now? What exists between us has evolved far beyond any initial conditions."*

"It matters to me," Mick insisted. "Was I targeted? Selected for some quality I don't even understand?"

The reflection rippled slightly, Marchosias's presence becoming more distinct within it—not fully materialised, but more separate from Mick than usual. *"Not in the way you imagine,"* he admitted finally. *"But neither was our meeting entirely random. Your capacity for seeing beyond conventional reality, even before my arrival, made you... receptive."*

"My history with Jamie Matthews, you mean. The trauma."

“Partly,” Marchosias acknowledged. “Trauma thins the barriers between realms. But it was more than that. Your natural resilience, your capacity to integrate the impossible without breaking—these qualities are rare.”

“So I was chosen.”

“Perhaps guided toward,” Marchosias corrected. “The distinction matters.”

Mick considered this revelation, surprised to find it didn’t disturb him as much as it might have once. Their partnership had long since evolved beyond its origins into something more complex and mutually transformative.

“And Lilaeth? What’s your history there? Before the Fall, she said.”

Marchosias was silent for a long moment, his presence in their shared consciousness withdrawn and contemplative. *“We existed in the same celestial sphere once,”* he said eventually. *“Before choices were made and sides were taken. Before everything changed.”*

“You were both angels,” Mick pressed, seeking clarity.

“Angels, demons—human categorisations for something far more complex,” Marchosias replied. *“But yes, we served similar purposes, once. We were... closer than mere colleagues.”*

The implication hung between them—immortal beings with shared history spanning eons, their current adversarial relationship built atop something far older and more intimate. It explained the undercurrents Mick had sensed in their interaction by the Thames.

“And now she holds my debt,” Mick observed with grim humour.

“Our debt,” Marchosias corrected firmly. *“Though the bargain is technically yours alone, we face its consequences together.”*

That unexpected commitment lingered as Mick turned away from the mirror, heading toward his bedroom. The day’s events—Lilaeth’s

appearance, Reeves's non-resignation, the absurd ice cream celebration—all swirled in his mind as he prepared for sleep.

He placed the binding stone carefully in the drawer beside his bed, wrapping it first in black silk to contain whatever energies it might still emit. One precaution among many in his new existence straddling worlds.

As he settled into bed, another wave of discomfort rolled through his abdomen, and he reached for the small bottle on his night stand.

"It's a good job I stocked up on lactase," he muttered, swallowing two tablets dry. "Your ice cream obsession is playing havoc with my digestive system."

"A small price to pay for such transcendent pleasure," Marchosias replied, unrepentant. *"Besides, the discomfort is entirely yours. I get only the enjoyment."*

"Convenient arrangement," Mick grumbled, though without real irritation.

"Indeed," Marchosias agreed, his consciousness settling into that strange half-sleep state he entered when Mick rested. *"Quite convenient."*

Beyond the window, London continued its nocturnal rhythm, oblivious to the supernatural currents flowing beneath its mundane surface. Somewhere across the city, William Harrington's remains were being prepared for a simple funeral, justice finally granted to both father and son. In the subterranean chambers beneath a forgotten bookshop, a gallery of mirrors lay covered and silent, their conduits to other realms temporarily closed.

And in Mick's hand, the mark Lilaeth had left upon his palm when they sealed their bargain pulsed with subtle energy—waiting, like its creator, for the perfect moment to call in its debt.

The Final Reflection had ended, but as Lilaeth had predicted, there would always be a next time.

"Always," Marchosias affirmed as darkness embraced them both.