



Beatrice Beecham's Halloween Haunting

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A Beatrice Beecham Mystery

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Dorsal Finn is a sleepy town, nestled in a small crescent shaped bay, facing the gleaming Atlantic Ocean.

In its one hundred and ninety-eight year history the town has come to know mystery and skullduggery like the dearest of friends, so much so that it has now become quite normal to have the odd explosion here or missing person there without many of the townsfolk raising as much as an eyebrow.

And it is in the town of Dorsal Finn that one Beatrice Beecham now resides, a girl of remarkable talent amongst which are an absolute, innate gift for cooking. Oh, and finding trouble.

Now it is well known to the small community of Dorsal Finn that Beatrice Beecham does not actively seek out trouble. On the contrary, they know her to be a softly spoken, polite girl; quite the opposite to what her fiery red hair may imply. But whilst she did not actively sniff out secrecy or advocate adventure Beatrice did tend to attract such matters. And more often than not they would begin in the most innocuous of ways.

It is on one such day - All Hallows Eve, in fact - that we now find Beatrice, meandering through the Culinary History section of the Dorsal Finn Municipal Library, searching, as ever, for nothing more than a run of the mill cook book. She is actively seeking out a traditional recipe for pumpkin soup that she intends to make for supper.

What she finds instead is the jacket. It is brown and faded and slung over the back of a chair; and as far from sinister as anything could be. But whilst it does not appear ominous it does appear to have been left behind and being the polite and good natured person that she so often is, Beatrice makes a decision to pick up the jacket and take it to hand in to Agnes Clutterbuck at the front desk.

And this is where once again trouble decided to go for a jog and along the way collided with Beatrice Beecham head on.

* * *

'Hi, Agnes,' Beatrice said to the elderly librarian behind the reception desk. 'I found this jacket. You recognise it?'

'Bleugh! Bleeuurgh!' said Agnes not even looking up from her Book Review catalogue.

'I'm sorry?' Beatrice said quite taken aback.

'Whoooooeeah!' Agnes pushed her small spectacles up her long thin nose, standing upright when she saw Beatrice on the other side of the counter.

'What are you picking up today, Agnes?' Beatrice enquired, now realising that the librarian's infamous hearing aids were in tune with some rogue signal in the ether. The ear piece had been this way since Agnes' brother had tried to repair them with a very large hammer and a roll of duct tape. It was not unusual for the hyper-sensitive device to pick up signals from all over the place. Not too long ago Agnes was inadvertently privy to an argument over the price of wallpaper in 10, Downing Street.

'Humpback whales, I think,' the old woman said, her brow furrowing with frustration. 'But after the past few weeks that's a relief.'

'Relief?'

'Oh, nothing for a young soul as your good self to worry about, dear,' Agnes said kindly. 'Now what can I do for you?'

'This,' Beatrice said holding up the jacket for a few seconds. There was something in one of the pockets making it feel very heavy.

'That looks like it needs more than a cat lick, dear,' Agnes mused. 'Perhaps you'll grow into it.'

'It's not mine,' Beatrice giggled. 'I found it in the reading area. I thought I'd better hand it in.'

'I doubt that anyone would admit to wearing such a tired old thing,' said Agnes tapping her chin with a biro. 'But I suspect that its owner is currently lying on the floor somewhere near the Historical Romance section.'

For a second or two, Beatrice thought that Agnes was once more at the mercy of her uncooperative hearing aids; but she then saw the librarian was very much focused on the jacket lying limp in Beatrice's hands.

'Why would someone be lying on the floor in a library?' Beatrice quizzed.

'He's listening,' Agnes replied cryptically.

'Listening?' Beatrice echoed. 'For what?'

At this, Agnes shuffled on the spot, the movement making her purple body warmer creak like the branches of an old tree.

'Are you okay, Agnes?' Beatrice asked with concern.

'Well, if I'm honest, no I'm not.'

'Why?' said Beatrice. 'What's the matter?'

'It's silly really,' Agnes said fussing with the cover of her catalogue and avoiding Beatrice's perplexed gaze. 'But you know this hearing aid of mine plays up somewhat?'

'Really? I can't say that I've noticed,' Beatrice lied.

'Well, it does, and for some time now it's been playing up something terrible. I mean, I do get used to the hiss and chatter but just recently it's difficult to ignore it.'

'Ignore what, Agnes?' Beatrice enquired.

'The voice,' Agnes said, appearing both embarrassed and a little anxious.

'The voice? You mean as in -'

'Ghosts?'

The small voice from over her shoulder startled Beatrice so much she let out a small cry of surprise.

'I'm sorry I startled you,' the man said buffing his shiny forehead with a hand kerchief.

'It's okay,' Beatrice replied having regained her composure. 'I'm Beatrice Beecham,' she said offering her hand as a greeting.

'And I'm Zachary Tyrrell,' the man said without taking her hand. 'And I do believe you have my jacket.'

'Oh, yes,' Beatrice said, suddenly embarrassed and holding out the jacket. 'I thought someone may have forgotten it.'

'There are many forgotten things in this place,' Tyrrell said bluntly. 'But this jacket isn't one of them.' He took it from her.

'I only -' Beatrice began, but reacquainted with his coat, Tyrrell appeared to have lost interest in her. He turned to Agnes.

'Ms Clutterbuck,' he said donning his coat. 'I have run some rudimentary tests and I can confirm that there is a high probability of an *existential phenomenon* - quite possibly an entity - here at your library. It is also quite possible that you are experiencing clairaudience activity through your hearing apparatus. I shall have to come back tonight with my equipment to see what we are truly dealing with.'

'What does that mean?' Beatrice said before she could stop herself.

'This is an adult conversation, dear girl,' Tyrrell said patronizingly. 'Now run along and play, would you?'

But Beatrice didn't move, choosing to look at Agnes who appeared worried and confused.

'You want me to stay, Agnes?' Beatrice asked defiantly.

'No, thank you Beatrice,' she said after a few seconds. 'Don't worry, Mr. Tyrell will be sorting out matters, I'm sure.'

'Indeed,' Tyrell confirmed. Beatrice noticed that he didn't blink much.

'Well, I'll be off then,' she said forcing a smile. 'Places to go, people to see, right?'

'Of course,' Agnes smiled but it was wan and tired.

So Beatrice left the library without further thought of cookery books and pumpkin soup. She had places to go and people to see alright. And the first place Beatrice went was the bottom of the library steps where she pulled out her cell phone and made a call. Then she headed for the beach to wait for the only people she needed when things were amiss in the town of Dorsal Finn.

The Newshounds arrived ten minutes later.

* * *

Watching the waves suck and slurp over the shale Lucas Walker, computer impresario, Newshound and closet Beatrice admirer pulled a puzzled expression.

'What's that face for?' asked Elmo, Walker's long time friend and fellow Newshound.

'To make my head look interesting,' Walker said with a smile. 'I'm thinking about what Bea has just told us.'

What Bea had just told them was her recent experience at Dorsal Finn library. She couldn't erase the confused and anxious look on Agnes' kind, aged face.

'She needs our help,' Beatrice said.

'Sound's like she's got help already,' Elmo said, digging his big, bare feet into the shale. 'Did the guy say what he was looking for?'

'Elmo, haven't you listened to a word Beatrice has said?' Patience Userkaf, final Newshound and fashion fan, said snapping shut her vanity case. 'He was talking gibberish.'

'Well Lucas talks gibberish most of the time and I understand most of that.'

'Cute,' Lucas chuckled.

'So what did this guy say?' Elmo asked.

Beatrice told them based on what she could accurately recall.

'That's pretty interesting,' Lucas said. 'Are you sure he used the term *clairaudience*?'

'Pretty sure,' Beatrice replied.

'So what's the theory, Inspector Clouseau?' Patience said without looking away from her compact mirror.

'Clairaudience is when people can hear things - voices - outside the normal range; usually people like mediums,' Lucas explained.

'That's me out, then,' Elmo mused looking exaggeratedly down at his large frame.

'You crack me up,' Lucas smiled. 'I mean like *clairvoyants*! Mr. Tyrell is a ghost hunter.'

Patience dropped her silver compact on the shale in surprise, the circular mirror cracking with a single diagonal line.

'That's seven years bad luck,' Elmo chuckled.

'I've known *you* for seven years,' Patience said to him but without her usual gusto.

'What's up, Patti?' Elmo sounded concerned. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'I haven't seen a ghost,' Patience said, her emerald eyes unblinking. 'But I remember Agnes talking about such things once,'

'When was that?' Beatrice asked gently

'You remember that business during the *Fete of Fate*? When we split up and I was with Agnes, she talked about her hearing aids picking up weird voices.'

'You sure?' Lucas said.

'She said it in the middle of a dark, trap infested tunnel a mile below ground; nearly scaring me to death. Such things tend to stick in the mind!'

'So this has been troubling her for some time. No wonder she's so desperate to get some head case in to sort it out,' Lucas said shaking his head in disgust.

'He might be able to help,' Patience countered.

'That would mean what he was saying was true,' Lucas said skeptically.

'Are you saying you don't believe in ghosts?' Beatrice said.

'I'm saying that I'd like to see Mr. Tyrell's evidence.'

'He said that he'd need to go back tonight and use his equipment to be definite,' said Beatrice.

'How cool is that?' Elmo said shifting his bulk to make himself comfortable. 'Ghost hunting on hallowe'en?'

'Yeah,' muttered Patience. 'Sounds like a riot.'

'Oh come on, Patti,' Lucas said enthusiastically. 'This will be fun!'

'The last time you said 'this will be fun' we were almost blown to pieces, you remembering that?' Patience said sourly.

'But this is different,' Lucas gushed. He had a gleam in his eyes that Beatrice knew only too well. He sensed mystery in the air and he wouldn't be happy until it was solved. 'Well I'd like to be there when he uncovers whatever it is, wouldn't you?'

'We can go and ask Agnes if it'll be alright if we stay at the library and observe,' Beatrice offered. That way there'll be no more of this sneaking around.'

'Or getting blown up?' Patience said.

'That's right,' Lucas reassured her.

'Or drowned?'

'Patti, it's a library, how could you drown?' Elmo asked.

'Or ruining a brand new outfit?'

There wasn't any reply to this one.

'Why is it always the outfits that suffer?' she grumbled looking at her feet with their perfect pedicure.

'Mr. Tyrell didn't seem like the kind of man who'd want a bunch of kids watching him work,' Beatrice cautioned. 'Even with Agnes's permission we might not get to see much.'

'You know me, Bea,' Lucas said, his mouth pulling into a mischievous grin. 'I can be as quiet as a mouse.'

'Yeah,' Patience said. 'A mouse on a tractor.'

She wasn't smiling.

* * *

Crab Mill terrace is a line of squat cottages painted in bright blues, yellows and white. From the top floor, those who face west are greeted by the greens and blues of the Atlantic each time they throw open their windows; and will come away with the of taste sea salt on their lips.

Nestled amongst Crab Mill terrace is *Postlethwaite and Beecham's News and Chocolate Emporium*, the town's local news agent and employer of The Newshounds. The proprietors of this fine establishment are one 'Aunt' Maud Postlethwaite and George and Maureen Beecham, Beatrice's parents.

Now Aunt Maud was not an Aunt to the Beecham's in the truest sense. But in heart and soul she was without doubt a member of the family. She had known Mrs. Beecham's mother and had always treated Maureen as a niece. When Mr. Beecham lost his accountancy job at *Parkinson Paintbrush Incorporated* Maud offered them a business proposition:

move to Dorsal Finn and help her run the shop. And such matters were working out very, very well.

Maud was sitting in one of the many rooms of Crab Mill Terrace studying a faded sepia toned photograph. The picture contained the image of a single person: a young, handsome man in a large overcoat, with corduroy trousers and big Wellington boots. Although the man was smiling he had his arm in a sling and a swatch of bandage lashed across his forehead. Maud sighed heavily; the long drawn out sigh of someone who has found a wonderful memory and longs to be back in the place where it lived.

She was pulled from her thoughts by the distant, rhythmic sound of a bell: the telephone in the parlor. The muffled din of the considered, mellow voice of George Beecham flounced upon the air as Maud placed the photo back down upon the table, smoothing its crumpled edges with her long, slim fingers; an act of longing; an act of love.

She got up from the desk and left the room, determined that the day should not pass without the photo - the man - straying too far from her thoughts. Later Maud would go and see her friend; as she did every Halloween's Eve; and they would discuss the man in the photo over a cup of strong tea laced with a hefty shot of brandy, before putting the memory away for another year.

As Maud opened the door and prepared to step out into the hallway, George Beecham stepped up to her.

'Agnes is on the phone, Maud,' he said pensively. 'Are you okay?'

'Aye, George, I'm fine,' Maud said. 'Nothin' that a good night's sleep won't cure.'

She ambled off leaving George Beecham looking after her; his ruddy face not believing her in the slightest.

* * *

As The Newshounds moved through the library, the atmosphere seemed heavy and suffocating. It was as though the place were waiting for something to happen; like the excitement of a big soccer game or the tension at the beginning of an important race.

At their approach Agnes looked up from the jotter on the counter. Then Lucas noticed that she did a curious thing. She lifted a sheet of paper from the jotter pad, tore it off and began folding it ready to put it in her pocket.

'Hi Agnes,' Lucas said. 'We were wondering if we could come and keep Mr. Tyrrell company this evening. Be great to see a ghost hunter on Halloween.'

'I'm afraid that Mr. Tyrell wants to work on his own this evening,' Agnes said to the four disappointed faces standing in Dorsal Finn library. 'He was quite insistent about it; something about 'fogging the astral plane' or something like that.'

'Well how about if we just lurk about in the background?' Lucas said desperately. 'He doesn't have to know we're there does he? All we'd need is your permission to be in here, right?'

'I'm sorry, but I can't allow that,' Agnes said.

The Newshounds looked at each other.

'Are you picking up something on your hearing aid there, Agnes?' Elmo asked thinking that the librarian was distracted as usual.

'No, young Elmo,' she came back, much to their surprise. 'I can't allow you to be in here tonight. I'm sorry, but I would be breaking a confidence as well as several library rules.'

'We're only looking after your best interests, Agnes,' Lucas said sulkily.

'And I understand that, Lucas. I really do,' Agnes smiled warmly. 'But there are some things that require the advice - the expertise - of those versed in such matters. I cannot allow Mr. Tyrell to be distracted from his endeavors.'

As she said this, Lucas noted that the folded sheet of paper in Agnes' hand was being stowed in the pocket of her body warmer.

'Okay, Agnes,' Beatrice said. 'We're just trying to help. We're worried about you.'

'And there really isn't anything to be worried about, dear,' Agnes said a little too quickly for it to be true. 'I think that I may have been a little hasty telling Beatrice of such concerns. It really is nothing to worry about.'

'Okay, Agnes,' Lucas said. 'I couldn't have a few sheets of paper could I?'

'Of course, Lucas,' Agnes said handing him three sheets from the jotter.

'You're too kind,' he said with a faux smile.

The Newshounds descended the library steps, disappointed and dejected.

'Now what, genius?' Patience said to Lucas.

'I've never seen Agnes like that before,' Elmo said. 'She said that she didn't want our help; maybe we should just bow out?'

'I'm not so sure, Elmo,' Beatrice said uneasily. 'I mean, the fact she is so quick to refuse help says there's more to this than meets the eye.'

'So what are you saying, Beatrice?' Patience asked. 'Are you saying that we ignore her?'

Beatrice considered this for a moment. Agnes was a dear friend and had made it plain that she didn't want their involvement. Yet she was torn by Agnes' wishes and the desire to help someone she deeply respected.

It was a dilemma. And when faced with such tough choices there was invariably only one solution.

Beatrice called the Council together.

* * *

If you were to ask Beatrice just how the Culinary Council came to be she would not have been able, in all honesty, to say.

And in reality the discussions that occurred between Beatrice and the group of esteemed chefs happened in the wink of an eye; but in that nanosecond conversations were held and conflicts addressed.

The council consisted of Gordon Ramsay, Raymond Blanc, Gary Rhodes and Mario Batali; but as austere as these Chefs were, the head of the Culinary Council was Beatrice's all time favourite, Jamie Oliver. Anyone who knew Beatrice would never challenge the utter faith or devotion she afforded to the cheeky chappie from Essex; with the exception of maybe the Mungford twins - Kayleigh and Elisha - whose penchant for self proclaimed 'chef extraordinaire' *Philippe Flambe* bought them into contention with Beatrice on a number of occasions.

But no one would dispute that Beatrice was an avid fan of Mr. Oliver and would do anything to meet him.

It is of little surprise that Beatrice had made Jamie the patriarch of her Culinary Council and in her mind's eye; it was towards his wisdom she was now drawn. She may have been there on the steps of the town library but what she saw in the moment it takes for a battery of neurons to fire across the synapses of her brain was a stainless steel kitchen; with pots and pans bubbling away as steam cavorted skywards.

At one of the slab, steel counters Raymond, Gary and Mario were shaking their heads in frustration as Gordon made his eighth consecutive unsuccessful attempt to say a sentence without uttering a single swear word.

Standing to one side of the group, Jamie held a mug of tea cupped in his hands. His face beaming at his colleagues' despair.

'I have a dilemma, Jamie,' Beatrice said. 'Its particularly tricky, this one.'

'Sous chefs are quite remarkable, aren't they?' Jamie smiled.

'I guess they are,' Beatrice confirmed with a puzzled expression. She was, however, used to his ambiguity.

'Yes, quite remarkable,' Jamie continued. 'Second in command and the link between the kitchen and the Head chef. A busy kitchen like *Fifteen* needs decisions to be made at the drop of a toque; as we chefs say.'

Jamie paused for a moment then leaned forward in conspiratorial fashion. 'This may come as a surprise but on occasion the Head Chef may make a *mistake*. He may get it wrong.'

'A mistake?' Beatrice said. 'I'm quite surprised by that.' She pulled a quite surprised face just to underline this notion.

'It is a fact,' Jamie said nodding. 'In the heat of a fast, hectic service the Head Chef might say one thing when he may mean another. And in that moment, the Sous chef may have to make a decision based upon their knowledge of both the chef and the way the service works. He may decide to not to do what's right -'

'But to do what's best?' Beatrice offered.

'Pukka!' Jamie grinned.

And back on the library steps Beatrice told The Newshounds that they should help Agnes despite her insistence that they shouldn't. They would help her because at that moment Agnes was not saying what she felt; and they had an obligation as friends to step in and support her.

So The Newshounds made their plans to return later that night and hide in the library whilst Tyrell tried to find ghosts. But while they were aware that their plan may need some sort of tweaking; they were totally unaware that someone was observing them through the viewfinder of a pair of high powered binoculars.

And that someone was none other than Zachary Tyrell.

* * *

'We have a small problem,' Tyrell said into his cell phone.

'Can it be handled discretely?' said the voice from the receiver. 'We don't want any complications this early in the operation.'

'It is a minor irritant,' Tyrell said curtly. 'It won't change matters. The Clutterbuck woman is on board with it; I've managed to convince her to let me investigate this on my own.'

'Then you are to proceed as planned. Deal with your irritant swiftly, Tyrell; time is against us. We can't afford any delays. My publisher is waiting.'

'I understand, Professor,' Tyrell said, 'I'm as eager as you to see this through to its electrifying conclusion.' And with this clicked off his phone. At last, after years of fruitless investigations, he was near to

finding some answers; some *evidence*. His mother had once told him that, when the time was right, he would feel blessed.

And how blessed did Tyrrell feel at that moment? Words simply could not describe it. From out of nowhere his abilities had been confirmed after years of ridicule and self doubt. Tyrrell's mother had promised him that this day would come. His faith had been tested on so many occasions. How things had changed, and mother had assured him that *The Sight* was part of being a Tyrrell; a trait handed down through the generations.

But she'd also warned him not to be impatient. *The Sight* was like a shy animal hiding in the shadows; he had to wait for it to emerge; give it time to trust his nature. It couldn't be forced out into the open.

Patience may have played a part but it was the accident that had been the catalyst for his new found gift. He couldn't remember that much about the event, just sketchy images of tripping over a briefcase as he navigated a flight of steps at Birmingham New Street station; then the slow motion free fall before hitting his head on the balustrade; the force of it knocking him unconscious.

He was taken to hospital where doctors told him afterwards that he was a lucky man; he'd narrowly avoided a skull fracture. But whilst he didn't fracture his skull, he did bruise his brain requiring neuro-surgeons to drill into his head to relieve the pressure.

And when he came round from the anesthetic, Tyrrell began to hear the voice. At first it was quiet, the way a distant conversation drifts in through an open window on a warm summer's day. And even when it became more distinguishable, Tyrrell couldn't even make it out. If it hadn't been for his knowledge of *The Sight*, Tyrrell would have told the doctors that perhaps the blow to his head had sent him mad. But he kept it to himself and waited for some kind of sign.

It came three weeks after he'd been discharged from hospital; an email from a Professor who was writing a book based on people's experiences of the paranormal arrived inviting Tyrrell to call. The Professor asked if Tyrrell had ever heard voices talking in a strange dialect when he was on his own. Skeptical at first, Tyrrell had dialed the number contained in the email. By the end of his conversation with the man on the other end of the line Tyrrell was packing a suitcase and loading up his van. The Professor had told him that all the answers to the origins of the voice in his head lay in this sleepy town. And to further convince him the Professor told him a name.

That name was Agnes Clutterbuck. Tyrrell almost collapsed in shock. Not because the man on the phone believed him to be not mad but truly gifted, but because he'd heard the name Clutterbuck before. It was one of the few things he could make out from the fizzing garbled nonsense bouncing around his head.

The Professor commissioned Zachary Tyrrell to contact Agnes Clutterbuck, come to Dorsal Finn and investigate the library, where, he was assured, he would find the owner of the voice.

And a whole lot more.

From this point on Tyrrell stopped asking questions and listened to instructions; thinking nothing to the Professor's suggestion that he only gave Agnes basic information; enough to grant him freedom to perform his investigations in private. Once he'd accepted this, the rest was very easy.

Tyrrell moved from his hiding place, hunkered down behind a small, sandstone wall, and made for his car. Here he checked over his equipment; equipment that would not only tell him that which he already knew, but also designed for a quite remarkable purpose. A purpose that not even he would have believed a few years ago.

But faith is a wonderful thing; and despite many years without it Tyrrell was glad to keep its company once more. The Professor had made sure of that, supplying state of the art electro magnetic field meters; box-new temperature sensing equipment (infrared thermometers costing a small fortune) motion tracking devices and brass dowsing rods all to locate the presence of the wanton spirit now living in Tyrrell's head.

After securing this equipment, Tyrrell sat in his vehicle; a red van with Psychic Investigations stenciled on its panels in green gilt writing and planned just how he could stop a bunch of meddlesome kids from ruining the find of the century.

* * *

'Hello?' Maud said into the huge receiver.

'Hello, Maud, it's me,' Agnes said sounding far away.

'If ye're still checkin' that we're meetin' up later, the answers "of course we are",' Maud grinned, her gold tooth twinkling in the light from the parlor window.

'It is about later,' Agnes confirmed. 'I think we'll have to postpone.'

'By postponin' ye're talkin' of puttin' a memory on hold for another year, Agnes. You able to do that?'

There was a sustained pause on the line. Then Agnes was back, 'I don't want to; but I have no choice. I'm sorry Maud.'

'I'm not the one bein' wronged, Agnes,' Maud said without reproach. 'We've kept this promise for nigh 60 years. Ye must have a solid reason.'

'I do, Maud,' Agnes said gently. 'And I promise that I'll tell you all about it. Soon.'

'Ye can be tellin' me tomorrow, not-so-young-lady,' Maud giggled and Agnes laughed along with her but there was something missing from the moment.

'I'll see ye tomorrow, Ms Clutterbuck.'

'You too, Ms Postlethwaite,' Agnes said, and the receiver died with a loud click.

Maud stared at the stuffed effigies of two gulls sitting on the side board for several long moments, and finally dropped the chunky handset into the cradle.

'I guess I'll be havin' that brandy a little earlier than usual,' she said to the gulls.

They offered no comment.

* * *

Beatrice found a very pensive Aunt Maud sitting at the kitchen table, a mug of tea parked before her. Sitting opposite was Thomas, Beatrice's younger brother. To say that Thomas Beecham was strange was a little like saying that the Gobi desert is a bit warm.

As Beatrice sat down she could see that Thomas had adopted some of Maud's pensiveness. If she didn't know any better Beatrice would have said that her brother was sulking, big time.

About them Maureen Beecham was fussing around the kitchen, finding bowls to fill with sweets and chocolates in preparation for the waves of "Trick or Treaters" due later in the day.

'Are you okay, Aunt Maud?' Beatrice asked as she noticed that the wise old woman appeared lost in thought.

'Aye, me girl,' Maud assured her. 'I got me thinkin' head on that's all.'

'Maud has been stood up,' Maureen Beecham said, tipping a small mountain of toffees from a huge cellophane bag.

'Really? Were you going out with Albert later?' Beatrice said referring to Maud's beau, Albert Smythe; butler to the Pontefract Family, the town's patriarchs at the auspicious Bramwell Hall.

'Albert's workin' at The Hall tonight,' Maud said. 'No, me evenin' with Agnes has gone

belly up. But that lass will have good reason, make no mistake.'

It was now Beatrice's turn to appear thoughtful. Agnes had cancelled her night out with Maud; a night out that occurred every year. Yet Agnes had claimed that she wouldn't be going to stay at the library either. This wasn't like the librarian at all. Something was amiss; another layer to the mystery.

Before she could become too bogged down with developments, against her better judgment, Beatrice turned to Thomas.

'Two questions, Thomas,' she began, 'how come I've been in your company for 10 minutes and you're not irritating me, and why is your face orange?'

'I am not Thomas,' said Thomas. 'I am Pikachu; Pokemon supreme!'

'You're looking more like Pooh Bear,' Beatrice smirked. Then a thought landed in her head. 'What have you used to turn yourself orange, Thomas?'

'Pikachu,' Thomas corrected her.

'Is that turmeric?' she pressed.

'Yes it is,' Maureen Beecham said from the kitchen counter. 'Thomas snuck in here without anyone noticing.'

'Not *my* turmeric?' Beatrice said aghast.

'Aw, look on the bright side,' Maud said, 'Turmeric's good for the skin. I read that in *Chinwag Magazine* last month.'

'That was my turmeric and cost me money!' Beatrice protested.

'The best beauty products always do,' Maud chuckled; giving Beatrice a playful wink.

'That's not helping,' Beatrice said churlishly. Then rounded on her little brother. 'You need to get out more; go and get some friends who aren't -' she fought to find the word, 'fictitious!'

'That might be a very good idea,' Maureen Beecham said. There was something in her mother's tone that began ringing alarm bells in Beatrice's head.

'What do you mean, mum?' Beatrice said, trying to ignore the sickening feeling in her stomach.

'What would you say to Thomas tagging along with The Newshounds for a while?' Maureen Beecham asked cheerily.

'I'd say that was a worse idea than microwave popcorn.'

'I like microwave popcorn,' Thomas muttered.

'*You* would,' hissed Beatrice.

'It would give Thomas a little direction for a while,' her mother said regardless, and the brightness had disappeared from her voice; telling Beatrice that a decision had been made and it was final.

'What are yer thoughts on that then, young Pikachu?' Maud grinned.

'The arrangement may clash with an important tournament,' Thomas said earnestly. 'I shall have to consult with my Pokemon master.'

'Kill me now,' Beatrice groaned.

* * *

'I think it's cool you're here, my man,' Elmo smiled.

They were all sitting around a table at Eccleston's Eaterie and Tea Shoppe; Beatrice glaring off out of the window as her brother settled down to a cream tea. Maureen Beecham had managed to buff his face down to a light yellow.

'It's a temporary arrangement,' Beatrice assured everyone; especially Thomas who was tucking into a cream scone. 'Just while mum sorts something out. Sea scouts; Salvation Army; admission to an asylum; who knows?'

'Give the little guy a break, Bea,' Lucas smirked. 'It's good to have you girls outnumbered.'

'We may be outnumbered,' Patience said haughtily, 'but we still conquer by sheer intellect alone.'

'I fear their insecurities have made them delusional,' Elmo said to his scone.

'So what's the score with Agnes and Maud?' Lucas asked.

'What do you mean?' Beatrice replied.

'This annual meeting of theirs; what's it all about?'

'I don't know. But it seems important,' Beatrice said. 'She didn't say anything but I think Maud is upset that it's not happening tonight.'

'Same night every year?' Patience queried.

Beatrice nodded.

'Sounds like something adults do to celebrate something,' Thomas said to no-one in particular.

'Stow it, Thomas,' Beatrice snapped. 'You're here only because mum said that you had to be. It doesn't mean anyone has any interest in your opinions.'

'Hang on a second, Bea,' Lucas said to her surprise and dismay. 'I think Beecham Junior, may have a point.'

'Go on,' Beatrice said through tight, white lips.

'Tom said that Maud and Agnes met as though they were celebrating something?'

'Like an anniversary celebration?' Patience offered.

'Maybe. But what if it's not a celebration. What if they're meeting up to remember an event or something?' He paused for a long moment. 'Or *someone*?'

'A mark of respect?' Beatrice whispered. 'That would explain why Maud was quiet today. Maybe it was something that she needs to do.'

'But if Agnes cancelled the meeting, what she plans to do instead must be even more important.' Patience appeared to speak for all of them since each Newshound nodded at her observation.

'What's the matter, Lucas?' Beatrice said in concern. Lucas's face appeared perplexed; as though a less than savory thought had suddenly crept into his mind.

'I think Agnes doesn't want us there tonight because she's planning on being there herself,' he answered unerringly.

'But she told Mr. Tyrrell that she'd leave him in peace,' Beatrice said.

But that wasn't really accurate, was it? It was Tyrrell who asked if he could have total privacy. And it was only then that Agnes Clutterbuck had replied that she would leave him in peace. Thinking about it now, Beatrice could also see that the statement didn't exclude Agnes from actually being in the library.

'I think you're right,' Beatrice said to Lucas. 'I think she plans to be there without Tyrrell knowing it.'

'But why would she want to do that?' Patience asked baffled by it all.

'I think this may hold an answer,' Lucas said pulling the wad of paper from his coat pocket.

'What are they?' Patience asked.

'This is called paper,' Lucas said slowly.

'You're a riot, Lucas,' Patience said dead-pan. 'What's it for and don't say 'to write on' or I may beat you to death with my hair brush.'

'Okay, I'll show you. Anyone got a pencil?' Lucas scanned the table.

'I may have one on my utility belt,' Thomas said lifting his wind-cheater to reveal a pack infested leather strap with a Batman emblem for a buckle.'

'You never said you had a *Deluxe Batman Utility Belt*, Tom!' Elmo said agog.

'Isn't that the coolest thing, ever?'

'Thanks, Elmo,' Thomas said bristling with pride. Beatrice and Patience cast their eyes skywards.

Thomas opened a pack and produced a HB pencil and handed it to Lucas, who, by this time, had flattened the blank sheets of paper on the table.

'So what are you looking for?' Thomas asked. 'Secret writing?'

'Something like that,' Lucas said holding the pencil flat and gently rubbing over the vellum sheet.

'Agnes was writing something on this pad then tore the top sheet off and shoved it in her pocket,' Lucas explained. 'If she pressed hard enough, we might get an imprint in the carbon.'

And as he rubbed they all huddled in to see if Agnes had inadvertently betrayed herself.

'Oh look,' Beatrice said in awe. 'There *is* something!'

Showing through the smudged scribble were three names. One was unfamiliar, Klaus; but then they saw Agnes' name float into view like a grey specter. And finally there was a name that made Beatrice screw up her face in bewilderment.

It was Maud's name.

'So who is Klaus; and why are Agnes' and Maud's names on here?'

No-one had any answer for that one.

And if anyone were planning to respond, the moment was interrupted by shop proprietor Ernie 'Eccles Cake' Eccleston; a good man with a poor memory.

'Ah, how are we all?' Ernie said jovially as he cleared away surplus crockery. His deep set eyes fell on Thomas Beecham.

'Ah, it's Jamie Price, isn't it? I know your mother, Sandra. Feet like a duck, am I right?'

'I'm not Jamie Price,' Thomas said softly. 'I am Pikachu.'

'Of course!' said Ernie and slapped his forehead as if trying to atone for his stupidity. 'I know your sister, Debbie, face like a Collie. Does she still shave?'

With this Ernie Eccleston made off towards the kitchen, his arms stacked with redundant plates.

'And you call me weird?' Thomas grumbled to his sister.

'It's impossible to think here,' Lucas said. 'Let's go to the bluff.'

They all agreed.

* * *

The Newshounds saw Mr. Tyrrell's red van as they peddled their way along the promenade. It was Elmo who espied it first, the large lettering so gaudy he felt the need to pass comment.

'Nothing as subtle as vomit green on red paneling,' he chuckled. 'It tends to catch the eye and turn the stomach with ease!'

'That's the ghost hunters van,' Beatrice said slowing as they neared. It was a good move because just as Beatrice and the others pulled out to give it a wide berth, the driver door flew open almost knocking Beatrice and Patience flying. Instead, the two were able to break sharply.

'Oh, I'm terribly sorry, ladies,' Tyrrell said getting out of the van. They could all see that he wasn't sorry at all. His thin lips were pursed and sported his thin pencil moustache. 'I guess that is a fine example as to how accidents can happen at any time; when we least expect them.'

'That wasn't an accident, death breath,' Thomas snapped. 'May the mighty Megatron stamp the life out of thee!'

'Easy, there Tom,' Lucas said putting a hand on the boy's shoulder.

'Children,' Tyrrell's smile was as unpleasant as a scowl. 'Such active imaginations. I shall let your impertinence go this time, young man.'

Thomas lifted a finger and began drawing mystical signs in the air until Lucas yanked his arm down. 'You're hexed, vile imp,' Thomas snarled. 'May all your hair fall out and you go blind as a moldy mole.'

At this, Tyrrell turned very red and got back into his car. He pulled down the window, his small beady eyes regarding them all with disdain.

'You shouldn't mock the occult, children,' he said pointedly. 'There are things that exist beyond your knowledge; beyond your *comprehension*. This is your only warning. Stay away from my investigations; or suffer the consequences.'

With that Tyrrell fired up the ignition and the engine screamed into life. He pulled away from them, the tires peeling out and leaving twin black streaks on the cobblestones and a blue-grey mist in the air.

'Now there's a man with anger issues,' Elmo said flatly.

'No doubt about it,' Lucas concurred.

'One thing is for sure,' Beatrice said, 'there's no way we can leave Agnes on her own with our angry little friend.'

'So we have to be there, we got that,' Patience said not impressed by any of it. 'But how are we going to get in un-noticed; and without upsetting Agnes?'

'I can try to resolve one of those issues,' Beatrice said.

'How?' Lucas quizzed.

'I need to see a lady about a jotter pad.'

They all looked at her, bemused.

* * *

Aunt Maud decided to forget the tea and went for a big glass of brandy instead. She was back in the room with the old photo; back in the past, where things were often made simple by time and a dulled memory. But the photograph in her wizened hands brought her thoughts into sharp relief. She traced a trim finger nail over the contours of the man frozen in time.

'I'm sorry, dear friend,' Maud whispered, 'but it's just me tonight. 'fraid our Agnes couldn't make it.' She smiled though her eyes were brimmed with tears. 'She has her reasons, maybe we'll learn about 'em on the morrow.'

'Who is he, Aunt Maud?' Beatrice said the words as quietly as she could but Maud still jumped a little; almost knocking the glass of brandy across the desk.

'Giddy goodness, me girl!' the woman said turning to face the doorway. 'Ye nearly scared me to death!'

'Sorry to disturb you, Aunt Maud,' Beatrice said with sincerity. 'May I come in for a few minutes?'

'Aye, me girl,' Maud sighed. 'I'm not used to bein' on me lonesome these days.'

Beatrice moved into the room, closing the door behind her. As with many of rooms in Maud's cottage, this was sparsely furnished; a bureau, two chairs and an anatomical skeleton grinning in the corner. If any of the many rooms in Crab Mill Cottage had a purpose Maud kept it to herself.

Beatrice sat next to Maud and looked at the photograph on the desk.

'He seems like a nice person,' Beatrice commented carefully. 'He has a kind face.'

'As handsome on the inside as on the outside, he was,' Maud said softly.

'He looks hurt,' Beatrice said observing the bandages on his head and right arm. 'What happened to him?'

'*Casualty of War*, that's what the military would say,' Maud said.

'So who was he?' Beatrice replied as tactfully as she could.

'His name was Klaus Hessel.' Maud let out a long sigh, as though the name brought with it good and bad things.

'Oh,' said Beatrice giving Maud time to work through her feelings.

'Ye remember when ye first moved to Dorsal Finn? The night I told ye about when I was sent to stay here durin' the Second World War?' Maud asked.

Beatrice nodded. She remembered it vividly; Maud using her experiences to help Beatrice adjust with the upheaval of moving to a new town; a new life. It all seemed such a long time ago now.

'Well,' Maud continued wistfully, 'in the spring of 1942 Agnes and me, we were soap box racin' up on the bluff; when we saw a German bomber low in the sky, smoke and flames spewin' everywhere.'

'So what happened?'

'The plane came down and hit Hill Crest farm; the buildin' and plane went up like a rocket.'

Beatrice had heard this story before. Agnes had told it to them when they were on the trail of *The Wrath* last summer. But Agnes had never said that she'd watched it happen.

'Well if that weren't enough drama for two young girls, we then saw a parachute driftin' down over the bluff. So we trailed it and found Klaus unconscious.' Maud paused to take a sip of her brandy. Then she pressed on.

'So we goes to him and he's pretty bashed up; arm busted and a big gash in his head. Yet he was alive and that may have been a good thing in the grand scheme, but in a time of war that put him in even more danger.'

Beatrice was now drawn into the story; fascinated by the events of many years ago and how they had potential to inform what was happening at that very moment.

'So what did you do?'

'We acted on impulse, that's what we did,' Maud said. 'We didn't see a German pilot - the enemy - we saw a man in pain and knew no one would help him unless we did. So we dragged him into the disused tin mines up at Monument Point and tended to him for two months.'

'Two months?' Beatrice said incredulously. 'And no one suspected?'

'Ha!' Maud laughed. 'Most adults think kids are invisible; it was no different back then. We came and went; we had a Girl Guides' *First Aid Merit Badge* between us and we did our best. And in those two months we got to know Klaus Hessel not as the enemy, but as a man who was far from his family.'

'He spoke English?'

'He did, not brilliant but better than our German, that's for sure, and he told about his life on his farm in Stuttgart and his wife Greta and their daughter Derika; about how he missed them so.'

'So what happened?'

'We decided to help him get back home,' Maud said tapping the rim of the brandy glass with a finger tip. 'We stole a row boat from the bay and moored it on the beach. On the night he left Klaus gave us his thanks and a hug, and a promise that after the war was done he would come back and introduce us to his wife and daughter. That was the last we ever saw of him.'

Beatrice saw a single tear tumble down Maud's cheek and she reached out and placed her palm gently over the woman's hand.

'He never made it home,' Maud whispered. 'A motor torpedo boat shot up the scull and Klaus was killed. We didn't know this at the time, of course. We read it in the paper later that same week. They called him a spy. But to us he was only ever a friend.'

'So this is how you and Agnes remember him each year?' Beatrice asked.

'Aye,' Maud confirmed after dabbing at her eyes with the sleeve of her deep red cardigan. 'It was destined to be our secret; a secret we couldn't tell at the time; then after the war we kept it that way. Sort of made it special. Klaus deserved that at least.'

It hurt Beatrice to see Maud upset. The woman had been her strength when she's first moved to Dorsal Finn and Maud had been there on several terrifying occasions. Beatrice sat quietly, allowing Maud to embrace her past, no matter how painful it was for her to watch.

'I guess Agnes has a pretty good reason for bowin' out tonight,' Maud said eventually.

'I guess,' Beatrice evaded.

'So ye goin' to tell me what it is now or later?' Maud asked catching Beatrice spectacularly off guard.

'I'm sorry?' Beatrice replied to buy herself some time. She could feel her cheeks heating up.

'We're both courtin' secrets tonight, me girl,' Maud said. 'But mine's now dancin' in the moonlight, so when ye lettin' yours out to play?'

As usual Beatrice had been transparent under her wise friend's eyes. She nodded and told Maud what had been happening over the past few hours; Mr. Tyrrell, Agnes' apparent need to be there when he hunted ghosts, his reluctance to allow that to happen. And Agnes' refusal of help.

'So what's yer plan?' Maud asked.

'Plan?'

'The Newshounds always have a plan,' Maud smiled. A mischievous twinkle set up camp in her eyes.

'I guess you're right,' Beatrice conceded. 'Coming along?'

'Is Mayor Codd a bumbling buffoon in the body of an idiot?' Maud queried.

'I suspect that's a yes, then,' Beatrice smiled.

* * *

Like many towns, Dorsal Finn has many high points in its social calendar. Where Dorsal Finn differs is that many of the events sanctioned by the Amity Committee are quite probably born out of varying degrees of madness.

Take the Fearsome Feast for example; a curious event that occurs every year at Bramwell Hall, home of the prestigious Pontefract family, and consisting of an evening in which townsfolk are invited to create and present dishes that are totally inedible to master food taster Vladimir Karloff; a man whose ability to eat absolutely anything has only been beaten once. That was by one Beatrice Beecham who earned herself not only the grand prize of a stay at Bramwell Hall but the begrudging respect of Karloff himself.

The Fete of Fate is another such event; this time on a grander scale; the sports field at Dorsal Finn High School paying host to over eighty tents, each crammed with clairvoyants, spiritualists, wizards, witches and warlocks, palmist and tarot readers. The event had ended with a rocket being sent into the night sky packed with so much explosive several hundred windows were blown out, leaving three thousand people with ringing in their ears and a budgie that dropped dead from shock.

So with this in mind, the decision to have a charity Hallowe'en event known as The Pumpkin Bumpin' Competition came as little surprise to Beatrice when her father read the announcement in the Dorsal Finn Herald.

'And the point of this is what, exactly?' George Beecham said to Maud.

'A bit of fun, I guess,' Maud suggested. 'You rememberin' that word, George?'

'You should write these down Maud,' George Beecham smiled. 'It would be a shame to forget them.'

'You're a razor, George,' Maud chuckled. 'Besides, it's for a good cause. It raises money for Farmer Palmer.'

'Farmer Palmer who *grows* the pumpkins?' Beatrice asked.

'The very same,' Maud replied.

'So let's get this right,' Mr. Beecham checked. 'Farmer Palmer grows pumpkins for an event that makes money for him to grow pumpkins?'

'Yep,' confirmed Maud.

'There may be a point in there that I'm totally missing,' Mr. Beecham said shaking his head.

'What do the competitors have to do, Aunt Maud?' Thomas asked.

'Well,' Maud said with glee, 'ye know how we play conkers? Well in Pumpkin Bumpin' each young un takes a turns tryin' to crack each others pumpkin.'

'What? On a bootlace?' George said bemused.

'Don't be daft, George,' Maud said as if the whole thing was very serious, 'the person hollows out a pumpkin and puts it over their head first.'

'You mean they butt each other?' Beatrice said aghast.

'It's quite safe if yer do it right,' Maud assured her.

'Only here, would head butting each other with a pumpkin be considered safe,' said Mr. Beecham shaking his head in disbelief. 'What's next, panther wrestling?'

'I'd love to have a go at Pumpkin Bumpin',' Thomas said.

'Strange,' said Beatrice, 'I'd love you to have a go at Pumpkin Bumpin' too.'

'Don't encourage him, Beatrice,' her father warned.

'Killjoy,' she muttered.

* * *

In room twenty-two of Tardebigge's Bed and Breakfast, Mr. Tyrrell was perched on the edge of a very comfortable bed; and busy scrutinizing the screen of an expensive laptop. It was as he was leaning forward to get a better look at the photograph he'd downloaded; that his petite cell phone shuddered in his pocket.

He placed the laptop onto the bed and fished out his phone.

'Hello?'

'Have you sorted out your problem?' The voice at the other end of the line was tiny but commanded great presence.

'I suspect there could be complications,' Tyrrell said trying to mask his nervousness.

'Can I remind you of your brief? You are, of course, being paid.'

'I know what's expected of me,' said Tyrrell suddenly affronted by the tone of the conversation. 'And I am providing a service for me fee. I make no apology for that. My *powers* should be acknowledged. I was told that I'd have to deter a bunch of nosy kids.'

The silence that followed was protracted, but Tyrrell could hear soft breathing from the ear piece. Then the commanding voice was back.

'Provide your service, Mr. Tyrrell,' it said. 'I shall take on the handling of 'the problem'.'

'I work alone,' Tyrrell protested.

'And you shall continue to do so,' the voice said. 'I have more than enough allies to bring this meddling to an end.' Before Tyrrell could comment the phone disconnected with a small click.

* * *

Gideon Codd, Dorsal Finn's long and self serving mayor is a man of mixed loyalties. Since first coming to the lofty position over thirty years ago, he has tried to balance his social and political duties against that of making sure he gets his greedy hands on anything that he can.

This has never been easy, since more often than not meddling townsfolk tended to interject when his conscience didn't. And there was no greater culprit than Maud Postlethwaite and that infernal pseudo-relative, Beatrice Beecham.

So when he was invited to discuss some important matter concerning Beatrice Beecham's most recent shenanigans, Mayor Codd was canceling the last of the day's appointments in his diary and jumping in his car within ten minutes of putting down the phone.

His rendezvous point was somewhat unusual; he was hoping for a spot of dinner at Ernie Eccleston's, or at least a latte at Molly Tardebigge's. But to his surprise the man on the phone suggested that they meet at the museum plaza. As disappointing as this was Codd hurried to the venue; eager to hear anything that would offer some leverage against his consistently irksome critic.

As he crossed the plaza, Codd made out a lone figure loitering between two large columns that flanked the entrance. At his approach the man standing in shadow lifted an arm signaling for Codd to stop.

The Mayor faltered for a few steps before pulling up.

'That's close enough, Mayor,' the figure said. 'Discretion is an ally of mine.'

'As you wish,' said Codd slightly bemused by such action. 'Though one wonders why a simple phone call wouldn't have sufficed if we are not to meet face to face.'

'It is for the best that our meeting remains clandestine for both parties. This will make things easier in times to come.'

'Easier?' Codd said.

'Plausible deniability,' the man said. 'If you do not see me then you can never claim to have met me.'

'Quite,' Codd replied, still not up to speed with the logic of it all. Then he realised, this man *knew* him. And if he really put his mind to it, Gideon Codd would soon come to realize that *he* also knew the man languishing in the dark pools of shadow. But that was not for here; not for now.

'You said that you have information,' Codd coaxed.

'About the Beecham girl,' the man said. 'Yes, I do believe that she is being quite the maverick.'

'Always,' Codd agreed. 'So how can I help with that?'

'It would appear that the little scamp has been up to no good over at the library,' the shadows flickered as the man changed position. 'I feel that once again she is prying into the heritage of this town. I feel that a warning may be in order.'

'Oh my,' said Codd. 'She really is a troublesome soul, that one. Runs in the family of course.'

'I thought that such news would be of interest to you,' the figure said. 'And I cannot overly stress just how deep she is digging into events so close to all of our hearts.'

'I shall have a word with her parents straight away,' Codd said staunchly. 'Maybe they can rein her in somewhat.'

'An evening with her out of the equation will be enough to hamper her meddlesome ways; and that of her friends.'

'Perhaps you could tell me what you know and I will start the ball rolling?'

And the man did tell Gideon Codd information that was a damning as it was false, and being a man of little scruple, the mayor never questioned the truth of what he was being told; he merely absorbed the information whilst at the same time recalling the home telephone numbers of Beatrice and the rest of her friends.

From his covert spot at the museum entrance the man - who Gideon Codd would come to know *very* well - nodded in satisfaction. Yes, a spanner was in the works for Beatrice and The Newshounds; for this evening at least. And this evening was all Mr. Tyrrell was going to need to do that for which the man in the shadows had planned and paid handsomely.

Though in truth, it was unlikely that after tonight Mr. Tyrrell would be in any condition to spend his hard earned money.

* * *

'This is just complete hogwash,' Maud said to George and Maureen Beecham.

What Maud Postlethwaite considered 'complete hogwash' was the allegations that a stern, yet very young looking Police Constable had just leveled at Beatrice and The Newshounds.

'That may well be your opinion, Miss Postlethwaite,' the Policeman said, 'but I have it under good authority that Miss Beecham and her friends were seen engaged in a wanton act of vandalism.'

Beatrice was watching the event unfolding in the parlor of Crab Mill terrace. She had been initially shocked and then angry when the policeman had turned up suggesting that The Newshounds were responsible for defacing the property of Mr. Tyrrell. The would be ghost hunter reported that the kids had scratched his van and broken the back window as he'd driven away.

'We know our daughter, officer,' George Beecham said. 'Beatrice would never be involved in such a thing.'

'And your son, Mr. Beecham?' The officer said bluntly. 'Would he be involved in such a thing?'

'No he would not,' George Beecham said firmly.

'Well, Mr. Tyrrell has a witness to the event who suggests that everyone was involved; and an enforced curfew for all alleged parties has been supported by Mayor Codd.'

'I should've known that weasel was involved in this nonsense,' Maud spat. 'What's Tyrrell payin' him, I wonder.'

'I shall pretend I didn't hear that slanderous comment, Miss Postlethwaite,' the young officer said. 'I would ask instead that you keep your children home this evening. I will have to take them in if they are out and about from this point on. Mr. Tyrrell has kindly offered to drop all charges as long as he doesn't see these youngsters before the end of the night. I would be grateful of that.'

The officer turned and left. Beatrice looked at her parents who met her gaze with faces blanched with confusion.

'We never did that to the guy's van,' Beatrice said flatly. 'You believe that, don't you?'

'Of course,' said her mother. 'But it begs the question why someone would say that you did?'

'I don't know,' Beatrice said, but this was where she began to bend the truth a little. Mr. Tyrrell had done it to keep them away this evening. Keep them away so that he could have the library to himself.

But why? Was Tyrrell so passionate about his craft that he'd stop at nothing to make sure nothing got in the way of an investigation? Even if it meant framing a bunch of kids? There were no answers here in the

parlor and any hope of finding out had now been dashed. She turned to Maud for any kind of inspiration but realised that her wise ally was no longer in the room.

Instinctively Beatrice knew that Maud had made some decisions as the officer recounted the allegations. If The Newshounds weren't in a position to help Agnes Clutterbuck, then it seemed her best and oldest friend planned to instead.

* * *

Aunt Maud found Agnes at the promenade sitting on a bench facing the sea; where the waves were edged in red fire as the bloated sun sank beneath the horizon.

Here and there townsfolk were beginning their Hallowe'en preparations. Jack O' Lanterns were appearing on doorsteps and, in cottage windows; plastic specters, goblins and ghouls, peered out from a haze of cotton candy cobwebs.

'What kind of old duffer enjoys sittin' out in this chill, Agnes Clutterbuck?' Maud chuckled as she approached.

'Our kind of old duffer, Maud Postlethwaite,' Agnes smiled; but it was watery and tinged with sadness. 'And we're likely targets for Trick or Treaters out here. Got any sweets?'

'No one Humbug,' Maud said. 'And me ownin' a sweet shop too!'

'Then I guess we're going to get covered in flour at some point,' Agnes said with a rueful smile. 'Ah, to be young again, eh?'

'Ye rememberin' our Klaus in yer own way, Agnes?' Maud asked sitting down next to her friend. 'Sort of goin' solo, eh?'

'Something like that,' Agnes replied. 'I never thought that I would consider such a thing.'

'Time is the worst kind of trickster; ye never know it's worked its magic 'til it's too late.'

The waves pounding the distant hem of Monument Point filled in the silence that followed Maud's adage. Agnes merely bobbed her head in token agreement.

'So are ye goin' to tell an old friend what's stirrin' the hornet's nest this evenin'?' Maud cajoled. 'It isn't like the town librarian to turn Ghost buster for no reason.'

'I guess folk have been talking,' Agnes said unsurprised.

'Happen they might've,' Maud conceded. 'But it isn't the gossip and tittle-tattle of Edna Duffy and Dorothy Arnold we're talkin' here. Its people who care about what happens to ye, that's all.'

'I know that, Maud,' Agnes assured her gently. 'There's nothing but good in those youngsters.'

'Well tell that to the mischievous little imp that's swannin' around yer library this evenin,' Maud said bitterly before explaining what the police officer had reported.

'Oh that's terrible!' Agnes said exasperated. 'I will have a word with him when he's done his -' she stopped abruptly as though her thoughts had hit some impermeable wall.

'Ye were sayin?'

Maud prompted. Agnes appeared hesitant and Maud threw her arms in the air in frustration. 'Giddy goodness, Agnes! Are ye goin' to flap them lips of yers or am I goin' for twenty questions?'

Agnes gave out a huge sigh; the kind of sigh that people use when they accept the worst. She pulled her eyes away from the darkening horizon and focused instead on Maud.

'It's this old thing,' Agnes said at last; tapping her hearing aid. 'It's playing up something rotten at the moment. Maybe it's the time of year; maybe it's just me being silly, fussing over the memory of it all.'

'Memory?' Maud queried.

'Yes Maud,' Agnes concurred. 'Memories of Klaus.'

'And what about Klaus?' Maud said with some trepidation.

'He's back, Maud,' Agnes whispered. 'I can hear him talking.'

'Where?' Maud asked. 'In the library?'

Agnes nodded. 'Late at night mostly but sometimes during the day.'

'How can ye be sure?' Maud said after chewing things over for a while. 'Maybe ye're pickin' up German tankers moored in open water; or radio Berlin or somethin?'

Agnes smiled wistfully and put a hand on Maud's arm.

'Because he talks about *us*, Maud,' she said in tentative awe. 'He says our *names*.'

'Giddy goodness, Agnes,' Maud said breathlessly. 'Are ye tryin' to give me the Hallowe'en heebie jeebies or what?'

'Its true,' Agnes said. 'And I'm not the only one who has been sensing it.'

'Ye talkin' of that Tyrrell fella?' Maud said, her shock morphing into disapproval. 'Well he's wrong about Beatrice and The Newshounds that's for sure. So I'm not goin' to be shocked if he's wrong about this, as well. Where did ye find him?'

'He found me,' Agnes admitted. 'Called me out of the blue and said he'd heard my name spoken by Klaus Hessel; did that name mean anything to me?'

'What did ye tell him?'

'That's my point, Maud. I didn't have to tell him anything, he knew. He talked of an echo from the past. Klaus Hessel talking in his head over and over. So Tyrrell asked to see me and I agreed.'

'I can understand ye wantin' to talk to the fella,' Maud said. 'But what made ye invite him to Dorsal Finn? To the library?'

'Tyrrell said that Klaus spoke of you too Maud, that's when I invited him.'

'And when were ye goin' to mention this little saga to old Maud?'

'After tonight,' Agnes said. 'After Tyrrell had completed a thorough investigation.'

'Well the word of a stranger isn't enough for me, Agnes,' Maud said bluntly. 'These old eyes of mine aren't as good as they were but they're goin' to have to see somethin' more than a report from a man I wouldn't know from Adam.'

'Then I guess you'd better come with me,' Agnes said, reintroducing her sigh to the evening.

'I plan to, not-so-young-lady,' Maud smiled. 'We last saw Klaus Hessel gettin' in a scull sixty-two years ago. If he's about to make a come back after all these years, Edna Duffy and Dorothy Arnold wouldn't keep me away.'

* * *

In the dusty gloom of Dorsal Finn library, Zachary Tyrrell was hard at work. He tried to balance personal feelings of excitement and awe with the kind of professionalism and focus required to see the job done, without any room for error.

Flitting between banks of equipment provided by his unknown sponsor, Tyrrell was so consumed by the task at hand that he not once thought of adding a few more questions to his list. Questions like: who was the strange and mysterious Professor who had landed in his life; or what the Professor was getting out of all this other than another chapter for his book?

As it was, the ghost hunter asked none of these very pertinent questions. Instead he used the brass, L-shaped dowsers; he plugged in the expensive looking Ion detection device, he focused on the questions already imbued in his brain. He triangulated the devices around one specific point; a rectangular panel of faded wood recessed into the ceiling. Finding the panel was easy enough, somehow the Professor knew of its whereabouts, there were schematics of the library with the equipment when it arrived. And with these schematics: detailed directions of how to

locate the panel though the Professor had written 'The Portal' next to it on the plans, and instructions as to how to triangulate the equipment.

Once it was all arranged as per specification, Tyrrell executed the last of his instructions. He sat underneath the wooden panel and stared up at it, focusing all his will and energy upon it until his eyes ached in their sockets.

And because he was consumed by this task, he was totally oblivious to the fact that Agnes and Maud had snuck into the library via the delivery entrance and were at that moment encamped behind the reception counter, watching his every move with bemused but keen interest.

* * *

'We can't just sit here,' Beatrice said. She was in a terrible state of hopelessness; so bad in fact she was airing her thoughts to her weirdo brother.

Sitting opposite Thomas watched Beatrice's dismay with interest. It wasn't often that the strange and alien world of his sister clashed with his world of, well, *strangeness and aliens* and the occasional goblin or super hero. But tonight he was party to it and found it all fascinating.

'Maybe we should consult with the Council of Elves?' he offered after giving it some thought.

'If you're going to be stupid and weird you can just button it,' Beatrice snapped.

'You're right, of course,' Thomas said with enough sincerity to appease his sister.

'Thank you,' she said.

'This is far too big for the Council of Elves,' Thomas said to himself. 'I think the Jedi Council would be more appropriate.'

Beatrice was about to explode when her cell phone began to ring, the shrill buoyant melody from the *Jamie's Kitchen* TV show. Beatrice snatched the phone from her bedside table and rammed it to her ear.

'Hi Lucas,' she said, her voice tight.

'You okay, Bea?' Lucas asked with some concern. 'You sound a little -' he searched for a word.

'Demented by my little brother who wants to take me down with him into the depths of madness?' she offered.

'I was going to say 'annoyed' but I guess you've gone for the fine detail.'

'What are we going to do?' Beatrice gushed. 'Agnes is going to hide in the library with a man who's capable of lying big time to get what he

wants. Who knows what he's capable of? And now Maud is AWOL and it's surefire she's gone to find Agnes.'

'I guess we'd better do something?' Lucas suggested.

'Like what?' Beatrice asked. 'We're on curfew, and it'll be our parents who'll get into trouble if we break it.'

'Then we better make sure we're not caught then, eh?' Lucas said impishly. 'Meet you at the library in ten minutes.'

Before she could protest, the phone went dead in her hand.

Beatrice sat on the bed, her eyes and mouth wide in a burlesque image of shock. Lucas had put her on the spot and now she had to think of something fast. And although she had reprimanded her brother earlier for suggesting they pull together a council of imaginary minds as a means to rectify the fix they were in, this is exactly what she did without even blinking.

* * *

'I've got a bit of a problem,' she said over the sizzle of a rib-eye steak hitting a pan on the stove.

Elsewhere, Gordon Ramsay was giving his colleagues lectures on the origins of certain swear words and their place in modern culture. Worryingly Mario Batali was taking notes.

As he pan fried the steak Jamie gave Beatrice a whimsical smile,

'I love cooking, me,' he said jauntily.

'I know that, Jamie,' Beatrice said patiently. 'You inspire me.'

'But sometimes I can lose focus,' he admitted.

'I can't believe that,' said Beatrice looking as though she couldn't believe it.

'It's true,' Jamie pressed on. 'And sometimes the best thing to do when you're trying to focus on something that's not working is to ignore it for a while.'

'Ignore it?' Beatrice said helplessly.

'Not ignore it in a way where you're not thinking about it,' Jamie clarified. 'It's always there but at the back of your mind; waiting for you to look upon it with fresh eyes.'

'So what do you do?' Beatrice queried.

'I play drums in a band,' Jamie said.

'I know that,' Beatrice said with some impatience. 'But what's that got to do with ignoring a problem so that you can see it differently?'

'I need to create a place for it to happen,' Jamie chuckled as he flipped the steak onto a plate. 'And playing drums gives me what I need to create a -'

'Distraction?' Beatrice said with conviction.

'Lovely!' Jamie grinned.

* * *

Beatrice looked at her brother.

Thomas gazed back.

'Thomas,' Beatrice said carefully. 'I need you to undertake a mission of vital importance. I want you to go downstairs and engage the Council of Elders for a few hours and moot the complexities of All Hallows Eve and the impact of a potential goblin uprising. You got that?'

Thomas looked at her for a few seconds then said, 'You mean go and keep mum and dad occupied while you go to the library with Lucas, Bea?'

'Yes,' said Beatrice with a sigh. 'That as well.'

* * *

Tyrrell held the brass dowsing rods in his hands. The air in the library had vibrancy to it; he could feel the static prickling the hairs on his arms and neck.

The atmosphere had changed without warning. Tyrrell felt as though he was back at school, sitting cross legged on the floor waiting for assembly to begin. First of all there was a kind a tranquility born from quiet expectation, now the very air crackled with electricity.

The dowsing rods began to twitch, imperceptible to the eye but sending a numbing buzz through his palms and fingers and suddenly the voice was back; loud and demanding in his brain. It was German, he knew this now, but the words remained garbled and distorted. Static fizzed, screeching and metallic, strangling words, rendering them incomprehensible.

A book case at the far end of the reading room suddenly discharged the contents of its shelves into the air, a block of seventy or so tomes taking flight, their pages shivering frenetically in the air like the multiple wings of a trapped flock of gulls. Tyrrell ducked as an encyclopedia whizzed past him and smashed into a wall light behind him, sending shards of glass in all directions.

For a moment panic and terror threatened to drag him out into the quiet streets but he fought against it; telling himself that this was part of embracing *The Sight*. He recognised poltergeist activity when he saw it, but this was so intense, it had to be a precursor to bigger things. Maybe it was the time of year; maybe it was his presence. It didn't really matter, not now the air was charged and clogged with paper and bindings and dust jackets.

A streak of lightning arced from the panel above his head causing him to flinch. Then came another that sent a flickering vein into a rotor book stand, spinning it and frying it simultaneously and throwing intense sparks of electricity and ignited paper across the room.

Tyrrell then saw the ooze rolling down the walls; a grey green slime, thick and sluggish like the worlds biggest, most productive boogey.

'Ectoplasm,' Tyrrell whispered awestruck. 'This is incredible! I must get a sample.'

But just as Tyrrell reached into his rucksack for a Petri dish, a terrible din filled the library; a roaring rushing sound that seemed to shiver the air about him. Tyrrell looked up towards the wooden panel just as a lightning bolt of blue brilliance streaked from the ceiling and ploughed into his forehead.

He opened his mouth to shout his surprise but instead of emitting sound his lips parted and lightning poured from it, a juddering zigzag of intense light cutting through the dark air and slamming into a nearby wall, leaving an incandescent orb of light the size of a football.

It was as the brickwork began to tremble and collapse that Maud Postlethwaite emerged from behind the counter dragging a bewildered Agnes Clutterbuck with her.

'Here's me thinkin' Bonfire Night was next week,' Maud mumbled shortly before the football shaped orb exploded, ripping the very air in two.

* * *

'That's not a good sign,' Elmo said at the bottom of the library steps as The Newshounds watched the eerie lights flickering through the library windows.

'Maybe we should come back later when there's less chance of being killed?' Patience suggested.

'Come on guys,' Lucas said in quiet awe. 'Look at what's happening. It's Hallowe'en and we're privy to a full on ghost busting investigation. How cool is that?'

'Is it me or are you missing the point here?' Patience asked.

'Point?' Lucas said not taking his eyes from the library where the pulsating lights were increasing their intensity.

'Yes, the point I made about not being killed?'

'We have to go in, Patience,' Beatrice said despite her own reservations. 'Maud and Agnes are in there. We have to make sure they're okay.'

Begrudgingly Patience nodded. 'It's just a few lights, right?' she whispered seconds before they were all showered in glass.

* * *

'Oh my,' Agnes muttered sitting up. The library was in disarray. Books were scattered everywhere, the shelving displays leaning precariously against each other, buckled and broken; a fine mist swirling at their hem.

The library was now enveloped in an ethereal, creamy half-light, emanating from a gaping hole in the back wall. Agnes groaned as she used the counter to pull herself up onto her feet.

'Giddy goodness,' Maud said from nearby. 'Me head feels like I've been hittin' a quart of Cinder's Cider.'

'Maud!' Agnes said going to her friend who lay nearby, prone and covered in dust and several editions of Readers Digest. 'Are you okay?'

'I've been to better parties,' Maud chuckled getting to her feet and dusting herself off. 'What's the damage?'

'He's gone, Maud,' Agnes replied incongruously.

'Tyrrell?'

'No,' Agnes said with some despair. 'Klaus. I can't hear his voice anymore. It's gone.'

'Maybe that's for the best,' Maud said scanning the devastation about them. 'Dead folk need their rest.'

Agnes didn't respond to this. She walked around the counter and made her way through the shattered bookshelves, part of her mourning the loss of Klaus Hessel's voice another part mourning the assault inflicted upon her beloved place of work.

But such thoughts were distant and fleeting since the librarian was drawn to the hole on the wall through which the shimmering light flowed across the carpeted floor tiles like the waters of a bloated river, swirling and bubbling in a spreading illuminated puddle.

Maud moved with her, lost in her own thoughts for the moment. Despite her attempts to illicit some sense of perspective it was difficult not to think that all this was only a small part of something much, much bigger and this anticipation left her unusually nervous and off kilter. She attempted to tame such notions by looking out for Zachary Tyrrell who appeared to have vanished into thin air; leaving the machines he'd brought with him blinking and winking yet so very redundant.

As the women neared the hole, they saw that it wasn't a hole at all; it was a doorway. A door way that had been there for some time but hidden by bookshelves and a false wall.

And beyond the door was a wider space; some kind of room hidden in pools of light and shadow.

A sound nearby made them both pause. Maud turned to see a shape emerge through the remnants of the reading room's large plate glass window.

'Wow, and I thought I knew how to throw a party!' Elmo said looking about him.

'Looks like the aftermath of the world's biggest sneeze,' said Lucas peering over his friend's shoulder and spotting the ooze sliding down the walls.

'The guy who did this needs decongestant, and fast,' Elmo mused as he inspected a thick cataract of ectoplasm swinging from a nearby shelf.

'I just know I'm going to get some of this nasty stuff on my jeans,' Patience grumbled as she clambered through the blighted frame.

'I thought we'd agreed that you youngsters weren't getting involved this evening?' Agnes said without sign of malice; but she did seem pre-occupied.

'Well we thought that we could double the mess if we came along,' Elmo smiled uncomfortably.

They found Tyrrell just inside the doorway. At first, Beatrice feared that he was seriously hurt; or worse. He was lying on his side and curled up into a tight ball, his knees hugged closely to his chest. But then, to her relief and quiet surprise Beatrice observed that the ghost hunter was shivering slightly and sucking furiously on his thumb.

'What a loser,' Patience said sourly.

'Patience!' Beatrice said in astonishment as she knelt beside Mr. Tyrrell to check him over. If he was aware of her presence, Tyrrell didn't show it.

'It's because of him I've got snotty stuff all over my new trainers!' Patience said by way of explanation.

'I think he's responsible for a lot more than that,' Agnes said quietly, pointing to the back of the room beyond the doorway. Tyrrell's torch had somehow found its way into the space, its beam feeding a layer of mist seeping up through the floor; turning the fog into a bright, living thing that illuminated the brickwork in the distance. And written on the brickwork in bold, red and gothic lettering was a piece of prose.

*In this place
A soul was tricked
Making way
For the Cryptic Crypt
A bird in hand*

*Owes much to fate
Pulling open long locked gates*

'Look at that symbol underneath the writing,' Elmo said quietly.

But they had all already seen it; etched upon the old, dusty brickwork: a white eagle, wings frozen in flight, clutching in its talons an iconic symbol of evil: a black swastika.

'What does all this mean?' Beatrice gasped.

'It means we've got the makings of a mystery,' Lucas said with satisfaction.

'Or maybe not,' Agnes said, astounding all but Maud.

'Are you joking, Agnes?' Lucas said agog.

'This isn't meant to be discovered, Lucas,' Agnes said slowly. 'This will take us to a place where only bad things can happen. I cannot allow it to go further. I will *not* allow it to go further. This must stay where it belongs, in the past.'

Beatrice saw that Agnes' concern was replicated in the face of Maud. Part of her was sorely disappointed at the decision that was going to be made here this evening. But part of her could understand it. The two women were wise and noble and only did things for the best. They could be wrong of course, but Beatrice doubted that very much. But this didn't stop the others from protesting.

'How can the search for truth belong to the past?' Patience asked fervently. 'You have a Nazi symbol on the wall of a secret room in *your* library, Agnes. Aren't you vaguely interested how it got there?'

'Or how we were able to find it?' Lucas added.

'How we found it is more difficult to explain than why we should leave it be, young un,' Maud finally said. 'The Nazis? Nothing good has ever come out of that evil lot or the tripe they peddled. Fear and ignorance in a time of hopelessness is their weapon against what we hold dear in this life. Let 'em rot in the past; for all our sakes.'

'So, now what?' Lucas said miserably.

'I'm thinkin' that ye lot can get yerselves off home before the constable finds out ye've been moonlightin',' Maud suggested. 'Go grab yerselves a couple of scary movies, while Agnes and me give Dennis Hodges and Albert a call to sort out this here mess.'

'I still think that you're making a mistake covering this up,' Lucas objected.

'Happen so,' Maud said with a nod of her head. 'But we have our reasons, young Lucas.' And as she said this she looked directly at

Beatrice and the old woman's eyes said *don't say anything about Klaus Hessel, me girl; this is all about protectin' the memory of a good man and two girls who just wanted to help.*

'Come on, Lucas,' Beatrice urged. 'Let's get out of here.'

Lucas appeared to have something more to say until Beatrice put her hand gently on his arm and he reluctantly relented. The Newshounds filed out of the library and gathered their bikes from the foot of the steps.

'Why do I get the feeling that this isn't over?' Patience said as she mounted her bike.

'Because it probably isn't,' Beatrice said beside her.

'Are you saying that something's going to happen, Bea?' Lucas said with interest.

Beatrice thought for a while before answering, 'Maud and Agnes may have their reasons for burying this,' she said. 'And, be sure, their reasons will be for the good of everyone. But I've a feeling that Tyrrell wasn't working on his own, as much as he'd have us think that was the case. Who set us up with Codd and the police? Someone with influence, that's for sure. Whoever these people are they have their reasons too; and they're less likely to give up. They want what's in Agnes' library. And they're linked to *that* symbol.'

'So I guess we wait until they show up?' Lucas said enthusiastically. 'It might not be now, or next year or the year after for that matter. But they will come; and The Newshounds will be waiting to say 'Hi', right?'

They all agreed.

'I guess we'd better get home before our parents get thrown in jail,' Beatrice smiled. 'But I guess that'll be preferable to talking to my brother all night!'

They all made off laughing.

'Are ye sure about this, Agnes?' Maud asked as she watched her friend pile book carcasses upon a slimy, nearby table.

'No,' Agnes admitted. 'But there's no other way really, is there?'

'I guess not,' Maud conceded. 'But I'm hurtin' thinkin' that we've duped these young uns.'

'It's for the best, Maud,' Agnes said simply. 'We have to protect them from what is going on here. And what is going on? That's a question in itself. The lightning, the ooze; something terrible is at work here. It needs to be forgotten.'

'Youngsters aren't goin' to forget, Agnes,' Maud cautioned.

'No, they won't,' Agnes sighed. 'But we have to do something, we owe them that. We have to be *responsible*.'

'Now don't ye go blamin' what we did all those years ago on what's happenin' now, Agnes Clutterbuck,' Maud warned. 'Klaus Hessel was a good man; and we did the right thing helpin' him.'

'I know, Maud,' Agnes said. 'But aren't you thinking the same thing?'

'What's that?'

'Aren't you wondering why he gave us the *brooch*?' Agnes said in a hushed voice.

'A memento is what I recall,' Maud replied. 'Somethin' to remember him.'

'That's what I remember. But even at the time I thought it odd that he's part with something that would save him from being shot as a spy. And if we're so sure, why is it we never really talk about it?'

'Do ye still keep it with ye?' Maud asked, though she suspected the answer already.

'Of course,' Agnes said dipping her hand inside her purple body warmer and retrieving a small box from the hidden pocket. She placed it in her palm and carefully opened the lid.

Resting inside was a round silver and black emblem. It was an eagle frozen in flight with a swastika in its talons.

The same image that they had found scrawled across an uncovered brick wall, in a secret room at Dorsal Finn Municipal Library. Then it had been a gift. Now it was a curio that raised more questions than it gave answers.

'What does all this mean?' Agnes asked the box in her palm.

'Let's hope we never have to find out,' Maud said grimly.

In a large hall a man was sitting at a large desk. In his finely manicured fingers he held a slip of paper that a servant in a smart dinner jacket had just handed to him. As he watched his butler walk away, the man behind the desk unfolded the piece of vellum and scanned the message embossed on its surface. He was smiling before he'd finished the last sentence.

He deliberately folded the paper and placed it on the highly polished desk, where he continued to look at it for several moments before reaching for the telephone.

After two rings a small pleasant voice fizzed in his ear.

'Tell me,' the voice said, 'is it true?'

'Yes, Sir,' the man at the desk said. 'I have confirmation that we have found phase one of the Cryptic Crypt.'

'Oh, this is indeed a wondrous day; a magnificent achievement for you and your team. How *damaged* is Mr. Tyrrell?'

'Nothing irreparable,' the man shifted in his big leather chair. 'He will continue to serve his purpose. It is early days yet, Sir, but I am confident that our sponsors in Dorsal Finn will continue to monitor events. And, as with Tyrrell and the Clutterbuck woman, our *devices* will sow their seeds in secret. All is well.'

'That is good news.' the voice said. 'A new era is almost upon us, Professor; an historical travesty shall be made right. There will be a second chance for our cause.'

'Then I am to proceed with stage two of the process, Sir?' the Professor asked.

'Of course, of course! Make your phone call; rouse our ally.'

'Very good, Sir.'

The phone clicked in his ear and before the dead tone could buzz, the Professor dialed another number. His call was answered promptly.

'Hello my friend,' the Professor said cheerily. 'How are we this fine evening?'

'I'm in Canada and its winter,' came a dour reply. 'What do you think?'

'Then I have news that is bound to warm you,' the Professor said. 'Your time has come. We are sanctioned for phase two of our operation.'

'About time.' The man may have been in Canada but his accent was English. And once he heard the phone click in his ear signaling that the Professor had disconnected the call, Xavier Pontefract threw his cell phone onto his kitchen table.

He'd waited a long time for it; but his return to Dorsal Finn was on the horizon. He got up and went to the wine rack where he removed a celebratory bottle of merlot. As he uncorked the bottle he cast his eyes up at a faded newspaper clipping secured to his fridge door by a magnet fashioned into the image of a whale. And on this clipping was a photograph of a young girl with red hair smiling directly at the camera.

Xavier filled his glass and stepped up to the photograph of Beatrice taken for the Dorsal Finn Herald to celebrate her winning The Fearsome Feast.

Lifting his glass in a mock salute Xavier Pontefract chuckled cruelly. 'I'll be seeing you soon, Miss Beecham!'

He drank his wine in several swallows and as soon as he was able Xavier Pontefract allowed his cruel chuckle to change into a great, ghastly howl of laughter.

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