

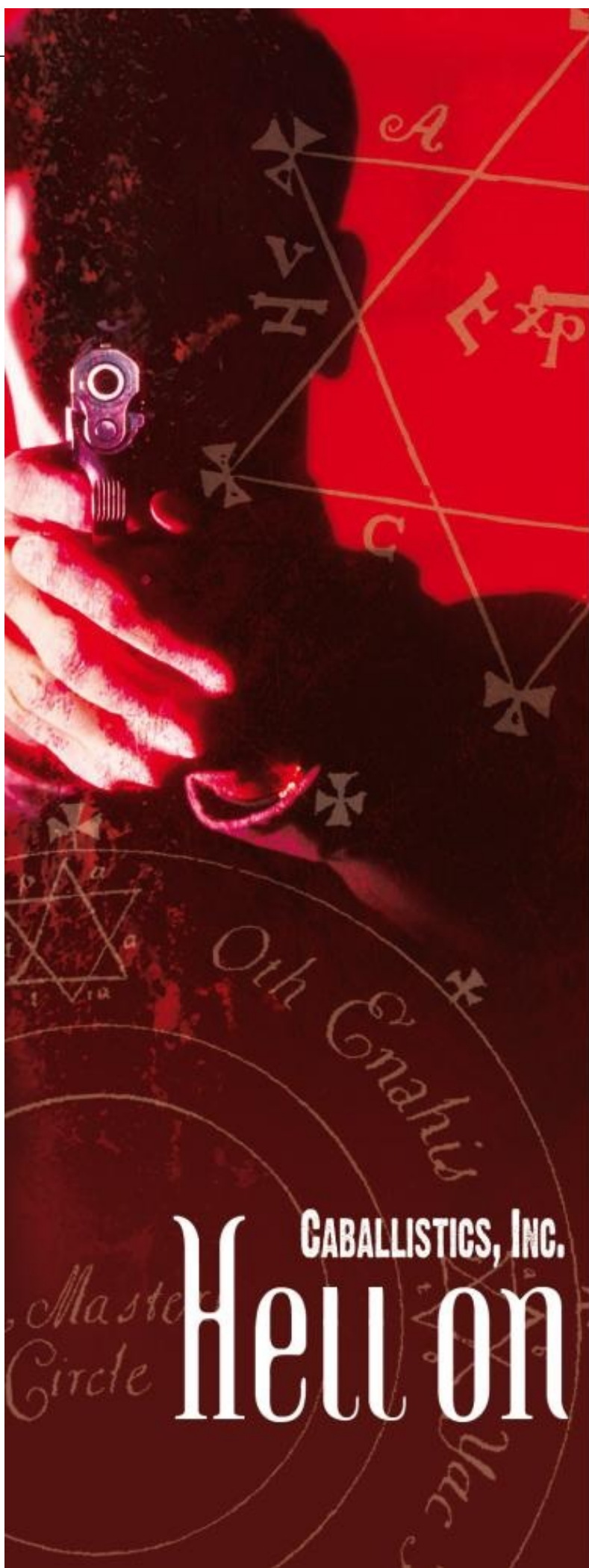


CABALLISTICS, INC.

Hell on

Earth

MIKE WILD



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CABALLISTICS, INC.

HELL ON EARTH

Mike Wild

The Illuminati, demonic possession, the Templars Resurgent, Opus Dei and the Hidden Inquisition, occult Nazis, the Starry Wisdom, hollow Earth theories, Delta Green, alien abductions, the Rosicrucians, the Cult of the Black Sun... some of that stuff's real.

**Boswell, on the Yorkshire coast
2.12am, October 15th, 1944**

Voices muffled by rubber and crunched staccato by static filled the airspace above the frozen moor

"Altitude one hundred feet. Preparing to begin flyby, tower, over."

"Roger, Nighthawk One."

"Nighthawk Two, ready to roll."

"Eyes peeled, Two. We have a blue alert."

"Understood, leader. Tower, this is Nighthawk Two. We are on approach vector, over."

"Roger that. See what's happening, boys."

"Affirmative, tower."

"And boys?"

"Tower?"

"I don't like scrambling blind. Be careful, boys."

"Roger, wilco. Activating fuselage cameras and commencing flyby in three... two... one..."

THOOOM.

Annabeth Jardine whirled full circle as the RAF Mosquitoes droned overhead, banking a second later to bypass Scratch Tor, in whose direction she too hurried. Buffeted by the flyover's wake she fell and split a palm on the track that ran beside the tor and down into town. The trenchcoat worn over her slight and trembling frame had once belonged to her husband, and its great folds flapped and slapped in the aircrafts' aftermath. She raised a bloody hand just too late to prevent an equally oversized cap being blown from her head and sent tumbling away. Annabeth's dog, Moll, gave chase instinctively, but she ventured only a small way along the path before scampering back to spin in panicked circles on her owner's side. The dog was rarely distressed but tonight clearly sensed there was something horribly wrong not far below.

She rubbed the dog vigorously to ease her fears, patted her solidly. Aye, girl, there was something wrong all right.

Annabeth heard the Voice once more in her head, felt her brain pulse agonisingly as she forced it away. Her breath condensing in the ice-cold air, she continued on, following the planes' flightpath to where the track dropped steeply into town and revealed the panorama below. She gasped and felt her heart seize. Beside her, Moll began to bark and howl.

The town.

Oh dear God, the town.

"We have visual contact, tower. Repeat, visual contact. Oh no. This can't be..."

"Nighthawk One?"

"They're burning, tower. All the people in the town. They're burning."

"Say again, Nighthawk One. Burning?"

"Affirmative, tower. My God. My God-"

"Nighthawk One, radar is showing no enemy air activity in the area. Repeat, no-"

"Tower, Nighthawk Two. Confirming the sky is clear. This is not an air raid, over."

"Then what-"

"So many. God help them, there are so-"

"Report, Nighthawk One. What is happening to these people?"

"Tower, I... I don't know... it's impossible, can't believe it. The people, the people they're just-"

Bursting into flames, Annabeth thought, hand on her mouth. It was impossible but happening right before her eyes. Human torches staggering out of their homes into the streets, screaming, consumed by fire. Others seemingly unaffected desperately trying to douse their loved ones, then themselves wailing in disbelief as their own flesh ignited for no reason at all. Men, women, even children - people Annabeth knew - flailing wildly through the night, collapsing to their knees, onto their faces, then just burning away on the ground. And in the midst of them, those very few who remained untouched, dropping to their own knees, but this time in prayer. And all of them wailing the same desperate plea to the sky.

"FORGIVE ME!"

Oh God, Annabeth thought. The Voice. It's the Voice.

"Mum?"

There was a tug at her hips and Annabeth turned to see her five year-old son. "Judd? By Christ, boy what are you doing here? I told you to stay at the farm."

"I know. But there's a voice... in my head."

Annabeth grabbed her son by the shoulders, span him away so that he could not see the horror that continued below them. Her heart thudded rapidly. Whatever the hell you are, stay away from my boy she thought.

"Aye, lad, there is," she said quickly. "But you're not to listen to what it's saying, do you hear me? You're not to listen."

"But it wants to see my shins-"

Annabeth blurted a laugh, aware that it sounded hysterical and came with tears, and she drew Judd tightly against her.

"It won't stop, Mum," the boy murmured into her side. "Mum it burns!"

"Judd, I said don't listen," Annabeth commanded and shook the boy. "Whatever it says to you, you must not listen! Promise me that, Judd. *Promise me!*"

Judd reddened and stared fearfully at Annabeth, his own face wet with tears. But he struggled to beat the pain, seemed to subdue it. "I promise."

"Good boy. Good boy."

The Voice, Annabeth thought. It had awoken her at the farm, perhaps fifteen minutes earlier. A sibilant whisper that felt like the remnant of some dream. But then it had grown and grown in her head until it felt like fingernails scratching on the inside of her skull. Not show me your shins, as her son thought. The word had been *sins*.

A command coming from everywhere, nowhere.

Show me your sins.

SHOW ME YOUR SINS.

SHOW ME YOUR SINS!

She had flung open the door of the farm, and it had revealed to her the distant dull glow of the town, the faint cries of despair carried onto the moorland by the wind. She had begun to run, the Voice becoming louder with every stride she took. She had fought it as best she could - agony every time she rejected its call - but passing the road where John had died, it had her.

Suddenly it was six years ago, and she watched her husband dying all over again. Thunder, lightning, the heaviest rain she could remember. The cliff edge crumbling suddenly away beneath John's feet.

"John! Aww, John, no, no, no..."

"Back, Annie... Get back!"

~~She was laying again on her side on that wet, wet ground, her unborn son in her belly, stretching a hand out desperately to reach John as the mudfall slid her scrambling husband down the liquid edge.~~

"I can reach you!"

"No, Annie! You can't!"

She had tried. Oh lord, how she had tried, her arms straining in their sockets as she had willed them to grow one more inch, her body arching like a bow until it felt that her spine might snap in two. The John had pleaded with her to think of their baby, and she had flailed at him hysterically in denial of the death he knew was coming. But her movements caused her to lurch forward in the mud and, in a moment of vertiginous panic, she'd instinctively grabbed for the safety of the rock. And in that moment, without her being able to say she was sorry, John had slipped away from her forever.

For a long time she thought that she could have saved him, that she had let her husband die. For a long time she thought that she had sinned. But at last the guilt had lessened, and she had found peace.

Until tonight, when the Voice had stripped the time away and again she had wanted to cry, "Forgive me!"

Was this what it was doing? Forcing the people of Boswell into baring their innermost souls? It seemed impossible, but why else were they begging forgiveness? Dear God, no - the question was why were they all burning?

Moll's renewed barking drew Annabeth out of her reverie and she turned to see the cause of alarm, shaking visibly when she did.

Above her, one RAF pilot had already vocalised what she could not.

"Request you say again, Nighthawk One, over."

"I repeat, tower, they are rising. The bodies are rising."

"Nighthawk Two, please confirm."

"Tower, it's impossible, I know, but leader is correct. Sweet Jesus, the people are getting up. And they're dead."

It wasn't just the dead, Annabeth saw, it was the dying, too. The dying and those on their knees, still in desperate prayer. All of them - every man, woman and child - rising as one. And as they rose, they turned to look out of town, up the hill.

And they began to move towards her.

No!

Annabeth swept Judd up under her arm and pulled the frantically barking Moll firmly by her collar to turn the dog around. She had run towards town in the hope that she could help with whatever had afflicted her neighbours, but this was vastly beyond her ken and she knew she had to get out of there right now. But as she turned back to face the moors, she paused. There was movement in the darkness, where there hadn't been before. A shape that was indistinct but seemingly emerging out of the ground itself. It looked like-

Something lunged at her from the dark, appearing and then disappearing in a feral flash of teeth and bone. She span Judd away, screaming in shock, and as she did Moll's collar tugged in her grip. The dog was going crazy, barking and straining on her hind legs, desperate to defend against the attack, and before Annabeth could do anything she broke free and raced into the dark.

"Moll, no girl!" Judd shouted. But it was too late. The aged and loyal working dog was gone, and a second later there was a brief, agonised yelp and then silence.

"Moll!" Judd shouted again. When there was no response, he began to cry. "M-Moll?"

Annabeth stared with horror onto the moor. She couldn't believe it. The dog was dead, just like that. Oh God, Moll, she thought. Please, won't somebody tell me what's happening?

Her desperate plea brought with it an even more desperate realisation. Whatever had just killed Moll wandered out there on the moor, and she and Judd dared not cross it. But equally, they dared not stay where they were. The only way to get her son out of there was to carry on into town.

Through the people.

Trying as best she could to calm Judd, Annabeth drew a deep breath and turned briskly back to the path, swallowing when she saw how far the throng had advanced towards her. Then she noticed that they were not really heading towards her at all. Because halfway up the slope the path forked, and a narrower, less-trodden trail veered up the side of Scratch Tor. It wound eventually to the ruins of the monastery at its peak but, before then, it passed the black mouth of one of the entrances to the labyrinthine cave system that lay beneath the tor. And one after the other, the people of the town were slowly filing inside.

Annabeth stared into the blackness of the caves and sensed the Voice speaking from somewhere deep within. Childhood nightmares of a thing meant to live down there came flooding back. Oh dear God, it was calling these people to it. No, stop, she wanted to cry out, but dreaded what would happen if they actually turned and looked back.

"Mummy, I'm scared," Judd said. "Where are all the people going?"

"I - don't know," Annabeth said haltingly. She knew she couldn't hide these horrors from him any longer. "Baby... I just don't know."

Slowly, cautiously, quietly, she eased Judd and herself down the path, moving as invisibly as she could through the grotesquely shuffling bodies of people who only a day before had been friends and neighbours. Time and again she had to bite her lip to stop herself crying out in shock, and felt there was going to be no end to their number. At last, though, she managed to weave Judd through their ranks.

But there was no respite in the town itself. A further mass of townsfolk filled its narrow lanes and blocked Annabeth's flight at every turn. The screaming here in their midst was horrendous, and it was surely only a matter of time before one or more of their burning bodies came into collision with Judd and herself.

Annabeth looked around desperately. She had to find refuge, somewhere to hide.

There. The church.

She bundled Judd forward, dodging the flailing forms, until the two of them reached the church's graveyard and crashed through its wooden gate, but she made it only partly along the path before she recoiled in horror. She did not need to hear the local priest, himself being consumed by fire, warning in his last breaths of Judgement Day - it was right there before her eyes.

"Nighthawk Two, are you getting this on film?"

"Affirmative, One. Oh, no. that's not..."

"Nighthawk One, this is tower. Report!"

"The graveyard, tower... it's..."

Had Annabeth been able to overhear the exchange she would have had no idea what to say. All that she could think herself was no, oh no, no, no... Every grave in the graveyard was erupting with its dead, and bodies milled about in various states of decay or decomposition. One or more of the more recently interred Annabeth - horribly - recognised. Slowly, inevitably, her gaze shifted to one particular grave in the far corner of the burial ground - and she physically convulsed as she spotted blackened hands emerging out of its topsoil.

No, not John. Oh please, not John.

Annabeth forced Judd behind her, shielding him from the father he had never known, and backed u

towards the gate. But other graves had disgorged their dead in her wake, and suddenly she and Judd found themselves crowded by leathered flesh.

It was too much. Just too much. Annabeth felt herself drop onto her knees as frantic bubblings of hysteria began deep inside.

Then a corpse was sent stumbling back, its head shattered under the impact of a huge, hairy fist. "That's quite enough of your nonsense, thank you very much," a rumble of a voice declared. Dazed, Annabeth looked up to discover its origin.

The owner proffered his hand and nodded to her briskly. "Professor Augustus Farralay, madam... My colleague, Winston Bey."

"Good evening," the other man said. "May we be of assistance?"

What, Annabeth thought? She stared hard at the pair, no idea who they were. The first, a huge barrel-chested man with a bald head and a bushy black beard might have been a street wrestler but for his smart dress and monocle, while the other, in a pin-striped suit and white turban, sporting a voluminous white moustache and eyebrows, looked like some cheap variety hall magician. But cheap variety hall magicians did not do what he did next. As the one called Farralay battled more of the corpses away, this Bey wrote signs in the air and it was filled suddenly with phantasmal snakes that darted at the dead things Farralay could not reach. Fangs bared, hissing clearly audible over the burning fires, they whipped and lashed at the dead, reducing them to flailing confusion.

Judd stared at them open-mouthed, but they were just too sinister. "Mum, I'm scared..."

"What's happening?" Annabeth pleaded. "Please, who are you people?"

"Best to save your questions for later, madam," Farralay declared. "For the time being, what say we get the devil out of here, eh?" He laughed as if he were Santa Claus and then struck out at the corpses with his fists again, crushing the skulls of - or actually beheading - those nearest. Both Judd and Annabeth cringed each time they heard an awful crunching of bone, and then Annabeth spied John moving through the pack and almost screamed. She knew this was no longer her husband - in the name of sanity, how could it be? - but she could not let him be treated this way. And as Farralay swung, she halted the man's arm, for a terrifying instant becoming convinced he was going to turn the club on her.

"Get out of here?" she reminded him, seeing his eyes widen and nostrils flare.

"Yes - yes," he said after a second. The feral stench coming off him was appalling. "Quite so, quite so."

The four of them backed away from the graveyard and left the corpses shambling in pursuit of whatever was calling them. The town offered no escape still, and as Farralay and Bey hurried the mother and son through its winding, burning lanes the pair dealt any emergent victims of the flames who got in their way the same treatment as they had the dead. But to Annabeth and Judd's horror, many were still very much alive. One old woman - hand on neck and face contorted with pain - came haltingly at them begging for help, and Farralay killed her with a single blow.

"Mum!" Judd screamed as the woman dropped in a twitching heap to the ground.

"Stop this!" Annabeth pleaded with undisguised horror. "For God's sake, they need your help!"

"No, dear," a voice said.

For the second time that night, Annabeth turned and found herself facing strangers. Two more, as strange and out of place here as the others. The first was a short, dark-haired slip of a woman in a low-cut evening dress and pearl earrings who grinned broadly, and the second a taller and much stockier woman wearing a matronly skirt and coat, who tamped down a Sherlock Holmes pipe. At least that was what Annabeth *thought* they were, because though she couldn't put her finger on what, there was something not quite right about both of them.

Bey greeted them as George and Harriet.

"Look dear," George - or was it Harriet? - said conspiratorially. She took Annabeth by the arm and

emphasised each word that followed. "There is nothing you can do for these people. They are already dead."

"No," Annabeth said in denial, "she was alive."

"Balderdash," Harriet - or George? - came back. "Utter tripe."

"Don't upset her, darling," George admonished, and she showed Annabeth where the old woman - her whole face gone - was rising up from the ground. "They're nothing more than puppets, understand. All we can do is try to stop as many as possible of them reaching it."

Annabeth stared. "What are you talking about, puppets, it? I don't know what you're saying."

Farralay was suddenly grabbing her by the arm, dragging her to where one of the lanes opened out to offer a view of the cliff-top monastery.

"You asked earlier what was happening," the big man said forcefully. He held Annabeth's chin and tipped her gaze upward. "Look," he prompted. "I said, look!"

Annabeth looked, and shook her head vigorously in denial. "I don't believe it. This has to be a dream."

"No dream," Farralay said. And if the giant of a man hadn't been holding her up then, she would have fallen to her knees. For over the monastery a great golden figure was materialising - looming over the town. Itself seemingly made of fire, it was a vague rather than detailed apparition, but it seemed to be holding out arms as if beckoning to her, and as it did an enormous pair of wings seemed to flex behind its back.

"Impossible," Annabeth mouthed. But impossible or not, it was there, and in her skull the agony began again.

"Mom, don't listen!" Judd urged, but perversely Annabeth wasn't listening. The voice was louder than ever, even more demanding.

Show me!

SHOW ME YOUR SINS!

My sins, yes, Annabeth thought. My sins. From deep within her came the same memories that had tortured her earlier, flooding her mind once more with sorrow and regret. Except this time she was convinced she could have done more. Stretched a little more towards John, arched her splattered, battered body until muscles tore and she crushed her own baby to feel the grip of his hand in her own. Oh God, she could have saved John. Just that little more effort and she could have saved him! It was her fault he died! It was all her-

"No!" Annabeth screamed. This memory was wrong. She had done all she could. She had done everything in her power. And no entity that cared would put her through this again. Nothing that cared would suggest that she had killed her husband. This was no sin, it was an accident and that was all. An accident. And knowing such she rejected it. Rejected it. Rejected it!

"What the hell are you, you bastard!" Annabeth screamed at the figure above the tor. "Leave us alone!"

"A resistant," Bey said impressed, and raised a white eyebrow.

"Few and far between," Farralay agreed.

"But she'll remember," Harriet commented, as if in warning. "Perhaps we should-"

The remainder of her comment was ripped away by the roaring drone of the two RAF Mosquitoes as they turned to meet the materialising figure. Their banking brought them directly over Annabeth for the first time, and she began to wave her hands frantically in the air.

"Tower from Nighthawk Two. I have survivors on the ground. Please advise, over."

"Roger, Two. There is now an official presence in charge of ground operations - please ignore, over."

"Ignore, tower?"

"Affirmative, One. We are instructed to cancel reconnaissance, over."

"Roger that, tower. But there are still people who need help here."

"I'm sorry, gentlemen. But as of a minute ago, this affair passed out of our hands, over."

"Tower, this is Nighthawk One... something in... Oh no, Susan... no, I never meant-"

Annabeth saw the first of the planes wobble and thought, No! It was the Voice again; it couldn't be anything else. Don't listen, she pleaded. Oh God, don't listen. But it did no good. As she watched, the plane veered from its flight path and out towards the sea, and Annabeth staggered back as there was a sudden incendiary burst inside its cockpit. Seemingly without a pilot, the plane nosedived and vanished into the dark.

"Jesus, oh, Jesus! Tower, what is this thing? Is it causing this?"

"Nighthawk Two, avoid the anomaly, over. Once again I say, avoid the anomaly."

"Negative, tower - I'm getting this on film."

"Return to base immediately. That is an order. I repeat, return to base immediately."

"Sorry tower, no can do. That thing killed the leader. We need to know what it is."

Don't be a bloody fool, Annabeth thought, as she saw the second plane head straight for the figure atop the tor. Then again, what could she do? She could only look on as the Mosquito flew directly at the glowing apparition - then into it, through it. She sighed with relief as the plane emerged on the other side, but the sigh caught as she saw something eject suddenly. Whatever it had been a moment before, it now burned horribly bright, as if it were a sailor's flare.

"Unfortunate," Farralay commented.

"Most," Bey agreed.

"Potentially awkward," George and Harriet said together.

What the hell are you talking about, Annabeth thought? "Tell me what's happening!" she shouted - now insistent. But Farralay and the rest just bundled Judd and herself further along the lane. "At least tell us where we're going!"

"The beach, dear," Harriet or George said, and grinned once more. "Rendezvous, don't you know."

Rendezvous with who? Annabeth screamed silently. She soon found out. The small bay by which the town huddled sat beneath the seaward side of the tor, and at the base of its rocky face was a vast cave mouth - another entrance to the system below. As the group arrived on the dark shingled beach, more of the - there was no other word for it than freakshow - emerged out of its cavernous maw.

The first looked like some bank manager who one day might snap and kill all those he worked with and he came backing out of the cave with twin revolvers aimed in his wake, sweatily firing shot after echoing shot at figures that pursued him in the darkness. With him came three more figures: a nasty-looking thug with a wooden truncheon, a dapper little skeleton of a man wielding a silver-tipped walking cane, and a taller man dressed in the coat, helmet and goggles of a First World War flying ace. But there was nothing lantern-jawed about this latter - a slight tear in the scarf he wore on the lower half of his face exposed a spot of raw and horribly scarred tissue like that from some Frankenstein's monster.

Another figure, a skeletal old woman with hawk-like features who seemed half librarian and half banshee, waited for them outside.

Farralay introduced them: Alex Nestor and Jack Strummer, Michael Magister and Randolph Rochester, then Miss Cecilia Bird. But Annabeth no longer cared. Because none of these people shocked her quite so much as the figures who came in pursuit. There was nothing strange about them

as such. They were simply not human at all.

Oh, God, she thought, and it was then that all the insanities of this surreal morning suddenly coalesced into one and the nightmare truly began.

"Collapse the roof, Magister!" Nestor ordered. "Do it now!"

Magister nodded, his brow furrowing in response to his orders, and Annabeth heard a dull rumbling from deep inside the tor. Dust started trickling from the roof of the cave mouth, and then rocks to fall, crushing the creatures beneath. Those that had already made it through, Nestor and the rest simply shot, bludgeoned, or attacked with serpent phantasms, until all lay dead.

Annabeth stared at Magister. The skeletal man was rigid with tension, pouring in sweat, and all the veins and arteries beneath his skin pulsed as if a layer of writhing worms had subcutaneously infested him. Tiny capillaries around his pupils popped, flooding his eyes with blood. The entire tor, and the ruins of the monastery above, shifted, and the rockfall became an avalanche.

All Annabeth could think was, he's doing this with his mind.

"Mum, the other people..." Judd said.

The other people. Annabeth's thoughts flicked suddenly to those she had seen entering the cave on the opposite side of the tor. If Magister was collapsing the roofs of the caves, then they were all being buried alive...

"Stop..." she said weakly. "Please stop..."

But that wasn't the end of it. Just before one final great slab of rock dropped to seal off the cavernous maw in front of her, something that was impossible flew slowly - no, hovered - through the closing gap, pushing rocks aside as it came. Almost as wide as the cave itself - disc-shaped, silver and with strange engines whining. It was some kind of... she struggled for words... *flying saucer*. Nestor and the others backed off and, as Annabeth gawped, the machine hovered slowly away from the cave mouth, over the beach and began to accelerate out to sea.

"Oh dear. Our friends appear to be departing," Professor Farralay pointed out.

"Miss Bird, if you please," Nestor said.

Cecilia Bird nodded and moved to the shoreline, positioning herself where seawater lapped at her feet. There, her arms stretched out wide, a mane of white hair billowing behind her and giving her the appearance of some ancient goddess, the woman summoned a storm. And in the midst of the storm, something else.

Some creature from the depths.

Judd clinging onto her, Annabeth screamed. And she kept on screaming as the tentacled behemoth pulled the saucer beneath the waves.

If Annabeth needed a final straw, then this was it. She collapsed to her knees sobbing, looked slow around the beach at the dead bodies, at the collapsed cave and then above the monastery, where the golden apparition was gone now.

She spoke almost to herself.

"God, what have you done? They're dead... all of them dead. Who are you people?"

"Alex, I warned you," Harriet said.

"She's right," George concurred. "There is the possibility this lady might... go to the press."

Nestor nodded, knelt down in front of Annabeth, smiled. "It's all right. Mr Magister will take care of things, won't you, Mr Magister?"

Annabeth looked up slowly. Nestor's smile was warm and comforting but she sensed something in that-

Michael Magister stood over her, still covered in sweat. He, too, smiled.

"Run, Judd," Annabeth said. "Don't look back."

"Mum?"

"Run, boy. Now!"

~~Judd was far too shocked and far too frightened to do anything else. He ran for the rocks as his mother bade, looking back only once.~~

The last image he had of Annabeth Jardine was a spasming, twitching thing whose nose, mouth, ears and eyes poured out blood.

His mother slumped, dead, to the ground.

"In answer to your question, madam," Professor Augustus Farralay said, "His Majesty's Government, Department Q."

He stroked her hair.

"We're the good guys."

**The M1, southbound
2.48am, present day**

BHHHHWWWOHHHHTRRRRRR!

The blast from the speeding hazardous materials tanker's horns erupted suddenly, unexpectedly and deafeningly, loud enough to blow windows, perhaps eardrums, perhaps to fell Jericho's fabled walls. Shiny twin pipes of polished chrome, these things looked innocuous enough - fashion accessories for the macho-looking vehicle - but in actuality they were state-of-the-art noise machines, designed in terms of the sheer decibels they emitted with one purpose in life. Mounted, for health and safety reasons, above and away from the driver's cab on either side of the tanker, they existed to inform other road-users that some quite serious crap was motoring towards them - or to put it another way, to scar the living bejeezus out of anyone stupid enough to be in its path.

Hannah Chapter did not consider herself stupid. She wasn't in the tanker's path. The young woman was, however, spidering her way with a great deal of urgency along the catwalk on its roof.

The horns blared as she passed between them.

"Gyyah!" she roared. In the circumstances, it was the closest she could manage to *bastard*.

Hannah slapped her hands over her ears, clamped her teeth together, and squeezed her eyes shut as the seemingly endless noise pummelled her temples with waves of pulsing agony so intense they were physical. This instinctive reaction to the horns was, of course, a mistake, and one the tanker had hoped she'd make. Beneath Hannah's feet, the speeding vehicle veered suddenly and deliberately across the motorway lane, its intention to throw Hannah off balance as a precursor to hurling her off the roof.

Suitably unbalanced, Hannah was jolted onto her side and whipped out a hand to stop herself from stumbling. It landed in a patch of black viscous gloop - the earthly remains of one Mabel Donovan, who in death as in life seemed to be everywhere - and Hannah felt her palm skid out from under her. She buckled and her right knee hit metal before it too slipped, wrenching her thigh, and Hannah felt herself starting to slide inexorably down the curve of the tanker's side. It veered again and she lurched upward in a last-ditch gamble to regain footing and steady herself - but it was a gamble that failed to work. The manoeuvre served only to feed Hannah's momentum and, as the horns blared in victory, she plummeted off the side of the speeding behemoth, arms windmilling the air.

"-king son of a-!"

A second, that was all she had. Hannah twisted in mid-fall, flailed madly for some kind of handhold, and managed, miraculously, to grab one. A huge "oooff!" escaped her as she slammed back into the side of the tanker, winded. Whatever it was she was grabbing - some rail or other, she didn't care as, as long as the damn thing held - she was doing so by her fingertips, dangling so low that her boots kicked against the racing road surface, sparking her steel toe caps and making her dance an involuntary jig.

She wasn't having that. Hated jigs. Reminded her of the hillbilly rednecks back home. With an agonised groan, Hannah began to pull herself back up, cursing when her glasses slipped off her nose and were crushed beneath a wheel. Godammit, that was the third pair this week.

Oh yeah, she thought wearily, here we go again. Why in the name of Rob Zombie did she persist on getting herself involved with this crap? She was an intelligent girl, after all. She could have gone to Harvard and been a doctor. Yale, been a lawyer. Hell, right now she'd have been ecstatic with a Ronald McDonald graduate programme and an endlessly smiling future as gold-star manager of the month.

But noooo. She had to choose Arkham University and major in cryptozoology. So tell me, Hannah, what is it you want to be when you grow up? Me? Oh, I want to spend my days down sewers shooting

dead, slavering things. I fancy trekking through some stinking South American jungle annihilating soul-cannibals. Or how about a trip to some its-grim-up-north-sink-estate to kick seven shades of unholy shit out of the neighbourhood's happy-slapping, blood-sucking vampire chavs...

Hey, you never know. Maybe some day I'll even find myself dangling desperately off the side of one of those runaway, forty-four tonne necroplasm-possessed hazmat tankers you see doing a hundred and thirty down the south lane of the M1... know the kind I mean, right?

Yeah... right.

Nah, the real question was, why she was asking herself dumb questions? She got herself involved with this crap because that was what she and her partner did.

Deal with the weird shit, honey.

It's our job.

Just two short minutes earlier, Hannah had been seated beside her business partner Lawrence Verse in the semi-clapped-out heap that served as their day-to-day transport, she the lithe, curly-haired ex-US intelligence agent in the jeans, boots and sheepskin coat, driving - he the defrocked priest with the pointy beard and the American footballer physique, annoying the hell out of her. As usual they had been involved in a discussion of a vital and profound importance.

"Sooo, best Star Wars character there never was?"

"Napoleon Solo, Han's long-lost uncle."

Verse snorted derisively. "Darth Death. Dark Lord of the Scythe."

"Nonsense. Hibba the Shed."

"Hibba the Shed?"

"Second cousin," Hannah extrapolated, "of Jabba the Hut, owner of Tatooine's only garden centre."

"Pff. Nice try, but no Death Star. I give you Ja-Ja Bonks, annoying CGI Nazi porn icon..."

Hannah stared at him. "There were no Nazis in Star Wars."

"Grand Moff Tarkin, anyone?" The priest turned to look at her with some difficulty - Verse was squeezed into the Mini Cooper like an Action Man in a Dinky car. "Bet you didn't know that Peter Cushing wore his slippers in all those scenes?"

"Yeah."

"You did not."

"I'm telling you, I did..."

Just ahead of the two, the tanker on which they had been riding shotgun for the last hundred-odd miles was trundling south down the M1 en route to Worcestershire. A specially converted container vehicle, it was on loan from the Quist Foundation and headed to Doomwatch's strange matter disposal site just outside Bromsgrove. As well as Chapter and Verse, it was escorted by two police motorbike outriders and a pair of blued-and-twoed four-by-fours, who acted as a rolling roadblock. All the uniforms involved in the escort had been briefed that the tanker held volatile chemical waste but, in fact, it contained stuff a lot more volatile than that. Necroplasm, to be accurate, gallons of the semi-sentient gunk, nullified by a Matheson radiation pulse after a particularly ugly psychic summoning that Chapter and Verse had been called to handle. It should have been an easy job but a sequence of events was in play that was about to lead Hannah to where she dangled now.

And it had all started with Mabel Donovan.

Mabel Donovan, may the blue-rinsed old bag rest in pieces. A Barnsley-born-n-bred Medium to the Stars and author of such bestselling spiritualist tomes as *Hugs From Heaven* and *Yer Grandma's Gone To The Angels*, Hannah took it as a blessing that Mabel had gone to the angels too, because frankly the woman had been dangerous. To be honest, she hoped that somewhere in heaven Grandma was giving her a reet good slap. People such as Mabel just never learned there were things you left alone.

She'd had been staging a seance for prospective purchasers of her new book when the shit had hit

the fans. Her audience of devoted readers, local journos and VIPs were being squeezed by heavenly hugs from Great Aunt Beryl and her ilk when out of the blue another entity had decided to step up to the mike. He said his name was Xaphan.

Anyone sensible involved in the biz would have backed off straight away. Anyone sensible would have known that Xaphan was your actual demon. A second-order demon, sure, whose responsibilities amounted to stoking the furnaces of hell, but a demon nonetheless. You didn't play with those.

Stupid, stupid Mabel didn't back off. Greater publicity beckoned so she asked that Xaphan show himself, that Xaphan use her ectoplasm to embody himself for her audience. This was the kind of game any self-respecting demon would not normally be arsed with, but maybe Xaphan fancied a break from shovelling. His fifteen minutes of fame.

So Xaphan came.

Being a demon, ectoplasm wasn't good enough for Xaphan, however. After all, how could that whiff show off his scales, claws and his horns to their best effect? So Xaphan opted to manifest in necroplasm instead. No amount of hugs from heaven could have saved Mabel from that point on because necroplasm was the far nastier cousin of ectoplasm, produced not so much *from* a medium's body as *with* it. In short, an agonised Mabel was gone before she knew it. And when the demon was done reducing her to a malleable gloop, it turned on her audience as well. Seconds later the only indication that any of them had existed were the harder-to-digest belt buckles, bra-clasps, exotic jewellery, pacemakers, gold fillings and the like that were being hurled about in the half-clotted, half-liquid black mud.

Xaphan manifested himself in an empty room. Ah well, fame was fleeting...

It was at this point that the venue manager had phoned for help, and Chapter and Verse had taken the call. These one-time freelance operators had worked around the world and been responsible for the demise of, among other things, the Guatemalan werejaguar cult, the corpse-riders of Zagreb, and Stockport's Dark Man. These days, however, they were cards-in with the recently formed paranormal troubleshooting outfit, Caballistics, Inc.

There were two questions people always asked of the pair. Were their surnames for real, and were they more than business partners? The answer to the first was that the names might be just a dumb gimmick but they brought in the work. The answer to the second was - okay, apart from that time in Guatamala - that one of them was meant to be holy ordered and celibate while the other wasn't into that opposite-gender-sexual relationship thing.

Actually, there was one other question they got asked a lot. And they'd got it as soon as they'd arrived at the venue.

"You're the Ghostbusters, right?"

"Wrong."

"Oh. Then?"

Hannah flashed an ID. "Caballistics, Inc. And we get very tired of being compared with the lead characters of a by now very old film. My partner especially gets tired of comparison with the big, black guy, 'cause he got fat."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"For example, how would you like it if the two of us referred to you as Basil Fawlty, I wonder? I mean, here you are, a jumpy, whey-faced pipe-cleaner of a man with a silly moustache-"

"Look, I am sorr-"

"Not much, I imagine. Because it would suggest that you were, in fact, a congenital idiot, would it not? Are you a congenital idiot, Mr Manager?"

"N-no-" the manager stammered. "I just-" He gave up and looked to Verse for help. The priest ignored him and stared through a small window in the door, but not before he'd winked at Hannah.

"Looks like Xaphan has had his fun and bugged off," he said. He held up a small EM/EP detector and studied the blip that came from the turbulent mud. "We do, however, have vestigial sentience in the necropool - most likely brain fragments." He tweaked the detector before adding, "Yup, it's Donovan's brain."

Hannah peered in. "God, I hate this gunk. I'd imagine Mabel's pretty cheesed off, and I'm in no mood to be whacked about the head by nipple rings and the insides of teeth. Matheson Machine?"

"Aha. One pulse should quieten it down."

"Fine. Get it from the boot and I'll-" Hannah keyed her mobile phone "-get us some transport."

Verse returned a minute later rolling a fridge-sized device covered in dials and buttons. The Matheson Machine was an electromagnetic generator made to disrupt E-K harmonies in the higher range of the Carnacki-Silence spectrum. Verse clicked a switch, the machine went *EEEEEE*, and the noise from the room stopped. Verse rolled the machine away again.

"What?" the manager said. "That's it?"

"Expecting proton packs and a laser light show? We're professionals, sir." Hannah thrust a large invoice into the manager's hand. "Our terms are thirty days. Next time be careful who it is you hire your rooms out to. Have a nice day."

And that was that. Half an hour later the gunk was aboard the tanker. What should have been an easy job and home in time for breakfast.

Should have been, Hannah reminded herself.

But then it had happened.

2.46am, according to the car's clock.

No warning apart from a deep bass hum, a sudden light, and the high-pitched screech of a thousand circuit boards shorting all at once. Then a wall of brilliant radiance had appeared out of nowhere and scythed swathingly across their path. In the few seconds it lasted, bolts of lightning punched the ground, flesh tingled and heads pounded as if all were suffering a subarachnoid haematoma. It was like being inside a giant fluorescent strip-light, with their necks plugged into the mains.

Then it was gone, just as quickly as it had come. Moving on across the countryside like the Almighty on a walking holiday, its path visible as a series of white flashes beyond the motorway embankment, receding ever more into the distance, and heading God alone knew where.

The tanker, car, four-by-fours and bike escorts skewed to a halt in a screech of assorted brakes. Everything went very still. For a few heartbeats everyone could hear everyone else breathing. The police escorts exited their vehicles and stared at one another.

"Okaaaaaay," Verse said cautiously. "That was what exactly?"

"You got me," Hannah Chapter said. "But I have a bad feeling about this."

"Bit clichéd, girl. It isn't quiet, too quiet, is it?"

Hannah looked at Verse with disdain. "You know as well as I do that weird feelings keep us alive longer in this business than any of the fancy hi-tech junk we carry about."

"So wha-?"

Chapter and Verse both ducked simultaneously as necroplasm exploded out of the rear of the tanker in angry, whiplashing tendrils. Unaware of what they were dealing with, the police escorts stared at it in agog while the tanker driver exited his cab to see what was going on. None of them lived to find out. Sensing their presence, the necroplasm tendrils whipped suddenly like snakes and buried themselves one by one into the backs of the heads of each and every man. Small fragments of skulls and gore splattered onto the windscreen of Verse and Chapter's car.

"Shit," Verse said. "I thought we'd nullified that crap."

"We did. But I'd guess that lightshow just now has given it a jumpstart." She turned the wipers on and peered out. Attached to the tendrils like puppets on single strings, the policemen remained upright

and were staring malevolently at the car. "Looks like it taught it a new trick, too. That crap's in their brains."

Verse watched as the tendrils guided the police back to their bikes and four-by-fours, the tanker's driver to his cab. The vehicles started up and began to move off, the spidery assembly of necroplasm and metal gathering speed. "Um, care to tell me what it's doing?"

"Getting away from us, I think."

Chapter threw the car into gear and slammed her foot on the accelerator. There was a junction on the way and if this crap got off the motorway and into a town...

"Fancy hi-tech junk time?"

"Can't use the Matheson Machine," Verse said.

"Why the hell not?"

"Drained the batteries at the hotel."

"It runs off batteries?"

"Puracell. The exorcist's choice." Verse gave a little grin that faded under a withering stare. "Okay not - but the thing *does* need charging."

"Great. So what we got in the back?"

Verse did a quick mental inventory. "AK47, one of. Golem grenades, pack of six. Crossbow. Two machetes, one with silver blade. Stake sharpener and garlic press. Spectralometer. Oh, and a 5.1 gauge multi-phasic anti-matter vortex cannon with Gatling laser and auto tracker."

"Cool. When'd we get one of those?"

"We didn't. But I've wanted one since *Doom 3*."

Hannah sighed. "Any C4, Astro Boy?"

"Expecting the unexpected, as always, doll."

"Then C4 it is." The car swerved as she turned to quickly scramble on the back seat. As she did, Verse manoeuvred himself under her - no mean feat - and took the wheel. Jamming four C4 charges in her pockets, Hannah yanked open the car's sunroof and climbed out. Knowing exactly what it was she wanted next, Verse gunned the car engine and drew alongside the tanker so she could make the jump.

"What's the plan?" Verse yelled.

"Mine it, blow it, not fall off!" Hannah yelled back. "Especially that-"

Last bit, Verse thought with concern. I'm with you on that, babe. Although obviously he'd never have told her that.

That last bit had not, of course, worked out in quite the way she'd planned, and here she was, in her usual mess. A mess in which it had soon been obvious that she was not getting back to the roof of the tanker up its side - the curvature made it impossible. She had briefly considered doing an Indy and sliding between the tanker wheels on the end of her trusty whip but, wouldn't you know it, she'd left the whip back home. Besides, business and pleasure never mixed.

No, the only way back was to reach the cab and climb up from there. Hopefully she could slam on the brakes en route.

Hannah inched along the rail by her fingertips, coming at last to the side window of the driver's cabin, and cringed as she tumbled inside. She'd been hoping there'd be something she could do for the driver but there wasn't a chance of that. In place of the original tendril, which had now withdrawn, another had punched through into the cabin from the tanker shell, plugging directly into the back of his neck, holding him there, rigid, while he "drove" the vehicle. Only the man's face was left, the rest of his head a slowly pulsing black goo. Grotesquely, two smaller tendrils had wound their way into the sides of his mouth and were stretching it back into a rictus grin that looked frankly ludicrous. What, with the wide-open gob, teeth, and staring bug eyes, he looked for all the world like he should have Grommit on his lap and be asking, "Nice piece of *cheese*, dear?"

But the terror in his eyes, the heated tears of agony streaming down his face, and the desperate, pleading look he gave Hannah, spoiled the comical image somehow. The man was dead... and he knew it.

Please...

Hannah unholstered a weapon and, holding him by the shoulder, loosed three 9mm parabellum steel-jackets into the driver's temple. As the tendril snapped away, she lowered his body onto the seat.

The necroplasm - Mabel - didn't take to that at all, and suddenly the cab was being whiplashed by the forcibly disconnected tendril. Hannah ducked and rolled to avoid it, at the same time slamming on the tanker's airbrakes and then firing three more rounds into the dash to short the electrics.

It took a couple of seconds but the tanker jack-knifed to a halt. Again, the escorting vehicles skewed alongside.

Time to end this, Hannah thought. She twisted back out of the window and hauled herself quickly onto the cab's roof, pausing only to pull out her second gun and blow away some necroplasm wrapping itself around her ankle. Oh yeah, she'd had just about enough of this bitch.

Hannah leapt from the cab back onto the tanker shell itself, and located the access hatch. This she flung open and peered inside. The necroplasm rolled like a wave tank in its shadowed interior, and somewhere in its component parts lurked those all-important fragments of Mabel Donovan's brain. It was these - the vestigial sentience - that she needed to destroy, and the only way to guarantee that was to blow the tanker and contents from the inside out. It was why she hadn't skimped on the C4; four chunks ought to do the job nicely.

A black tendril erupted suddenly from the hatch and flailed at her wildly. Hannah emptied twin magazines into it, driving it back. Mabel didn't want to be blown up, obviously. Too late, honey, Hannah thought. She set the explosive's digital timers for one minute and lobbed the packs into the four corners of the shell. Time to go...

As she stood, the tanker lurched violently, and Hannah was thrown back. She threw out a hand for support but it met only the darkness of the hatch and she was tipped half inside. She grabbed onto an edge and managed to heave herself back, in the process almost dislocating her shoulder, but this took time and beneath her she could feel that the tanker was once again on the move and picking up speed. How the hell had that hap-?

Aww crap. Hannah stared down at the motorbikes and four-by-fours, towing the tanker by their still-linked tendrils, and burning rubber like there was no tomorrow... they had to be doing eighty already. Mabel again. She knew she wouldn't see tomorrow, so she didn't want Hannah to see it, either.

Okay, Hannah thought. She looked at her watch. Twenty-four seconds. No way I can make a jump at this speed, and no way to stop the C4. Bollocks. Just have to hope that...

The familiar sound of a semi-clapped out engine pushed to its limits heralded Verse's arrival on the scene. The Mini Cooper swept out from behind the tanker and raced between it and the motorbike and four-by-four on its left hand side. Verse was driving with one hand and leaning out of the car's window wielding a roaring chainsaw in the other. It was this chainsaw that had led to Verse's parting of the ways with the church - or more accurately his rather novel use of it during a rite of exorcism - and Hannah knew just how effective it could be. As she watched, the priest drove beneath the two connecting tendrils and with a juddering of metal teeth sawed through the necroplasmic links. This done, the priest braked the car into a controlled skid, gunned the protesting engine once more, and raced around the tanker to sever the tendrils on its other side. Strings cut, the motorbikes and four-by-fours skewed off, riding up onto the embankment or slamming into the central barrier, where they and their drivers came to a dead stop.

The tanker began to slow. The burning question for Hannah was whether it would slow enough.

Three seconds, according to her watch. No, not enough. One chance. Be there, Verse, she urged.

Read my mind.

Hannah sprinted along the tanker's catwalk and launched herself from its rear, tendrils snapping behind her ankles as she took flight. The Mini Cooper screeched into position below her, just as she'd hoped.

But I'm not gonna make it, she thought. Unless-

The C4 detonated and Hannah felt the concussion wave from the exploding tanker whack her solid in the back, giving her the extra few inches she needed. Silhouetted against the billowing plume of flame, she flailed through the air and hit the bonnet of the Mini Cooper, her momentum flipping her up and over. For a second she threatened to skid off the end of the car but, as she expected, a large black hand shot out through the sun-roof, grabbed her firmly, and pulled her down inside.

Hannah flopped painfully into her seat as Verse slammed on the brakes and brought the Mini Cooper skidding to a halt. Through the windscreen they looked ahead as the burning tanker decelerated at last, half mounted a junction slip road, and then blew itself and its hellish contents to pieces in a huge and final ball of flame.

For a while they sat in silence, thinking about the men who had died. It was something, though, that neither could allow it to affect them for long.

Not in this job.

Emergency services sirens sounded somewhere in the distance. Verse looked at Hannah and slowly slipped the car into gear.

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