



VALEWOOD
TALES

THE WRONG GHOST

ALEX DONALD

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The Valewood Agency for the Unexplained and Paranormal in:
The Wrong Ghost

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Prologue

A long time ago, there was Tuesday and she was running.

Her house was aflame and her sisters on the run. A mob of hateful, violent villagers are not far behind her, waving sticks and throwing stones and shouting horrible, horrible curses at her. They are led by a man who claims to be a witchfinder, but finds only the sick and the vulnerable and draws out false confessions from them to rile the villagers, to accept pay he claims he doesn't need and to prove himself a saint in the eyes of a god he uses for murder.

Tuesday stumbles and almost trips in the long grass, the light of her sisters' lantern marking her only goal in the suffocating darkness of the moors. The hills loom large behind her and over the crest comes the witchfinder, leading the furious mob. She doesn't understand why they hate her so much. She and her sisters lived just fine in the village, using their small magicks to help and bless their friends on the farm and at the blacksmith and in the home.

Nobody had cared until the witchfinder had come, but that was just the way things were. Her sisters seemed to have stopped up ahead, having stumbled upon the old stone circle up on the hill. The glow of the lantern flickers and dies and Tuesday forces herself to keep running, the hem of her dress becoming torn and muddied in the grass. The witchfinder behind them is shouting something awful, waving a flaming torch in the direction of Tuesday and her sisters.

She is almost caught up to them now, and she can see the harsh orange glow of magicks she does not recognise. Wednesday stands in the centre of the circle, her hands held high above her head, a concentrated ball of burning light spitting sparks outwards at the seven stones which surround them.

Seven stones. A stone for each sister. The orange light spreads from girl to girl and wraps around the stone circle in an umbrella of energy. Tuesday takes one last look back at the villagers pursuing them and steps into the circle. Then there is a harsh explosion of light and noise, and an overwhelming feeling of nothing as all seven of the witch's daughters disappear into thin air.

Chapter One

The late October sun hung low in the sky over the small Lake District town of Valewood, casting long and tangled shadows across the valley. The night drew nearer, bit by bit, and it was to be a night like no other.

All Hallows' Eve was upon the town of Valewood, the culmination of a season which celebrates all things weird and strange, sinister and scary. A season which draws upon the shared cultural fear of the unknown, the incomprehensible nothing that hides in the dark places, stylises it, rebrands it and hangs it up on your lawn to make the neighbours jealous.

Valewood, however, was having no part in it. If you were to take a long and chilly walk through the town tonight, you would see almost nothing to indicate that there was anything supernatural, otherworldly or even spooky about the season at all. It all stems from a sort of widespread unspoken apathy which out-and-out refuses to acknowledge Halloween, partly because the citizens of Valewood are so used to the paranormal being a part of their daily lives that they can't see any point in celebrating it, and partly because here in Britain there's just not that much interest in this sort of thing.

The shops sell sweets and pumpkins and little plastic skeletons but nobody ever buys them. Elizabeth Glass liked to collect the weirdest ones, like plastic dog skeletons with impossible bone-shaped ears and invertebrates with vertebrae. There was a cupboard full of them in her house which her dad had been secretly trying to get rid of for thirteen years now.

Her favourite at the moment was a scrawny little creature which claimed to be a spider skeleton, and even went so far as to include a sort of ribcage where the thorax would be. She had named it Antimony and on this long afternoon it was waiting dutifully on the arm of the sofa she was leaning against with a game controller, certain that she was going to beat her friends May Winter and Andrew Wheatley at the funny plumber racing game.

"Count me out," said Andrew wretchedly, after his third loss in a row. He put the controller down and went to get a drink.

Elizabeth, in her mid-twenties, thin and wiry with little round glasses to match, was not quite sure what to make of her friend Andrew despite having known him for several months now. He was short and scruffy, and rarely seen without the enormous aviator jacket which had previously belonged to his mysterious grandfather. Andrew seemed oddly secretive about something today, which was unusual for him because if there was something on his mind he was always talking and it was bound to come out eventually.

"Coward," called May Winter in the general direction of the kitchen. May was even more of a puzzle than Andrew, in Elizabeth's eyes, despite having known her since secondary school when the cyan-haired sorceress detective had accidentally set Elizabeth's bag on fire. May was strange, and her newfound witchy electricity powers made her even stranger, but she was dependable and had a dry wit about her. She leant over the arm of the chair she was sitting in and shouted at Andrew. "Only a loser gives up this early!" she continued.

“Yes,” came Andrew’s voice, “That’s why I gave up.” His phone began to ring.

Elizabeth reached up and grabbed Antimony the impossible plastic spider skeleton. “Oh Antimony,” she lamented in a silly voice, “We may be the only sane people in this house.”

The plastic spider skeleton did not talk back to her, because it was a plastic spider skeleton and those don’t talk. May leaned back against the sofa and yawned. “I think this might be the only good Halloween tradition,” she said absent-mindedly. “Hanging out at your house with video games and snacks until three in the morning. It’s like trick-or-treating, except we don’t have to go anywhere or talk to anyone, and there are no tricks.”

“What do you think the trick part is actually about?” asked Elizabeth, “Like, what if you just answered the door and said *trick* and gave them all used batteries or something?” She placed Antimony thoughtfully back down on the floor.

“Nah,” replied May, “I think the trick is what *you* do to *them* if they don’t give you treats. You ever seen one of those American movies where someone’s house gets loo roll thrown all over it? Yeah, it’s like that.” Elizabeth blinked with the dawning understanding of another classic Halloween tradition.

“Huh,” she said pensively.

May glanced away from the screen for a few seconds and checked her phone. “Speaking of America,” she added, “The millionaire tells us he is making a start on decorating the Agency, for some reason.”

The millionaire was their mutual work friend, Moe Frankfort - a loud and American businessman with subtlety problems who had moved to Valewood just a few years ago, and only recently got involved with local affairs after May had convinced Elizabeth and Andrew to sneak into his mansion to investigate a mystery, which had ended in the discovery of a very disappointing alien and the destruction of a killer robot.

“He better not be decorating *my house* with Halloween junk,” snapped Andrew, appearing in the kitchen doorway. He was shrugging his coat on and trying to tie his shoelaces at the same time with mixed results. Elizabeth raised an eyebrow and asked him where he was going: “I have things that I need to be doing,” he said unhelpfully.

“What things?” asked May, as Andrew crossed the living room to the front door of Glass Cottage. He shrugged in their general direction and moved to turn the key in the lock. She threw a controller at him and asked again, and he made a general noise of pained protest.

“Alright, fine,” he replied unhappily, “I decided to let Darwin practice some of that black magic stuff he’s been studying ever since the incident with the runes at the museum, and I think he needs my help with it, and I was gonna hang out here all night but he’s picked a

spot up at the stone circle and found a book and everything and if I change my mind now he's going to be very upset and I will feel mean."

Elizabeth folded her arms. "You let Darwin do black magic?" she asked, "Is that wise?"

Their friend the detective pushed open the front door. "If I'm still alive tomorrow morning," he announced dutifully, "Then yes." He gave his friends a lazy salute and slipped through the door, then closed it behind him and was gone. May and Elizabeth looked at each other. The concept of funny plumber racing seemed marginally less entertaining without somebody they could make fun of for being bad at it.

"Alright, want to go make fun of Moe for going overboard on decorations?" asked Elizabeth eventually. She looked up to see May already putting on a jacket.

"Hold the ladder steady, hold the ladder steady," repeated Moe seriously as he draped an oversized wreath of black tinsel around the wooden sign which advertised the Valewood Agency for the Unexplained and Paranormal. His usual blue suit and tie had been replaced with a tacky Halloween costume which actually made decorating harder. Nobody was quite sure what the costume actually was and Moe was waiting in vain for someone to guess.

Several rungs below him, the demon hunter Nate Grant was holding the ladder steady and voicing aloud his thoughts on the kinds of monsters he had fought in his line of work. Moe, like the rest of the detectives, wasn't quite sure what to make of the burly demon hunter who had shown up one day and tried to kill them after getting possessed, but he seemed to get on well with Darwin and Moe was admittedly glad of the company of a fellow American for reasons he was unable to meaningfully articulate.

Plus, Nate seemed to really enjoy Halloween too. "I think we need more pumpkins, bro," he added thoughtfully in-between listing off the names of the folks he had gotten romantically involved with on several occasions: "Katie *did* try to kill me, so that one was a bust, but I think I really messed it up with Logan when I forgot to call him back."



"They were *werewolves*?" commented Moe from the top of the ladder, "No judgement, I guess." He scrambled back down to the ground and surveyed his handiwork proudly. "Okay, I think this looks good!" Moe announced cheerfully.

“Nice tinsel, nerd,” said the voice of May Winter from behind them. Moe and Nate turned to see her and Elizabeth arriving in Pines Close, surveying the Agency’s new festive look with disinterest. Elizabeth was wearing a large yellow raincoat and her little grey woolen hat, while May was wearing a long black jacket over a grey hoodie. She folded her arms.

Moe spread his arms wide theatrically and gestured to the Agency behind him. “What do you think?” he beamed.

“You know Andrew’s gonna hate that, right?” replied May. Elizabeth agreed with a sympathetic nod in the Americans’ general direction.

Nate shook his head. “The little guy gets picky when people decorate without him,” he said sagely, “I get it. I knew a guy like that back in Seattle. He *did* turn out to be a vampire but I don’t think that part’s important.”

Something occurred to Elizabeth. “What? No,” she replied slowly, “You guys... *do* know about Valewood and Halloween, right?” Judging by the looks on Moe and Nate’s faces, she had the horrible feeling that they did not. The millionaire glanced uncertainly at the decorations he had put up and scratched the back of his neck.

May snorted. “Oh, that’s hilarious,” she said dryly, “In a sad sort of way. How have you not noticed yet?! Okay, maybe Moe gets a pass ‘cause he’s been hiding in a mansion for like a year and a half but - you guys, this town *hates* Halloween! And I don’t think Andrew is too jazzed about it either.”

They watched as Moe’s heart sank. He went through all five stages of grief in several seconds, and a few extra that he didn’t even know existed. “No Halloween?” he repeated.

“No Halloween, man,” muttered May.

“But it’s the spooky season!” protested Nate, gesturing wildly with his axe. Moe ducked: “It’s like, the second best holiday after Christmas! Third best if you count my grandpa’s birthday, because he always gets an *amazing* cake.”

Elizabeth patted him on the back in a loose and distant way, feeling obligated despite herself to console the intimidatingly burly demon hunter who she did not know all that well. “This town has to put up with ghouls and goblins and ghosts literally every week, mate,” she said sympathetically, “You get why Halloween might not appeal to us all that much, yeah?”

Next to them, Moe sighed. He looked back at the decorations hanging from the Agency’s roof and windows and sign. “Then I know what I have to do,” he said in a small voice.

“I’ll go get the bins out,” said May.

“We’ll *make* Valewood love Halloween!” declared Moe, posing triumphantly. Nate blinked, shook himself and then gave a bold thumbs-up. May and Elizabeth looked at each other despondently and began to get the feeling that this was going to be a really terrible night.

Moe continued. “I’ve seen enough movies to know that the only solution to a town stuck in its ways is a really big party, and luckily for you guys I happen to know a lot about parties,” he explained. He reached into his pocket and produced his phone. “Kentworth!” he said into it excitedly, “Get the ballroom ready! I need all the tablecloths that are black, orange, or black *and* orange. I’m sending you my Halloween playlists now.”

“You guys!” he said, turning to the assembled detectives and Nate, “With me! We’re gonna give Valewood the best Halloween party it’s ever seen.”

“It’s dark already,” protested Elizabeth, “It’s not going to *be* Halloween in a few hours.”

“Seven hours until midnight!” countered Moe, texting frantically, “We can still pull it off if we believe! Never underestimate the power of the festive spirit!”

“That’s for Christmas,” Elizabeth said.

May folded her arms. “Do we have a choice?” she asked.

“You already know the answer!” said the millionaire, beaming, and he headed for the Agency’s van. Nate and Elizabeth looked at each other and shrugged. “Kentworth’s getting the ballroom ready. Nate, I need you to think of the spookiest possible thing you can carve into a pumpkin. I’ll get Andrew and Darwin to meet us up there,” Moe continued, “Where *are* those two goofs, anyway?”

Chapter Two

On a tall, wide hill at the edge of town, a crumbling stone path wound around the grassy hillside above Valewood and was lit only by the faint, warm glow of a lantern which signalled the arrival of two people who probably had better things to do with their time. Andrew followed his housemate Darwin Archimedes up the mountain and regretted it.

There had been a lot of things about aliens which Andrew had assumed were a given, all of which were proven wrong when he had stumbled upon Darwin in the basement of Darkstone Manor, hiding in a pop-up alien lair and doing research for a university course back on his home planet of Reloo - a distant splinter of human society with an incomprehensible backstory and a taste for weird Victorian names. The two of them had forged a solid enough friendship nevertheless, but now Andrew was beginning to wonder if living with an alien was really worth all this miserable pottering about in the dark.

Up ahead of him was Darwin, swamped in an oversized red duffel coat and a distractingly bright yellow scarf. He was holding in his hands a large, ominous-looking leather-bound book and a staff made of thick orange glass growing from a branch which looked strangely

familiar. Andrew was unsure how Darwin had gotten his hands on any of this stuff and resolutely refused to ask.

“Let’s keep moving!” proclaimed Darwin for the twelfth time, “I have to try and do this *right* as the moon is overhead! The ancient wizards were very specific!”

“So you keep saying,” he replied.

Darwin turned back to him as they continued to climb along the stone path. “You have very little faith in my burgeoning skills when it comes to the field of dark magic, don’t you?” he complained, a little disheartened.

“No, I have a lot and that’s what worries me,” said Andrew sourly, “Darwin, you need to be *careful*, okay? There’s a reason you’re only allowed to do this one night every few months.”

The Reloovian inventor did not reply as they reached the top of the hill, and their destination was framed at last in pale moonlight - a set of seven standing stones, arranged in a rough circle atop the hillside. They were covered in streaks of moss and the weathering of a thousand years’ vigil. “Well, here they are!” announced Darwin, gesturing grandly as he walked into the centre of the stone circle, “The Standing Daughters of Greater Valewood!”

“Yup, I’ve seen them on the internet before,” said Andrew, who really was only there to hold the lantern.

“A local legend!” his housemate continued, “One of the strangest stone circles on record, the Standing Daughters have kept watch over the Valewood forests for an impossible length of time! Nobody knows where they came from!”

(“That’s not what Wikipedia says,” Andrew protested lamely.)

“According to this ancient magical tome,” explained Darwin, holding up the old leather-bound book in his hands, “The Standing Daughters share no common purpose with any of the other stone circles in the British Isles - which means they may well have been built as a focusing lens for dark magical energies!” He flipped through the book with a thoughtful expression, then turned back to his reluctant assistant. “Tonight!” he continued, “We shall see if the ancient scholars were right. With this Artrakanian Staff, you and I are going to channel that energy through the tome and really shake up the academic field of magical research!”

His companion shivered and hugged himself. It was cold, in something of a frightening supernatural sense. “I don’t know why I agreed to do this on Halloween,” he said miserably.

Darwin held up the willowy branch staff, which had once belonged to a malevolent and poorly-dressed warlock who had tried to steal the magical powers of May Winter, and pointed it at the moonlight. The book, turned at last to the right page, flapped its pages helplessly in the growing wind. He began to read.

“Here on this night, so dark and cold,” he whispered reverently, “Where shadows loom from stone to stone. We open wide thy daughters’ ark, and call them forth from ancient tome.”

The wind picked up. Andrew glanced uncertainly up at the sky as some leaves fluttered past him. The moonlight, trapped in the orange glass at the tip of the staff, glowed bright and began to illuminate the stone circle in a sickly orange glow. The nervous detective began to feel like he needed to inject some normality back into proceedings. “These wizards were really good at poetry, huh?” he asked irreverently. He was waiting for absolutely nothing to happen, which meant that the something that was happening was beginning to seriously unsettle him.

Darwin did not respond. “Darwin?” said Andrew anxiously. He strode around to face his housemate and saw him caught in the glow of the moon. His eyes were flashing that same sickly orange as he turned the pages like a man possessed. He did not even acknowledge Andrew’s presence. The detective backed away slightly.

“Of freedom lost and prisons found,” continued the spellbound student, “Her spell to seal darkness within. Now reaching out from underground, let the night of daughters now begin.”

A bolt of lightning erupted backwards and up out of the ground, cascading into the sky. Andrew decided that enough was enough and tackled his housemate with an apologetic yell. He threw his whole might into Darwin’s oversized hoodie and the Reloovian went over backwards, throwing the book into the air as he went. The staff and the book remained suspended in mid air as they hit the mud and grass with a painful-sounding crack.

They cried out. “Crap! Are you alright?!” demanded Andrew, “What’s *happening?*”

Darwin, as if waking from a dream, looked blearily around. The sickly orange glow had begun to envelop the stone circle, wrapping itself around the perimeter like a forcefield. “This is why you are *banned* from performing black magic rituals!” Andrew continued, shouting to be heard above the howling wind, “You are *not* doing this *ever* again!”

“I think this is supposed to happen,” replied Darwin stupidly, and then there was a crash of thunder and something burst from the ground behind them and the two detectives turned to see all seven of the stones open like coffin lids, pushed aside by pale, wretched hands.

Standing solemnly inside each stone was a girl, which was surprising for a number of reasons. “Who *are* these people?!” cried Andrew, terrified. There were seven of them; young and they looked righteously angry, wearing long and shabby old-fashioned cloaks and robes as if they had been sealed away for a long, long time. Their eyes glowed with a frightening power as they began to move, and together as one they stepped from their stone prisons and into the centre of the circle, surrounding the two detectives.

“Okay, this is not supposed to happen,” said Darwin.

Moe was having a really good evening. In the half-hour since he and Nate had been devastated to learn about Valewood's general Halloween apathy, the staff up at Darkstone Manor had been working tirelessly to get their hands on as much spooky decoration as they could, and now here in the lobby with May and Elizabeth it was all coming together. He adjusted the oversized cape slung around his shoulders and checked his phone to see how the invites were going.

"You really love parties, huh?" asked Nate, leaning against the banister at the bottom of the grand staircase.

The millionaire nodded enthusiastically. "And all this is just on short notice. You're gonna love my birthday party when it comes around. What are your thoughts on a cheese fondue volcano?" he replied. Nate blinked and wasn't entirely sure how to reply.

"Master Moe," said Kentworth the funny little butler, hurrying into the room, "The invitations have all been sent out, though I must complain that we are having certain difficulties with your request for a live zombie." He bowed obsequiously and then wheeled out a large tray with a ghost-shaped cake on it, accompanied by several bemused-looking chefs.

Elizabeth and May followed behind them, and clearly neither of the two detectives had taken much interest in the Halloween costume wardrobe Moe had offered them, because Elizabeth's only concession to the season was wearing a large, battered-looking witch's hat, and May had not bothered to change her clothes at all. "Now what?" asked Elizabeth contemptuously.

"I've sent out invites to everyone in town," explained Moe with a smug smile, and he checked his phone again: "Now we wait. We're gonna teach Valewood the true meaning of Halloween, and it's gonna be awesome! I appreciate that you guys aren't feeling it, but wait until I break out the spooky playlist."

(May wondered if Moe's entire life revolved around bad teen high school movies, and whether or not he actually had any ability to tell fiction from reality. She hoped he did.)

About an hour passed. Nate disappeared off somewhere and changed into a costume based loosely around Frankenstein's monster, which amounted mostly to a bolt in his neck and a slightly shabbier outfit than usual. Sitting around in the lobby, Elizabeth's phone began to run out of battery and all four of them wondered where the guests were. Moe brought out several bottles of a drink he called *monster blood*, but turned out to be a kind of energy drink dyed red. The Halloween spirit in the room began to crumble slightly.

"I told you this town hated Halloween," admitted May eventually.

Moe stood up, looking hurt. "I don't get it!" he complained, "I'm hosting the best party this town has ever seen! There's a huge mansion, and there's cool American guys, and the spooky spirit, and three of my best Halloween playlists. Why isn't anyone coming?"

"It is weird that not even the teens showed up," Elizabeth added, without looking up from her phone. It had run out of battery about seven minutes ago, but she was hoping that by sitting and pretending to play on her phone for long enough, Moe and Nate would eventually give in and let her go back to playing video games at home.

"Maybe there's a curse," said Nate doubtfully, who had tried his hand at karaoke earlier while they were still waiting for people to arrive and nearly caused permanent damage to the hearing of everyone in earshot. The microphone hung miserably out of his back pocket and waited for better days.

They sat around in silence for a few more minutes. May tucked her phone into her jacket, stood up, and headed for the door with a glance back at Moe. "Sorry dude," she said by way of explanation, "I don't think this is going anywhere. At least you tried."

She reached up to pull the ornate front doors open, and then there was a sharp rapping noise like somebody knocking urgently on them. May yelped in surprise and took a step backwards away from the entrance. Whoever it was on the other side knocked again.

"Guests!" cheered Moe, his spirits lifted. He swept his cape dramatically around himself and strode towards the doors, then flung them open with a theatrical flourish. "Welcome-" he began, and then stopped himself. He swallowed nervously and fixed the newcomers with a perplexed stare. "Uh. Can I help you?"

On the other side of the doors were a man and a woman, shrouded in sunglasses and trenchcoats made up of a lot of grim colours like dark green and black. The man had wild, stylish hair and a hopeful expression; the woman seemed unimpressed. Her hair was tied back into a serious ponytail and she regarded Moe coolly. He wondered if they were wearing costumes from a movie he hadn't seen yet.

"Evening, sir," said the woman, in an accent that they couldn't quite place, "My name is Penemue Robin, and this is my assistant Lucas Luton. We understand you have a ghost problem?"

Nate and Elizabeth joined Moe at the door, trying to make sense of the newcomers. The millionaire cleared his throat and glanced back doubtfully into the mansion's lobby. "A ghost problem?" he asked, "On Halloween?"

"How appropriate," added Elizabeth.

Lucas spoke up. "Can we come in?" he said, with a hopeful grin.

"Just one second," Elizabeth replied and she closed the door in their faces, then turned back to the other detectives and Nate, "There's definitely something going on with these guys, right?"

“What?” asked Moe, looking hurt, “Liz! These are the only guests we’ve actually got! We *have* to let them in!” He gestured wildly around at the hastily-decorated Darkstone Manor lobby and turned towards the door emphatically. “Look at all the work we did making this place spooky!”

“If you say the word *spooky* one more time I’m going to hit you,” said May.

Nate shook his head and looked worried. “You guys know what kind of creepy supernatural creature can only come in if you invite it?” he said, in an uncharacteristically serious tone of voice. He made a strange gesture with his hands.

“Polite party guests?” tried Moe. Everyone looked at him. “I’m just kidding,” he said, “It’s totally vampires. But also, do you know how cool it would be to have real vampires show up at our Halloween party? Oh, we *will* have to get rid of the garlic bread first though.”

“We are *not* letting vampires into this mansion,” snapped Elizabeth. She pinched the bridge of her nose and sounded tired.

May spoke up from where she was trying to have a nap across several chairs. “We don’t actually know that they’re vampires. They were talking about a ghost problem, and this manor definitely has a lot of those,” she pointed out, “You’d have to be an idiot to turn down a free ghost-bust like this.”



“*May!*” hissed Elizabeth, but Moe had already reached over and opened the doors to let the sinister pair of ghost hunters in. They stepped into the manor almost cautiously, and then surveyed the lobby with quiet satisfaction. “Oh no,” muttered Elizabeth quietly.

Penemue and Lucas shared a conspiratorial glance. “This will do nicely,” said Penemue.

She reached into her backpack and took out a set of complicated-looking instruments. “We’re ghost hunters,” said Lucas by way of explanation as he began to connect wires together, “Darkstone Manor has always been a secret passion of ours. The amount of mystery surrounding this building’s construction is really terribly interesting. I hope you don’t mind if we poke around some.”

“You... didn’t get the invitation?” asked Nate suspiciously.

“Invitation?” replied Penemue thoughtfully, “No, we just felt like it was an appropriate night to investigate.” She produced something that looked like a glorified vacuum cleaner and linked it up to a tablet that Lucas was holding.

“Then where did the invitations go?” Moe said to nobody in particular. “They were all sent out over the internet but not a single person has replied. Not even Andrew and Darwin.” Nate and Elizabeth looked at each other quietly, and together they began to realise that something was very, very wrong.

Chapter Three

“Bloody hell,” groaned Andrew as he woke up, “Where are we?”

His entire body hurt. He forced himself to sit up and noticed that his clothes were covered all over with mud and dirt, and that he was lying at the bottom of the hill which he and Darwin had been standing atop just several minutes ago. He felt sick with a sensation he couldn't explain.

Several feet away was Darwin, trying to brush mud off of his hoodie. One of the lenses in his goggles was cracked and the magic staff or book were nowhere to be seen. He looked affronted. “Well, that was just plain rude,” he said to nobody in particular.

“You summoned *witches!*” said Andrew suddenly, pointing an accusatory finger at Darwin. “There are *witches* and you summoned them from a stone circle and now there are *two moons!*” He jerked his finger in the direction of the sky, where a ball of sickly glowing light hovered far above them, and made them feel ill just looking at it.

Darwin stood up and adjusted his broken goggles. “I get the feeling that book lied to us,” he admitted sheepishly, and looked up the hill again. “Did we fall down here?”

“I think so!” replied Andrew, trying to wipe mud off of his jacket, “They must have thrown us off the side of the hill, and now there are *two moons*, and I'm not getting any phone signal, and we need to find the others because this is *crazy* and I want to go home.”

The walk back to town took them the better part of an hour, which did very little to improve Andrew's mood or mitigate the bizarre sickness that both of them were feeling in any capacity. Darwin wondered aloud why the presence of the standing daughters in Valewood had conjured up a second, Eldritch moon, which seemed to be making them more ill the longer they stood in its light. Andrew complained that some witches had pushed him down a hill. The two of them were able to agree at least that Darwin would never be allowed to practice black magic again.

“So let's run this through one more time,” said the nervous young detective as they reached the edge of Valewood, “The stone circle named the Standing Daughters was actually a prison for a bunch of actual daughters, who are scary witches, and they've pushed us off a hill and made another moon appear which *might actually be KILLING us.*”

He stopped in his tracks. "Wait, maybe that's the focal point," he said suddenly.

"Huh?" asked Darwin, turning back to him.

"You know," Andrew suggested, pointing back across the hills in the general direction of the open stone circle, "The focusing lens, like you said. The book told you that there was a focal point for dark magic in the circle or something. What if that new moon is the real focusing lens for their power, and it's appeared because the witches are free?"

Darwin nodded thoughtfully. "I haven't studied focusing lenses much, but that's dangerously possible," he admitted, "If it's a singularity of pure black magic then no wonder standing in its light is making us sick. We should get indoors."

They wandered on through dark, empty streets. The late October night was suffocating in its silence, and something about this struck Andrew as strange. A set of neon lights up ahead caught their attention as they crossed through the shopping street in the town centre. "The mall!" said Darwin, pointing ahead, "We'll take a break in there. There's no way we'll be able to make it to the Agency in this moonlight, and maybe we can warn everyone about it too."

"We're like reverse vampires," said Andrew miserably as they headed inside the Longstreet Shopping Centre, a small shopping complex in downtown Valewood which had been a very popular space in the latter half of the twentieth century, and was now slowly dying out, like most things, due to the internet. The main court was a wide, open space with a lot of plastic plants, and a few Halloween decorations which had been largely forgotten about. Darwin drew the Divinator Detector from his backpack and fiddled with it, trying to get a reading on the second moon curse.

There was nobody around. "Where is everyone?" asked Andrew, trying to make sense of the vast emptiness which surrounded them. The shops were still open but nobody was inside, not even behind the counters which were visible from where they stood. A sense of implacable dread settled all around them.

"It *is* night-time," suggested Darwin, reassuring himself.

Andrew shook his head. "It's only a quarter to seven," he replied, "Besides, the amateur drama club is supposed to be holding an open evening in the open shops over there, I think. Don't look at me like that, they do it every weekend and sometimes I run into them here. But... there's no sign of them. Darwin, where is everyone?"

The two detectives looked around them at the deserted mall, and slowly it dawned upon them that they were standing in an empty town. "Uh oh," said Darwin.

A noise behind an entrance sign startled them, and they turned to see a sliver of white glide between the potted plants at the entrance. Darwin and Andrew knew what it was at once; the

daughters of the standing circle come to claim them. The Reloovian inventor shook the Divinator Detector and tried to get a reading.

“What have you done to us?” shouted Andrew at the witch, who appeared suddenly - framed in the orange street lights beyond the mall’s entrance. “Wh-what’s happened to Valewood?”

“My name is Wednesday,” said the witch. She was long and thin, and wrapped in a tattered grey shawl. Wednesday regarded the two detectives with a hateful expression and stepped closer. Andrew and Darwin took a step backwards. “You know what you did,” she said.

“This wasn’t us!” protested Darwin, shaking his head, “I’m not good enough at black magic to make an entire town disappear! That thing that happened with the postman was an accident, I swear!”

(“What?” asked Andrew.)

“Free them,” ordered Wednesday, and she raised a hand menacingly in their direction. Darwin was lifted suddenly and unexpectedly into the air with a whooshing sound of terrible magicks, and thrown backwards across the mall’s main court. Andrew cried out in alarm and ran after his friend as he crashed hard against a stand selling calendars.

Andrew looked back at the witch, his eyes wide. “Why would you do that?!” he yelled.

“You have one hour,” replied the witch, and she disappeared.

It had been about twenty minutes since Penemue and Lucas had left the lobby with their ghost-hunting equipment and disappeared into the labyrinthine corridors of Darkstone Manor, and Moe and May had decided to tag along with them. Meanwhile, Nate and Elizabeth were comparing notes on the supernatural and not feeling great about the general vibes that the ghost hunters had brought with them into the mansion on Halloween.

“So we both definitely agree that there’s something going on,” said Elizabeth, glancing nervously back at the grand staircase as if Penemue and Lucas would return at any moment with the heads of May and Moe on a stick. She folded her arms.

Nate nodded unhappily. “If it’s not vampires then it’s probably ghosts,” he explained, “Seattle, ‘06, a bunch of so-called paranormal investigators showed up at my door who turned out to be one ghost possessing four people at once. It was pretty messed up, bro.” He shuddered. “What’s the plan?”

“The plan?” asked Elizabeth, and she blinked in surprise. Truth be told, most of the things that happened in Valewood usually ended up being an accident, and more often than not everyone survived purely out of luck. There was rarely, if ever, an actual plan. Elizabeth thought about this. Maybe there was an opportunity here to actually go about this in a way which even vaguely resembled strategy, she reasoned.

“Okay,” she said, “We’re gonna need a vampire plan, a ghost plan, and a regular plan.”

“A regular plan?”

“Yeah, in case they turn out to be normal ghost hunters who are just a bit weird, and then we have to apologise to them or something. We might even learn a lesson about judging people by appearances,” she said dryly.

“Alright,” replied Nate, “If it’s vampires, here’s what we’re gonna want to do...”

Several corridors away, Moe and May were trying to make conversation with the strange pair of ghost hunters and learning a lot about Darkstone Manor in the process, which wasn’t quite the goal of the discussion. Penemue had gone up ahead with a device which looked like a sci-fi torch and was shining it studiously over every painting that she came across, while Lucas was hanging back to talk to May.

“That’s the really interesting thing about the manor,” he was saying, “The architect went insane. His name was Zachariah Echelmier and nobody knows what happened to him. They say there’s a secret deep underground...”

May nodded. “Uh-huh,” she replied, “So uh, how long have you and Penemue known each other? What got you involved in the ghost-hunting business?”

“Um,” said Lucas awkwardly, and he ran a hand through his dark curly hair, “We just sort of got involved a few years ago at a meet-up for this sort of thing, y’know? Mue had a bunch of equipment and I thought it would be interesting to go searching for ghost stuff and, well, yeah.”

“So where did you guys say you’re from?” asked May, glancing back up the hallway at Moe and Penemue.

“Oh, we’ve been all over the place, really,” replied Lucas unhelpfully. He adjusted the collar of his trenchcoat and looked down at the tablet in his hands. It was giving off readings that May had no hope of interpreting and did very little to alleviate any of her suspicions.

They walked on in silence for a few more minutes. Penemue was making notes on everything that Moe could tell her about, and just like her companion had still not taken off her sunglasses. “Penemue seems very interested in Darkstone Manor,” commented May eventually, “What’s that all about?”

“She thinks it’s an interesting place,” Lucas said.

“Moreso than the rest of the town?”

Lucas frowned and folded his arms. “I don’t think you like me very much,” he complained.

May began to worry that Lucas might have noticed that her line of questioning was getting a little intense, because he was getting defensive. Maybe it was time to bring out the real big guns. "I find it hard to get on with people who wear sunglasses indoors," she said, just a little too casually.

The nervous ghost-hunter made an unhappy noise and nearly tripped on the hem of his trenchcoat. "I have sensitive eyes," he protested, "Don't be mean."

"How sensitive?"

He did not get the chance to respond, because at that moment Moe turned back to them from his position further up the corridor and called out to May. "Hey May!" he shouted, a little louder than was necessary, "Did Darwin leave anything weird underground? Penemue says there's a powerful secret underneath the mansion."

"I'm pretty sure that all the powerful secret stuff got blown up," replied May tersely.

The effect that this had on Penemue was frankly surprising. She stumbled in the exact same way that Lucas had and turned back to the three of them, then adjusted her sunglasses in a way which suggested she was a hunter on the edge. "Blown up?!" she asked, "The anomaly was destroyed?"

("What's going on?" asked Moe, who was finally beginning to realise that something was up.)

"I mean, Darwin survived," said May slowly, and then seized the moment and knocked Lucas' sunglasses off of his face with a backhand slap. He yelled in alarm and moved to cover his eyes, but it was too late. The nervous ghost-hunter stared at them with eyeballs that were almost insectoid, a mass of compound eyes of varying shapes and colours which flashed dangerously in the dim light of the manor corridor. He made a noise which was definitely not human and angrily turned to face May.

"And I was *just* starting to like you," he gurgled.

"*Aliens?!!*" wailed Moe, and found himself at the business end of a laser blaster which was pointed in his direction. He cried out and stumbled backwards as Penemue removed her glasses too to reveal identical eyes with one hand, holding the blaster steady with the other. The millionaire took a few seconds to process this. "Why are there aliens at Halloween? My party! This isn't seasonally relevant!"

"Foolish humans!" spat Penemue in a nasal, inhuman voice.

"Oh man, you guys actually say stuff like that?" replied May, who was almost impressed.

Penemue shoved Moe roughly aside and moved to join Lucas. "If even a fragment of the anomaly has survived then we shall reclaim it for our invasion force," she gurgled

meaningfully, “You will bring us this *Dar-Winn*.” She waved the weapon dangerously at Moe and May, who had no idea how to respond.

“Probably now is a good time to use your powers on them,” suggested Moe quietly, as the aliens adjusted a setting on their equipment which no longer seemed like proper ghost-hunting paraphernalia. May nodded and reached deep into the ancestral power of the Gandoran lineage and summoned up lightning from the darkness, then threw it at the invaders with a guttural yell.

“You’re not supposed to be able to do that!” Lucas yelled in alarm and held up some machinery in front of him which caught the brunt of the lightning bolt, then turned to his superior officer. “Humans aren’t supposed to be able to do that!” he cried, sounding upset.

“Then use the stasis generator, *Luton*,” hissed Penemue. The nervous alien nodded in agreement and raised the thing which looked like a vacuum cleaner, then pointed it at Moe and May. The two detectives turned to run but the machine whirred into life and emitted a blast of menacing green energy which quickly wrapped around them.

“Hey! What the hell’s this?” shouted May.

Moe cried out as he crashed against the floor and realised that he was unable to move. This was not what Halloween was supposed to be like, he thought to himself, and then passed out.

Chapter Four

Having recovered from the witch’s attack, Darwin and Andrew snuck out through the back loading areas of Longstreet Shopping Centre and together they decided to head in the direction of the library, because it was the closest helpful building and also because if they spent any more time in the light of the second moon curse they felt like they might actually die. It hung high above them in the night sky, a burning ball of sickly orange light which flickered and hummed with powerful energy.

“Why do those witches think we did this?!” hissed Andrew as they crossed another empty street. “This whole town is deserted! There’s no way we could have done this, right?”

Darwin shrugged. “Stuff happens,” he said unhelpfully. They kept to the shadows as much as they could on their way to the library, keeping a nervous eye out for the witches who appeared to be prowling the streets of Valewood. Andrew felt like this was a very unfair consequence of him deciding to be nice for once and letting his housemate experiment with dark magic. Another part of him asked him why he was even surprised by this sort of thing happening in the first place.

They reached the library eventually, a big modern building made up of steel and glass which had recently replaced the older and much more appealing library that Andrew would have

felt a lot more comfortable in. The automatic doors slid open quietly as they stepped inside and surveyed the empty room.

“I know libraries are supposed to be quiet,” admitted Darwin, “But this is still creepy.”

Andrew followed him across the silver carpet to a set of shelves near the back of the library that he had never seen before. A sign at the top read “*Occult*” and indicated several large, leather-bound books not unlike the one which Darwin had used earlier tonight to summon the witches from the stones.

He pulled down a large book from the shelf and slapped it on a nearby table with a resounding thud. “Everyone in Valewood has vanished,” said Darwin resolutely, “The witches of the standing circle seem to think we did it, except we know that they must have done it, because neither of us on our own possess the amount of magical power to seal away hundreds of people at once. I don’t know how we’re going to fix this but what we need to do first is find a counter-spell that will destroy the second moon curse so we can bring back the townsfolk.”

“A counter-spell,” repeated Andrew, breathing heavily, “Right, well, this all seems very normal and great, we’ve just got to do *more* black magic to cancel out the regular black magic that we did in the first place which has cursed us with a second moon that may be actively killing us. Terrific.”

“I think you’re panicking again,” said Darwin absent-mindedly as he took a notebook from his backpack and began to scribble down notes, “Listen. The key to creating the right counter-spell is to pick and choose the parts you need from *other* spells.”

Andrew sat down heavily at the table and put his head in his hands. “Other spells. Got it. Where do we find those?” he asked. By way of response, Darwin slapped down a large book in front of him and pointed him to the contents page. “I didn’t know the library even *had* an occult section,” he moaned.

Behind him, Darwin made an annoyed grunt. “This would be so much easier if we had the original spellbook on us,” he said, “We’re going to have to work really hard to figure this one out. Let’s see. What do we know about the standing daughters?”

“Absolutely nothing,” said Andrew despondently.

“Somebody had to have created that spell in order to trick us into freeing them, right?” suggested Darwin, typing something into the Divinator Detector’s keyboard, “The first part of the spell was innocent enough, but once you read that aloud it channels the energy through the second, hidden part which freed the witches. Something about opening wide an ark. But an ark isn’t a prison...” He was pacing now, thinking aloud. Andrew rested his head on the table and pretended to understand what was happening.

Darwin snapped his fingers. “The witches were *hiding* from something!” he realised, “That’s why the spell to release them is hidden too! They wanted to be found by someone with magic like theirs.” He thought about this for several seconds. “But that means somebody was after them. Who would be stupid enough to persecute witches?”

“Uh, how about *all* of the witchfinder guys from the seventeenth century?” suggested Andrew sarcastically, and then remembered that Darwin’s knowledge of Earth history was scarce in all the wrong places. “You know, all the religious weirdos who burned the vulnerable and the elderly at the stake and drowned them and stuff? A lot of them weren’t even witches?”

“I always forget how messed up your planet is,” said Darwin thoughtfully.

Andrew nodded sympathetically. “I think that’s the best way to stay sane,” he replied.

“So if the witches were hiding from persecution,” the Reloovian student continued, “Why did they do what they did? They sealed away everyone in town! It’s up to us to get them back! Is this a test? A challenge? We both want the same thing, why can’t we work together?” He looked down at the large books strewn out over the table and sighed.

There was a loud, harsh sound of shattering glass from the front of the library. The two detectives looked at each other in alarm and then across the room, where they could hear voices and they could hear footsteps.

“They’re here,” breathed Andrew.

“Garlic!” cheered Nate, as he pulled out a drawer in the Darkstone kitchens and found a whole pile of the weird little vegetables. Elizabeth grabbed a handful and stuffed it into her bag, which she slung back over her shoulder with a determined nod. The two of them had been working on a plan for a while now, sneaking away to the kitchens to plot in peace without the risk of being disturbed by the weird new ghost hunters.

Elizabeth grinned. “I think that’s everything,” she said.

“Then let’s go get ‘em!” replied Nate, and he raised his axe theatrically. Elizabeth gently pushed it back down and reminded him that they were going to try and avoid using it unless absolutely necessary, just in case the newcomers turned out to be regular humans who were just a bit weird.

The demon hunter nodded in agreement, seeming just a little bit disappointed, and together they headed back towards the lobby. Darkstone Manor’s main lobby was large and vaguely sinister on the best of days, and here, shrouded in cheap Halloween decorations and a total lack of party guests, it seemed even more empty and unsettling than usual. Elizabeth shared a nervous glance with Nate and they moved up the stairs in the direction of Penemue and Lucas, and Moe and May.

Several corridors away, the alien going by the name of Penemue Robin was trying to make sense of this sudden complication in her invasion plan. The humans had quickly figured out what they were up to, and they had been forcibly subdued for it. Now her subordinate (going by the name of Lucas) was getting panicky.

“This is a complication!” he was saying, “We were supposed to promise no complications! We go in, we dig up the ancient power underneath the manor construction, and then we return to the mothership in orbit. We’ve just knocked out the only two who might know where it is!”

“Be quiet,” snapped Penemue, pinching the bridge of her nose. Her multiple eyes throbbed in frustration. The solar empress was not going to be impressed if they came back empty-handed - but it would be worse if their presence was revealed to the planet at large. Earth was a fertile ground for their empire expansion, but only with the anomaly underneath the manor that had been emitting some frankly astronomical readings (which had driven them halfway across the universe) would they be able to give their straggling empire the boost it needed for this major conquest. “Here’s what we’re going to do,” she continued, “We take these two humans back up to the mothership and force them to tell us how to find *Dar-Winn*.”

Lucas looked mopey. “Can’t we do it down here?” he complained, “You know space travel makes me queasy.” He folded his arms and looked at the two inert humans floating in the coils of the stasis generator.

“We don’t have the time!” his superior hissed. She glanced uncertainly back up the corridor and narrowly missed the arrival of Nate and Elizabeth, who were listening quietly in on the conversation with a sort of silent horror. Penemue cleared her throat with a wet, clicking noise. “There are two other humans here, remember? They will come looking for their associates.”

“*We already have!*” declared Nate Grant theatrically, stepping out from around the corner with a broad gesture which indicated that he meant business, and that he had an axe, and that he meant business with said axe.

“You!” howled Penemue in fury, and she gestured in the direction of the hunter. Lucas nodded and raised the stasis generator, but he was suddenly and unexpectedly clubbed in the back of the head by Elizabeth Glass, who was wielding a baseball bat.

“Vibe check!” she said.

The weedy invader went down instantly with a disgruntled groan, and landed over the stasis generator with a crunching noise that suggested it had been immediately broken. Penemue staggered back in alarm and there was a popping sound as Moe and May were released from the machine’s otherworldly grasp. The alien captain levelled her blaster at Elizabeth with a furious growl, but Nate threw the axe and knocked it out of her hand.

The two of them moved for the blaster at once, but Elizabeth was faster and grabbed it up, pointing it meaningfully at Penemue. She carefully picked the axe up too and handed it back to Nate, who was no longer quite sure what to do with it.

“Alright, lady,” said Elizabeth sternly, “Why don’t you tell us what the hell’s going on here?”

Across the room, May Winter sat up slowly and rubbed her head, feeling woozy. “What happened?” she asked blearily. Nate offered her a gentlemanly hand and helped her stand up. She glanced back down the corridor and saw Elizabeth threatening Penemue with a laser blaster, then began to wonder exactly what it was she had missed. Moe yawned and turned over in his sleep.

“I’ll tell you nothing,” spat Penemue, “You Earth people are fooling around with technology you couldn’t possibly hope to understand. Hand me back that blaster.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “No thank you,” she said smugly, “I’ve played enough video games to know how a space gun works. Now tell us what you’re up to, or I’ll ask *Nate* to try his hand at *karaoke* again.” She waved the blaster menacingly in Penemue’s direction, and the alien captain shrank back slightly.

“The Mocariemme are a proud race,” declared Penemue righteously, “I shall withstand any torture you foolish humans subject me to.”

“So you guys are named the Mocariemme,” said Nate, nodding sagely, “Cool.”

From the floor, there was a sorry-sounding noise as Lucas began to come around. Nate stood intimidatingly over him and made sure that he didn’t attempt to get up. Elizabeth began to realise that they weren’t getting anywhere. She thought long and hard about interrogation scenes in movies, and decided to try a new strategy. “Okay, okay,” she said with a sigh, “How about we do this a different way? An answer for an answer. You tell us what you want to know and we’ll tell you what you want to know.”

“Very well,” replied Penemue with a scowl, “But I’ll go first.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Sure, alright,” she said.

The alien captain of the Mocariemme fixed her with a serious stare and narrowed her many eyes. Her face contorted in the closest thing to a meaningful expression that she could manage. “Where is *Dar-Winn*?” she demanded.

Nate and Elizabeth looked at each other in confusion, and then at May and Moe. “They seem to think that Darwin is some kind of immensely powerful alien weapon,” said May by way of explanation, and she shrugged. Moe rubbed his temples and tried to make sense of his surroundings.

“He does have a toaster gun, I guess,” added Moe.

“Darwin’s off working on his magic or something with Andrew’s help,” explained Elizabeth, turning back to Penemue. “I think they’re at the stone circle. I’m not sure what you want from Darwin though. He’s a nice bloke but he’s a bit of a scatterbrain, and he’s *definitely* not a powerful alien weapon or anything.”

“I wonder how he’s doing,” Nate said, and then he was hit by the stasis generator and he went down instantly, wrapped in a tangle of alien green light. The others turned to look at Lucas on the floor, who was no longer there. Elizabeth felt the barrel of the generator press against the back of her head, and she froze.

Penemue took the blaster from her with a thin smile. “I suppose we ought to thank you, human,” whispered Lucas in a chilling voice from just behind Elizabeth, “That’s *exactly* what we wanted to know.”

Chapter Six

All seven of the standing daughters walked into the front of the library. They were animated by a supernatural energy, striding determinedly into the centre. Darwin and Andrew, hiding behind the occult shelves, watched in horror. The one they recognised as Wednesday was leading them, and she was moving her hands slowly through the air as if it were water, performing some kind of magical incantation they couldn’t hope to understand.

The cold white fluorescent light that filled the library seemed harsh and blinding. Andrew was sweating heavily and beginning to shake a little. He clutched one of the spellbooks under his arm and turned to Darwin, who stared through the shelves at the seven witches.

“What do we do?!” hissed the nervous detective.

Darwin looked despondent. “There’s nothing we *can* do!” he replied, “There’s no way we can rig up a counter-spell before they find us! I’m nowhere near good enough at magic yet!”

Suddenly, Andrew’s face turned serious. He fixed Darwin with a warm stare and put a hand firmly on his shoulder. “I believe in you,” he said seriously, and smiled. He glanced down at the book and held it out to his Reloovian housemate.

“No, really,” said Darwin blankly, “It’s literally impossible. I appreciate the sentiment but you’re just setting yourself up for disappointment.”

“That always works in movies,” replied Andrew with a scowl.

Together, the two of them moved further down the aisle of shelves, keeping a close eye on their surroundings. They could hear the witches talking amongst themselves in strange, clipped accents which were several centuries out of date as they spread out in search of the two detectives. Andrew had never been hunted through a library before and was finding it an altogether new and stressful experience.

Darwin had, on account of a long-running disagreement he had had with a Reloovian librarian and a set of automated shelves. This was all strangely familiar to him.

Behind them, a flimsy book (the plot was terrible) that the detectives had brushed against toppled from the shelf with a slapping noise. They looked at each other in horror. "Over here!" one of the witches shouted. There was the sound of footsteps, closing in fast on their location. The Reloovian inventor paled.

Andrew and Darwin turned to go back the way they came, but there was a witch waiting for them at the end of the aisle. She was short, wrapped in flowing white robes, and her hair was long and dark. She regarded them with a cold stare, and closed in.

"Oh no," said Darwin.

Five minutes later the two of them were tied to chairs in the centre of the library and neither of them were very happy about it. Andrew was blaming Darwin for everything bad that had ever happened in his life, and Darwin had started reciting verbatim a textbook on magic that he had read a few days ago. The seven witches clustered around them.

"You had one hour," said Wednesday coldly, stepping forward, "We gave you one hour to return the people that we took." She adjusted the hood of her cloak and looked at the two detectives, who stared miserably back at her.

"So you *did* take them away!" realised Darwin, "But why? What was that all about?"

"Hold your tongue," ordered another of the witches. Darwin moved to try but his arms were held in place by the ropes that secured him to the chair. His housemate groaned.

Wednesday, who had been pacing thoughtfully back and forth, turned back to them. "You freed us from the stones we had hidden ourselves in," she explained, "The incantation could only be read by those of sufficient magical power, enough to summon up a second moon focusing lens which we would use to reclaim our abilities." She conjured a small glowing ball of energy into existence which resembled the second moon. Andrew thought it kind of her to provide pictures with her villain monologue.

"We used our first magic to take away the townspeople. The light of the second moon drains normal humans of their lifeforce in order to fuel itself. It would be unfair to kill this town, even after what they did to us, after all these years. Everyone in the valley below is hidden away in a dimension of mind, so that they will not even remember the experience of being taken," continued Wednesday.

She turned to another of her sisters: "It was Monday's idea to test the two of you, the powerful wizards that brought us back into the town of Valley's Wood. If you could find a way to undo what we had done, and rescue your fellow men, then perhaps you would be worthy

successors - students, even." Monday shook her head and seemed disappointed. Evidently, surmised Andrew, they had failed the test.

He blinked, realising something. "So you guys weren't out to bump us off?" he asked.

The witches stared blankly at him.

"Um, I mean murder us," he corrected himself, remembering what he had learned about future slang from other Halloween movies about witches transported to the present day. The daughters murmured bemusedly amongst themselves.

Wednesday sighed. "The language of this time is so strange," she said, "But no. What would be the point in clumsily executing the most powerful wizards in the whole of Valley's Wood?" She shook her head.

("I'm having a difficult time processing the fact that this town used to be Valley's Wood," added Darwin as casually as he could.)

"We will drain you of your magic instead," said Wednesday matter-of-factly, "And once we have been restored to the height of our powers, we will dispel the second moon and allow the townspeople to return. Then my sisters and I will move onwards, to another reality, where we shall live out the rest of our days." The short witch who had captured them earlier moved forward, out of the circle that surrounded the two detectives. "Drain them, Friday," ordered Wednesday sternly.

Friday raised her hand.

"Wait wait wait!" protested Andrew, "Wait, please! We can still help you!"

The witch paused. Wednesday lowered the hood of her cloak and raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Explain," she said.

"Darwin may only be a beginner at magic, but he's got promise! He's actually really good at it so far," Andrew continued, lying through his teeth, "What would be the point in draining him of his magic altogether if you really wanted to find worthy successors? This guy is the closest you're gonna get! Except for maybe May, but I think you guys took her too, and I feel like she probably wouldn't want to associate with you, and also I think there's a whole different kind of magic going on there. But anyway, um... Darwin!"

Beside him, Darwin nodded vigorously. "Exactly!" he added, "Do you really want your legacy in the new world to be made from this? That you drained us and just left? How is anyone supposed to learn magic in these kind of conditions?" He waited until the expression on the head witch's face had altered, even just a little bit, and then threw in his winning pitch: "Teach me how to help you dispel the second moon curse, and we'll never bother you again. I promise."

Wednesday looked at Friday, who lowered her raised hand. The other sisters exchanged thoughtful glances, and seemed to come to a strange unspoken consensus.

“Very well,” said Wednesday eventually, and she snapped her fingers. The ropes around them caught fire and burned away, leaving the two detectives sitting in the middle of the library feeling very relieved that they had just escaped what they could only imagine was a horrible fate.

Darwin beamed. “Okay,” he said breathlessly, “Where do we start?”

The three detectives were running, and collectively they all felt a little bit bad about leaving Nate behind, stunned ungracefully on the Darkstone Manor carpet and drooling. They did, however, have more pressing priorities on their hands - like the two alien invaders who were escaping back to their spaceship with information on Darwin’s whereabouts and an invasion plan to which he was apparently crucial.

Elizabeth ducked to avoid a laser blast which was fired in their direction as they descended the enormous staircase in the lobby. Penemue and Lucas were a short way ahead, sprinting to the door with the remains of the stasis generator and a still functioning blaster. “We can’t let them get away!” shouted May, throwing a lightning bolt at the escaping Mocariemme.

“Yeah, I know,” replied Moe tersely, almost tripping on his cape as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

Ahead of them, Penemue shouted an alien swear back at the detectives and threw the doors open, bathing the lobby in the cursed light of the second moon which hovered low above the town of Valewood, its light just stopping short of the Darkstone Manor gardens. At once the three human detectives felt unaccountably sick with a sensation they couldn’t quite explain. Moe shielded his eyes and tried to make sense of the burning light flying over Valewood, but could arrive at no reasonable kind of answer.

“The mothership!” screamed Lucas suddenly, from just ahead of them. “The solar empress has come to burn this planet herself!” He threw his arms wide in a gesture of almost reverent worship.

May and Elizabeth stared at each other in horror. A pair of incompetent alien invaders they might be able to handle, but an entire mothership of them? That was military territory, and as far as May was aware, not even the government knew about the weird stuff that went on in Valewood. Which was weird, considering the fact that the runes incident had actually made national television. “What do we do now?” asked Elizabeth, trying not to look at the sickly cluster of alien light in the sky.

“I’m almost out of lightning,” replied May, and she sounded tired. Moe shrugged.

At the far end of the Darkstone gardens, Penemue and Lucas were staring reverently up at the thing they thought was their mothership. They stood at the great gates which formed the

entrance to the garden, beyond the fountain in the centre of the path. "I'm not sure about this," mumbled Penemue, "Has the mothership always been that bright?"

"Looking at it makes me feel ill," Lucas agreed miserably.

Penemue shook herself. "Perfectly normal anxiety," she said sternly, "It's not like that's unusual for you. Let us go; the solar empress will be disappointed if we keep her waiting." The plan now was simple: share with their forces the location of the *Dar-Winn*, some kind of stone circle, and then harness its power to conquer the Earth. Penemue reached behind her and primed her jetpack.

Several feet away, the detectives were running out of ideas. May had exhausted her powers from all of the missed shots she had taken, and now was looking quite pale. The mansion's owner still looked slightly cross-eyed from the hit he had taken from the stasis generator weapon earlier, and Elizabeth was too far away from them to reach the invaders with her bat, which she was becoming quite fond of.

"We can't let them reach the mothership!" she shouted, and ran towards the invaders.

Lucas laughed maniacally and brandished the malfunctioning stasis generator in her direction as he began to lift off of the floor with a wheezing, groaning sound. The ghost-hunting equipment that had been strapped to his back revealed itself to also be a jetpack as beams of green energy shot out of it.

"Fool! You were a fool to try and stop us!" he cackled.

He fired the stasis generator at Elizabeth, and the detective braced herself for an impact which didn't come; she opened her eyes to see that a last bolt of lightning had intercepted the shot, delivered from behind her by a thoroughly exhausted May Winter. She staggered slightly as Elizabeth turned in astonishment. "You're welcome," said May weakly, and the two of them turned back to watch the invaders disappear into the sky, racing towards their mothership. Moe sighed despondently.

"Well, we're boned," he said.

Chapter Seven

The summoning circle was almost complete. Darwin and the witches were frantically scribbling things all over the ground in chalk, archaic symbols that Andrew had no hope of recognising. They talked to each other of spell-clauses and moonbeam focus, and occasionally turned to consult the enormous spellbook that the two detectives had pilfered from the *Occult* section. Darwin, now, was working on the Divinator Detector, holding it up to a window to take some readings on the second moon. He grinned with satisfaction and read out a set of numbers to the witch named Sunday, who inscribed them onto the library carpet with chalk.

Andrew wondered who was going to clean it up. He stood off to one side with the short witch who had almost drained Darwin of his magic earlier, Friday, and found conversation extremely difficult. Talking to a witch girl from the seventeenth century was actually exactly as difficult as he imagined, and they didn't get much further than introductions. "How's it going?" he called out to Darwin, after an uncomfortable length of silence.



"We are almost done!" called back Wednesday instead, as Darwin seemed far too involved in choosing the right kind of symbol for the next part of the spell. "Your friend is an incredibly promising wizard. Perhaps there is hope for his studies yet."

Darwin was next to him suddenly, and Andrew yelled out in surprise. "I don't think I'll take up their offer," the Reloovian whispered conspiratorially, "They seem like interesting ladies but their teaching methods are questionable."

"Right," replied Andrew, nodding with relief, "Oh well, I suppose you can always go and learn from May or something if you're really interested."

"No I can't," said Darwin, and he looked confused. He gestured back at the witches: "This is an entirely different school of magic to May's biologically-inherited Gandoran magical ancestry." He shifted into lecture mode and adjusted his goggles. "Magic comes in different flavours, kind of like languages. It's all about the source, Andrew. Me and the witches have to draw on ourselves and arcane trinkets to perform our magic. May and Reingard and that have a whole other dimension from which they can harness their powers. According to my notes, they call it the Magicplane."

"What about Monothiel?" asked Andrew, thinking back to the basement of Burns Realty, "He had some pretty weird magic stuff going on. How'd he power that?"

"Just like us," explained Darwin, "He must have been drawing from some kind of local source, too. Something in the basement, maybe. Whatever it was, it'd have to be incredibly powerful to let him harness extradimensional demons like that." His voice took on an almost reverent tone: "I'd love to see how he does it."

Andrew fixed him with a hard stare.

"Not to learn anything, though," added Darwin hurriedly.

“Because this whole experience has been incredibly humbling and now you finally get why you shouldn’t be messing with arcane forces you couldn’t possibly hope to understand?” prompted Andrew, as the witches put the finishing touches on the summoning circle.

Darwin shook his head. “No,” he replied, “Because I don’t think Monothiel would be a very nice teacher.” He clapped Andrew on the shoulder, rubbed his hands together cheerfully and headed back towards the circle with the witches.

The leader of the sisters turned to greet him as he arrived. “This will be our last meeting,” said Wednesday coldly, “The circle that will dispel the second moon curse will open our pathway to the world made of magic, and we will leave you be. Perhaps one day we will meet again, Darwin Archimedes - unless you desire to come with us?”

The Reloovian shrugged. “Maybe I’ll drop in for a meal or something,” he said, and extended a hand. Wednesday shook it uncertainly, “Thank you for not murdering us!” continued Darwin, “You guys keep on doing you, alright?”

“I know not what that means,” said Tuesday softly.

“You’ll figure it out,” added Andrew. He stood back, and the witches took formation, and with Darwin in the centre they began to chant. Somewhere, from another world made entirely of mind, the citizens of Valewood started to wake up. The library shook and hummed with powerful arcane energy, and the books tumbled from the shelves. Darwin’s eyes glowed with magical power as he started the final part of the spell.

The clock struck midnight, and November began. Far above the little town of Valewood, the two Mocariemme scouts raced towards what they believed was their mothership, trailing out streaks of green light behind them. Penemue had begun to laugh in a weird sort of way as they approached, a sheer kind of deranged joy at the prospect of another planet to conquer. The night air screamed past them and Lucas watched the town stretch out beneath him, all glittering lights and funny-shaped buildings. He was almost fond of the planet - but that made its prospective conquest even more potentially satisfying.

They got closer and closer to the enormous ball of light, and waited for it to transmit the signal that would open up the airlocks and let them on board. Instead all that happened was that they felt a little sick. Penemue adjusted her visor and flew in closer.

“Are you sure this is the mothership, Mue?” asked Lucas, and then it blew up.

The explosion of the second moon was the closest thing to fireworks on Halloween that Valewood was ever going to get. Far below, standing outside Darkstone Manor, the three detectives (and Nate, who had finally recovered) stood together and watched the bursts of orange and silver light rain over the town, sending showers of magical sparks bouncing onto the streets below. Moe decided that it wasn’t quite a Halloween party, and he had absolutely

no idea what had just happened, but it was cool enough to count and he started dancing to one of his playlists which he had accidentally just started playing.

Elizabeth shrugged and joined in.

Somewhere in Valewood, DI Perkins woke up from a strange dream in which he and all of the other townspeople had been standing around in a sort of strange honeycomb landscape, blamed it on his new medication and his wife Maureen, and went back to sleep.

In a dingy office under a building in the town centre, deranged cultist and fugitive Monothiel Blackwill was surprised and frustrated to find that he had fallen asleep at his desk, and shook himself awake with a growl. He held the glowing purple stone in his hand, and took another look at the blueprints and notes that he had stretched out before him. He was close, and he knew it. He just needed a few more components.

And in the streets, the detectives Darwin and Andrew wandered cautiously out of the library to find a town no longer bathed in the sickly light of an arcane moon. It felt like home, in a way they couldn't quite articulate. There was now just one moon in the sky, like there should be, and as Darwin stepped into the road a car almost ran him over. The driver honked at him and shouted a swear word, and was gone. The Reloovian rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly and gave a thumbs-up to his friend and housemate. Andrew breathed a sigh of relief and hoped that wherever the standing daughters were now, they were doing alright.

"Witches?" asked Moe, sitting on the bottom of the staircase in the Darkstone Manor lobby. He puffed out his cheeks and blew air from them. "Wow," he said, "We were way off."

May punched him lightly on the arm. "Hey," she interjected, "I did say it might have been a curse. They *really* weren't out for me at all?" She addressed her question to Darwin, who shook his head. The detectives were sitting around in the lobby watching the sun come up over Valewood. Andrew was helping Nate and Elizabeth take down the Halloween decorations.

"It was a whole different magical thing," explained Darwin, "I still can't believe you three managed to fend off a Mocariemme invasion force. Those guys are *brutal*."

"I helped too!" added Nate, from atop a ladder where he was dismantling an oversized plastic spider. "Next time you need help with magic, just ask your bro Nate! I know all about it. Well, some of it. Well, I watched a movie once."

"Why did we invite him again?" asked Andrew. Elizabeth shrugged and handed him a set of pumpkin-themed fairy lights which had been strung over the portraits in the lobby.

"You're just mad you didn't get to meet the aliens," she replied.

Andrew nodded. "That's fair," he agreed. Elizabeth told him everything she could, and they worked together on dismantling the decorations for another few hours, until the manor's staff

arrived for the morning and kindly offered to take over the job for them. Moe apologised for dragging everyone into a huge mess of party shenanigans, claimed it would never happen again, and immediately started planning for his next birthday get-together at the manor.

Up in the attic of the Valewood Agency for the Unexplained and Paranormal, Darwin thought long and hard about his experiences with dark magic and decided to put his notebook at the back of the cupboard for the time being. He looked at a toaster on his workbench and felt like spending the afternoon improving that instead. The rest of the detectives went their separate ways and slept for the entire rest of the day.

And somewhere in orbit, the great mothership of the Mocariemme fleet waited a few hours, decided that its invader scouts weren't coming back, and left, stopping at Mars on their way back to take a good look. The solar empress declared it kind of boring to look at, and they set off for their home galaxy.

The End