

The Ferret Files

By
Phillip Legard

By





Introducing Ferret

London's Premier Detecting Consultant

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Contact: ferret@detectingconsultant.com

Project XIII

Flamen Dialis bolted upright in the rough wooden sleeping crate he called a bed and let out a gasp of astonishment. Moments earlier, he'd been on the deck of a ship, reaching out to grab his old friend the chemist by the wrists, to pull him to safety. He felt a tightness in his tendons, a burn where their hands had met as he tried to yank the scientist back over the rail, losing his grip at the last moment. Far below, an angry cobalt sea crashed against the steel hull, whipped into a frenzy by an unfriendly squall.

"So real," he tried to say, fat tongue clinging to the roof of his mouth.

Clearly, the gods were speaking to him in their improbable language of signs, showing him something divine. It was to the augurs he must turn, for an official interpretation. In his opinion, although he wasn't formally qualified to comment, the reappearance of his friend after all these years suggested but one thing: a warning.

Someone was prying into the project.

The priest took a long, slow breath.

Good luck with that.

He'd put specific precautions in place to prevent the powers that be from doing such a thing.

And with good reason.

Still half asleep, the old man narrowed his eyes and focused on the glass of water on his dressing table, beyond physical reach. Gently, he caressed the scuffed beaker, fondling atoms of silicon, hydrogen, and oxygen, until each stood to attention.

In his mind he barked an order.

The glass flew through the air and landed in his open hand, perfectly aligned. Flamen nodded in satisfaction and took a long sip of cool liquid. It had taken years of practice to achieve such results, but it was still only a magician's parlour trick.

Flamen rubbed the sleep from the corners of his eyes and began the ritual of baselining his senses, a habit started many years ago while still in the service of his country. Having assured himself that all were functioning optimally, he chanted his daily mantra:

"One must always keep up one's guard."

"Never allow the enemy the space to regroup."

"The Brotherhood comes first."

"Always."

Contented, the old man rocked from side to side. The project was secure, of this he had no doubt. As hard as they might try, a lifetime was not long enough to dismantle the maze of blocks and false trails he'd put in place. The paperwork alone was a great nightmare of a Gordian knot, expertly tied by his own hand.

Discover the inner workings of Project XIII?

What a ridiculous notion.

The chemist's reappearance must mean something else.

In order to be certain, Flamen knew he must seek a second opinion while the details of his vision remained fresh. Pulling himself out of bed, he pushed his feet into a pair of padded woollen slippers. He took a few tentative steps across the cold flagstone floor, making faces at his reflection in the long, plain mirror that occupied one corner of his sleeping quarters. Years of mountain living, regular backbreaking toil, and a sensible diet of home-grown food had honed his body, leaving no sign of fat. Truth be told, he was far older than the image the looking-glass displayed. It was the lack of body hair that threw the eyes into disarray. When confronted with a plucked chicken, ready to be basted, the mind was wont to play all manner of strange tricks.

Flamen washed his face in chilled mountain water and shivered. He pulled on a thick white woollen toga trimmed with royal purple and donned a simple white cap. Below the north tower where he quartered, the world was slowly stirring from its sleep.

A goat maaa'd.

Clanking cow bells whispered through the mist.

Far away to the east, the sun poked its head above the horizon, illuminating the foothills and sending dancing shards of lilac this way and that. The great castle of the Himalayas began here. The low-lying hills were merely its outer battlements; the impregnable central keep lay many days' travel hence. The old man's breath crystallised; he felt the edges of his nostrils tighten.

Pulling the robe tightly about his body, he hurried along the monastery's outer wall, keeping to the heights, mindful of his brothers below. He dare not risk being seen at this time of day, for once spotted, they would call on him to lead a prayer to the new day, an invitation he dare not refuse.

As Jupiter was his deity, so he was Jupiter's representative on earth, the most powerful man in the compound.

Only the Pontifex stood higher.

When he was here.

Flamen descended to the earthen floor, traversing a well-worn stone staircase that offered little protection against the chill. Outside the office of the chief augur, fist raised to strike the wooden door, he came to an abrupt halt.

And sighed.

It was not unknown for the augurs to take two cycles of the moon to respond to a request such as his. Even the simplest interpretation took them forever with their endless meetings and philosophical jibber-jabber, consulting this tome and that in a quest for the ultimate definition of how to phrase the question. Once they decided on the grammar, there was then the wait for an auspicious day.

The old man exhaled hard, his shoulders sagging underneath the robe.

Damn them all!

In order to change the outcome of his vision, he must be there, as foretold.

Instinctively, he turned around and, gathering up the toga, headed resolutely towards the compound's chicken coop, clinging to the shadows, the premonition of his friend's forthcoming accident never far from his thoughts.

A cockerel pecked the ground, finishing off the seed Flamen had dropped, eyeing him with suspicion. It ruffled its feathers and held its head to the sky. Fearing what an alarm call might bring, Flamen drew a circle in the air with his forefinger and pointed to the creature's beak.

"Five minutes."

Unable to make a sound, the bird ran around furiously, its comb erect, head clacking back and forth. Thrice the wild ball of feathers smacked into Flamen, forcing him to glare at it hard. Only then did the cock moodily retire.

The priest entered the coop and collected a wooden carrying cage, into which he thrust one of the girls from the cluster of hens that had stopped laying. She flapped and squawked in confusion until, with a wave of his finger, he silenced her too.

To the haruspex!

To the one member of The Brotherhood trusted with reading signs. He was new to the post, his credentials unproven but his references sound. It was perhaps a little early for a blood ritual, but what choice did he have? Holding the detail of the vision in his mind was becoming increasingly difficult; he had to let it go.

Knowing the haruspex's sleeping habits, Flamen hurried to the stables. The rest of the brothers didn't agree with how the seer carried on. They thought him a little odd. Even the pontifex found it tiresome.

"Do you not know the time?" The shaggy seer tore himself away from a sheep, hay clinging to his matted body hair, voice booming out louder than a foghorn.

"The matter is most urgent."

In contrast to the priest, who despite his thick white robe of office still looked like a skinny polar bear, the seer was as large as a grizzly and quite naked. In public, he consented to a robe, but here, in his own domain, he set the rules. Flamen took a step backwards and craned his neck to catch the man's eye. If he got too close, the haruspex would hug him, as he hugged all living things, leaving a distinct smell of warm, stale livestock about his person.

"I had a vision, and in it, I lost a friend."

"Someone close?"

Flamen nodded.

"Do you bring an offering?"

The priest held out the wooden cage.

The haruspex snatched the cage with one hand. "Undo your spell."

Flamen waved his finger.

The bird flapped its wings, scratching and screeching, causing the sheep to stir and an old grey mule to bray in annoyance. The racket spread throughout the stable. Despite the din, Flamen knew an interruption was unlikely.

Deftly for such a large man, the seer took hold of the bird by its feet, pulling it clear of the cage. He waved it once around his head and, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, snapped its head clean off, causing a spurt of blood to gush forth.

The stable fell silent.

Blood dripped from the seer's stomach. He inserted a finger into the bird's neck hole, ejecting a mix of blood and mucus. A wing flapped. The giant of a man wiped blood and snot across each of Flamen's cheeks, then his own, letting his fingers come to rest in the bush of his beard.

"Hear me, great Jupiter, whose orbit dictates the energy that flows around and through this world, I say this passing is not in vain." With which the seer pulled the dead bird apart, casting its entrails roughly on the floor, the heart still beating. The bird's gizzards and liver slopped in an elongated heap.

Flamen's nostrils curled with the stench of fresh faeces.

"I see a ship," said the seer, interpreting the patterns left by the innards.

A lump formed in the priest's throat. "Where?"

"Three swords stand guard above a fjord."

Despite the weight of his toga, the priest danced a jig. His premonitions were always a week ahead at least. He had a dozen valid passports, a dozen identities; a dozen disguises to wear.

"I fly to Stavanger."

Why not?

What a jolly jape.

"Oh no you don't."

Flamen sighed.

It was true.

His chain of office was wrought with great responsibility. Only one day, from sunrise until sunset. That was for how long he was allowed to leave the compound.

"This is important," he said. "I must know precisely when."

Closing his eyes, the priest let the vision wash over him, replaying every detail. The fear in his friend's eyes wasn't just the fear of death made manifest, there was more. He was trying to say something. A word hung fresh in his throat, suspended in the air, begging to be heard. Flamen pressed his eyelids tightly together in concentration.

"Sohn . . ."

"I see a young man with a large nose and an unruly mop of hair," said the seer, cracking a smile.

Flamen nodded. He'd observed the youth many times from a distance although they'd only formally met once. The priest had tried to open the boy's eyes by lighting a cigar with his thumb, a feat the lad was convinced relied on concealed tubes and a supply of compressed gas. They discussed the possibility that the boy might be mistaken, only to be interrupted by the lad's best friend, who howled in derision at the thought of such tripe.

All that good advice, dismissed as incoherent nonsense.

When he tried to press the case again later that evening, the boy's friend became ever more vocal until the ushers had little choice but to intervene.

In retrospect, thought Flamen, the youth's graduation ceremony was the wrong place to make first contact.

"I see a vault in a green and pleasant land."

"That's hardly important." Flamen waved the seer away.

"It is open."

"That's not . . . possible . . ." The words dripped sourly from the high priest's tongue, reminding him of the taste of curdled cream.

"But true, nonetheless." The seer found a cloth and wiped his hands.

Flamen gulped. In his heart he'd always feared there might be a way to cut through the countermeasures he'd put in place, specifically designed to keep all comers out of the secret underground bunker.

"God forbid." He cradled his head in his hands.

If the vault was open, then whoever was responsible must have access to the official records. If this was so, they knew the nature of the treasure contained within.

The priest's mind raced.

The chemist had sworn to keep their off-piste work secret. Those responsible for the opening were missing vital details.

"I see a dying lion, gored by a dead unicorn," said the haruspex, poking the entrails with a stick.

The priest's heart skipped a beat. Evidently, the realm had a new enemy, stalking the corridors of power, operating within the shadows.

He sighed.

After they had their hands on the treasure, they'd follow the paperwork trail until eventually his name came up. Sadly, he knew such people of old. They'd employ violent scum to do their dirty work, the result being a nasty assault with automatic weapons followed by missing limbs and a long, drawn-out death for each of his brothers. Whatever it took to unearth the secret of secrets.

The priest coughed, spitting out a glistening ball of phlegm which spun through the air, catching a dung fly unaware.

"Now," said the seer, "your authorisation."

"I'll bring it by later."

"Ho! You will not," laughed the seer, a twinkle in his eye. "You know the price for unauthorised advice."

Flamen removed his robe, taking care not to dirty the edges, and hung it on a gleaming metal hook. Sex and magic were always so interlinked. One type of energy morphed into another; this was the way of things. The haruspex wasn't interested in mounting him, the High Priest of Jupiter, oh no. He had an entire stable set aside for such purposes. No, this was a chore of a different kind.

"Assume the position," said Flamen wearily, picking a supple leather strap from an array of interesting instruments.

Thwack!

The vision of his friend came back to haunt him once more.
Thwack!
“Jupiter loves you,” said Flamen.
Thwack!
The seer turned his head in time to see the bird’s heart stop beating.
“Your friend’s time is up.”

“No!” Flamen gasped for air.

He felt himself detach from his body, watching the spanking of the seer, while the vision unwound in slow motion in time with his blows. In a blink, through the ether he flew, arms outstretched, determined this time to save his friend.

Fingertips met.
Gravity screamed in defiance.
One, two fingers unwound.
The middle one ached.
The god of immutable physics took a bow.
A scream.
And the chemist was gone.

The priest snapped back into his body, eyes stinging, tears streaming down his cheeks in hot rivulets. Of all the deaths he’d been witness to, this one had consequences more far reaching than most.

Flamen saw once more the look of horror on the chemist’s face, heard the cry of abject terror.

There was something reflected in his friend’s eye, in the very corner of his pupil.

In astonishment, the priest dropped the whip.
It wasn’t a something.
It was a someone.
His friend hadn’t slipped from the ship’s deck.
He was pushed.

Gurp!

Pressing a combination of buttons on an electronic key fob, Ferret unlocked the front door to his home. The seasoned oak door swung open on well-oiled hinges. The consultant wiped his feet on the doormat and whistled three notes in succession, disarming the motion sensors.

Bob Bobson, Ferret's co-worker for the week, took a step backwards and gazed up, surveying the three-storey townhouse towering in front of him. He pinched his hand. "How . . . on . . . earth . . ."

"It's a little larger than the last place," said Ferret with a wink, beckoning the engineer in.

Bob poked his head inside the door. "Perhaps I should stay outside."

"Nonsense! You're as welcome as any of my friends."

Bob dropped an old beaten-up metal toolbox outside the door, unlaced his heavy boots, their steel toecaps protruding through cracked leather, and deposited them on a shoe rack next to the welcome mat. Methodically, he unzipped the faded blue overalls he favoured, making sure not to drop any of the contents of the pockets on the polished black marble floor and stowed the garment atop the boots.

Weird, thought Ferret. He has one bare foot.

Grabbing hold of the grand-banister rail, the consultant set off up the stairs, suit jacket tails billowing behind him, but stopped at the first turning. Bob remained rooted to the spot, mouth agape, staring at the pale-yellow paintwork and the diagonal row of carefully chosen pictures. Begrudgingly, the engineer pulled a carrier bag from his toolbox and, with a look of bewilderment, trudged on up the steps.

"Close sesame!" Ferret clicked his fingers, the noise echoing through the entry hall.

The door did as commanded.

As they ascended, Bob's curiosity got the better of him. "How many rooms?"

"The agent said twenty-six, although I suspect some of them of being cupboards."

"That one?" pointed Bob.

"Bathroom." Ferret held the door ajar.

Nervously, the engineer poked his head inside, nodding at the complementary shades of Italian marble adorning the walls and floor. "And that?"

"The master bedroom," smiled Ferret.

Truth be told, he was rather proud of the wrought iron four-poster bed, feature wall, and walk-in wardrobe, the hanging rails packed with suits for every season. The whole ensemble looked like it belonged in a fashion catalogue, which unsurprisingly, was exactly from whence it came.

"With an en suite?"

Ferret nodded. Getting the colour right had been a nightmare. So many shades of light grey and yet only one that truly matched the brushed aluminium fittings, bringing them to life. At least that's what the designer had said and, being Italian, she should know.

The consultant pressed on, towards a jet-black rectangle with no visible handles, located at the very top of the stairs.

"This is all topsy-turvy," said Bob, scratching his head. "The living room is downstairs; I saw both of them. And I'm sure the kitchen must be too. This layout, it makes me feel all . . ."

"Discombobulated?"

"That's the one."

Ferret pressed a button on the keychain, resulting in a faint click. The door opened just a crack. He pushed it with his index finger, causing it to swing open effortlessly. Loosening his tie, he marched in and flung his suit jacket across the back of an easy chair. Bob followed. With a flourish of the wrist, the consultant introduced the engineer to the massive single-pane picture window that fronted the attic-cum-den, offering a panoramic view of Regent's Park all the way to London Zoo.

"Wow," said Bob. "Nice TV."

Ferret slipped into the adjoining kitchenette and rummaged through the fridge. He withdrew a frosted glass container and poured a measure of clear liquid into a cocktail glass, adding a pair of ice cubes. Wrapping up the operation, he grabbed a bottle of beer, which he handed to Bob. "Welcome to my den."

Bob took the amber nectar.

Clink!

"Is that vodka?"

"Gin martini," said Ferret. "I make them in batches that don't last as long as they should. But how rude of me . . ."

"Beer's fine."

Ferret pointed his colleague at the window. From high above, the park was a sea of mottled green extending far into the distance, punctuated by random flashes of bright blue, yellow, and pink, the battle banners of runners and cyclists.

The consultant wandered over to the nearest recliner and picked up a game controller. "Fancy massacring zombies?"

Bob shook his head, swigging deeply from the bottle.

Ferret polished off the martini and returned to the fridge. "I'm glad the problem with Ted's all sorted."

"He's innocent, and he's not a mad loony," retorted Bob, raising his voice. "There. I said it."

Ferret felt a stirring inside that might be anger, although he wasn't sure.

He shrugged his shoulders, poured a second drink and returned to the lounge. Bob had taken up position in the midpoint of the den, the park behind him, ceiling spots illuminating his squat frame, focusing in on his left eye which was bruised like a battered peach. He looked so innocent, so alone, like he was

facing the beak on serious charges of grand larceny, deserted by his friends, the jury against him.

"I had a proper good chat with Ted earlier. I told him you'd do the right thing and get his job back."

"Honestly, Bob, you can be so naïve." Ferret grimaced. "I've already squared the situation away with management. As far as they're concerned, Ted's guilty. They've agreed to pick up the damages tab and pay us in full for all the time you put in. Plus, I negotiated a 'keep quiet' bonus and an extra double-time bonus, provided you finish by Sunday."

In an instant, Bob flew off the handle, jabbing the air with his finger. "You know he's innocent and you don't want to face the truth."

"Explain the hairy wig they found in his locker," said Ferret, parrying the assault.

"It's a stage prop from his wrestling days when he was known as Hairy O'Fairy."

"And the tunnel access panel in his office?"

"Coincidence. They're everywhere on that site, as you well know."

"What about the bag of goodies for those voice-activated attack squirrels?"

"They were ordinary squirrels who were nesting."

Involuntarily, Ferret moved to cover his thighs where his trousers were dotted with small holes ringed with spots of blood. While he'd been underground, chasing whatever it was that had vandalised Bob's work, those damn rodents had set upon him tag-team style, nipping away without remorse. In fact, if he didn't know better, he'd swear the suit had been assembled in a factory that handled nuts.

"Why won't you face the fact that Ted was telling the truth?" said Bob.

The consultant took a sip of martini. "There's no such thing as the little folk and there's certainly no such thing as a Gulp! On the other hand, there is such a thing as dressing up in disguise to sabotage our work. I don't know what Ted's motives were, and quite honestly, I don't care. Management says he's guilty, and that's good enough for me. As for voice-activated attack squirrels, they *do* exist. I've seen them for sale."

"Don't."

"Do."

"Double do with hundreds and thousands," said Bob, triumphantly.

"Triple do, with hundreds and thousands, syrup and a flake."

"You can't have syrup AND a flake. That's greedy."

"Can."

Bob took a step back. "What is it you're scared of?"

Ferret tensed his shoulders. "I'm not frightened of anything."

"You were a lot nicer when you believed in ghosts and yetis and the Loch Ness monster."

"I've grown up, got real, and got with the program." The consultant sighed, fiddling with the game controller. "Come on, indulge me. Zombie assault."

"Perhaps it's time you regressed, got unreal and stepped off the program," said Bob, ignoring the invitation. "This is a great opportunity to take up paranormal investigating again."

Ferret wandered over to the picture window. A bunch of rowdy gulls flew past, arguing over the remains of a pizza crust. Leaning against the glass, the consultant turned to face his friend. "Let me tell you a story about a successful TV presenter who decided to channel alternative theories. In a matter of months he transformed from respected sports correspondent and Green Party spokesperson to turquoise-wearing nut job, who claims to this day that trans-dimensional lizards are running the planet."

"But that's not you!"

"Bob, I'm building an international consultancy practice from the ground up. My business will not incorporate any kind of strangeness, and I include weird personality-profiling tools." Ferret undid his cufflinks and threw them one by one at the easy chair on which his crumpled suit jacket lay. "The paranormal is a ruthless, self-obsessed predator that seeks out believers and devours them in a single gulp. If I let it anywhere near me, it won't be long before I lose my credibility. In my experience, this is usually followed by the loss of one's residence."

"You're far too clever to let that happen."

Ferret shook his head. He'd thought the same, until things had come to a head at The Consultancy. It was none of Bob's business and hardly relevant to the conversation, but it lodged in Ferret's gut nonetheless. From Golden Boy to Spank Boy to out the door in less than thirty-six hours. All it had taken was turning up late to an important client meeting with the wrong haircut.

Ferret rubbed his left eye, brushing away an imaginary tear. "About these zombies."

"I said no." Bob fiddled with the carrier bag he was clutching and withdrew a padded envelope, handing it on.

The consultant raised an eyebrow. He emptied out the contents of Bob's offering onto a low-slung glass coffee table, revealing a broken video camera with exposed electronics. The lens was missing. He stroked his chin, turning the pile of mangled electronics over. "Is that *the* half-destroyed camera?"

Bob nodded. "Ted told me where he'd hidden it."

"There's no tape." The consultant exhaled hard through his nose, braying like a donkey.

Bob produced a cartridge from his pocket.

Ferret turned to face the window. "Unfortunately, I have no means of playing it."

"I knew you'd say that, which is why I copied it to a disk."

"Sadly, my laptop is in for repair."

"Then it's a good job I brought mine." From out of the carrier bag, Bob produced a portable computer and a tangle of cables. "Prepare to be amazed."

Although the image was off-centre, the location was instantly recognisable. It was clearly Bob's head and shoulders moving in and out of focus, jutting out

from a hole in a computer-room floor. Down he ducked. A syrupy radio presenter announced that Brentford had won one-nil the night before. Then Bob reappeared in an explosion of flailing arms and expletives, with a woolly shape clinging to his back, reminiscent of a replete sheep, fully charged with electrickery. Teeth did gnash, drool did fly, claws did snick and snack. Bob fell on his back, grappling bravely. Just as he was winning, the creature stuck its stubby snout into his eye and licked him right around the lips.

Slurp!

Spitting frothy bubbles, Bob kicked out with his foot. The creature bit his boot, entering into an ownership dispute during which Bob frantically untied the lace. Screaming loudly, he shuffled backward on his bum, free foot pumping at the floor, eyes firmly closed. Hackles raised, the creature let go. Bob shot backwards, gasping for air. In a single leap the creature was upon him.

Gurp!

Bob reeled.

In the confusion that followed, the hairy whatever-it-was pulled off his boot and ate his sock.

Slurpagurp!

The thing lolloped back to its hole-cum-lair, snarling and drooling. Bob dared to open an eye. Searching around, his hand located his lunchbox, which he threw at the thing with all his might, striking it on the flank. Distracted, it turned and sniffed the air. Bob curled into a tight ball and lay whimpering, awaiting his fate. The hairy thing collected the trophy in its mouth and dropped it in the hole. Then it saw the camera.

The last frame of film was of its slavering maw; the last sound, clear and unmistakable:

Gurp!

Ferret rewound the last ten seconds of film and watched it again.

"Top prank," he said with a smile. "You almost had me there. Which of your friends is it that looks like a wolfy Saint Bernard with a comedy beard?"

"Ferret!"

"You must have made this first thing this morning, before anyone else was about. Ingenious. I'm really impressed."

The colour of the engineer's face shifted gear from pink through to purple. "Ever since you joined that consultancy you haven't been right. They went through your head and changed all the best things about you, and now you don't even remember who you are any more."

"Look around you," laughed Ferret, back-peddling. "I'm proud of what I've achieved and unapologetic about the compromises it took."

"When was the last time you spoke to your dad?" Bob asked, covering his mouth with his hand.

"Months ago." Ferret counted to seven on his fingers. "He's an interfering busybody who can't keep his nose out of my affairs."

"That night, then. He was in a right panic when he called me. I came over immediately and found you passed out on the floor."

"Sounds like an average Friday night."

"He said you'd had a blazing row; the worst one yet." Bob rubbed the side of his neck. "You were being so bloody unreasonable, he shot you."

A curly lock of hair sprung to attention aside the consultant's head. "Now you're being melodramatic."

"I thought I'd find blood everywhere." Bob knocked the last of the beer back. "Instead, you were lying in a heap, a sweet smile on your face, sleeping like a babe. Your dad was working away at his desk, like nothing had happened."

The consultant searched through his jacket pocket, producing a mobile phone. He tapped the keys, summoning the requisite number. "So he shot me? If you think the last argument was bad, wait until you hear this one."

"Ferret." Bob's eyes welled.

The consultant held the phone aloft, ready to press 'dial.' "Let me guess. He's back in the Middle East."

"He was on holiday."

"I find that highly unlikely. He's never taken a holiday in his life."

Bob wrung his hands, playing with his thumbs. "There was a terrible accident. I'm really, really sorry."

"He was injured?"

"It's worse than that. He's dead."

"That can't be." Ferret's arm shook so much he was forced to put down the drink. "There's still so much to shout about. Only the other night, I composed a list of names to call him in German next time we meet."

"Sit down," said Bob. "You're as white as a sheet."

Ferret felt sick to the core and yet mentally the news meant nothing at all. He knocked back the remainder of the martini then walked over to the drinks cabinet, rifled through the whisky section and withdrew a bottle of unopened fifteen-year-old single malt scotch and two crystal tumblers. He cracked the foil on the bottle, removed the cork and poured a generous two-finger helping of silky liquid into both of the glasses, handing one to Bob.

"To Wolfgang," he said.

The consultant's world swirled around him.

He was supposed to be sad, dammit.

How could he cry over losing someone he hardly knew, someone who wasn't there from one birthday to the next? As a child, he'd had no idea when he was going to see his father next and when he did, the old scrote was never happy, always sporting a scowl and a criticism, delivered in fluent German.

Ferret wondered what it might feel like to cry, to sob his heart out. He leant on Bob's shoulder. His tear ducts felt like they were made of porcelain, the reservoirs behind as parched as the Atacama Desert at midday during drought season.

"I met him the day before he went away," said Bob. "He was so looking forward to seeing the fjords."

The engineer opened the carrier bag and produced a small package carefully wrapped in brown paper, methodically bound with string. On top,

tucked underneath the string, nestled a manila envelope which was decorated with a single word, written in gothic German script.

"He said if anything were to happen, I must give you this. Everything is explained inside."

"When's the funeral?"

"Ferret, I'm really sorry. It was two months ago."

"And you didn't think to tell me before now?"

"I thought you'd know." Bob walked around the den, unable to look Ferret in the eye. "It was in the papers and everything. When you didn't turn up in Salisbury for the burial, I didn't know what to do. I don't have this address, only your old one. And the phone numbers I have didn't work either."

"But you knew where I worked."

"And they told me you'd left. They didn't want to talk about you. It was as if your name was a dirty word."

Ferret and Bob sat in silence, sipping whisky.

The consultant recalled how Bob, in his capacity as family handyman, used to help him build models as a child. Later, his father would rebuff him because he was too busy on this project or that. Every once in a while Ferret shook his head and readied himself for the tears he was sure would follow. But they never did.

The day it had all gone downhill faster than an Olympic skier greased with weasel spit was the day he announced he'd been headhunted by The Consultancy and earmarked for a star-spangled career as a management consultant. Wolfgang blew his top in spectacular fashion, letting loose a full artillery barrage, coupled with an air strike, peppered with cruise missiles.

About what one might expect from a government scientist turned weapons inspector.

"This doesn't change anything as far as Erin Breweries are concerned," said Ferret at last. "I know you like Ted, but someone has to take the rap for vandalising your work."

"But the tape."

"The tape doesn't exist. If it did, the Asset Conformance Team would have watched it. Then they'd hide it and blame Ted."

"That's not fair."

"Life isn't fair, Bob. Not unless you happen to have the right connections, a pile of money and a gang of supportive friends. Then, perhaps, it can become too fair."

"About that." The engineer held his nose, then offered his right hand, the middle finger tucked against the palm.

"Well I never!" Bemused, the consultant completed the shake. "To friends."

"To friends," said Bob.

"I've known you how long? You kept your membership very quiet."

Bob blushed. "I didn't know you were in The Network either, until your friend Marcus called. He passed on your details. He said that ever since you'd

left that job in the City of London you'd become a hermit and you were avoiding your friends. He asked if I could do something. That's why I offered you a job, managing me, to get you out of the house. I've been trying to say something about your dad all week, but you're all defensive and shut off and not right in yourself."

Ferret took a slug of whisky. "Thank you for stepping up."

Bob said his goodbyes, gifted Ferret a four-leaf clover, mumbled something incomprehensible, and let himself out.

Ferret returned to the window, piling into another two-finger salute of whisky. Once he was sure his father's old handyman was two floors down, he switched the TV over to the home security system and skipped through the channels, checking each of the concealed internal camera feeds in turn.

Bob was by the front porch, climbing into his overalls. The consultant skipped to a different camera feed and waited, catching Bob nodding to one of his neighbours, a snooty gent in his mid-fifties, who gave a sneer of disapproval from beneath the brim of a Panama hat.

"Good old Montgomery," chortled Ferret. "Always contemplating a citizen's arrest."

Bob climbed into a grimy grey van parked up in the private road that ran the length of the terrace and fired up the engine, creating a cloud of blue smoke.

Ferret laughed.

The engineer's visit would be reported in the next residents' newsletter. Workmen must use the rear entrance or the tone of the neighbourhood will suffer. Ever since he'd moved in, despite his best efforts, he just couldn't stop collecting acerbic put-downs. The Lord knows he'd tried to fit in, but like the rest of the world, his neighbours were quite alien to him.

The consultant tutted, picking up a game controller. There was nothing quite like a full-on, no-holds-barred Friday night zombie massacre.

At least the undead didn't criticise him.

Unlike his father.

Bob was a member of the same secret club. Now that was a surprise.

The engineer's parting words rankled in his brain.

Ferret put the joystick down, his face screwed up in contemplation.

What had Bob meant exactly when he'd wished him the best of Irish luck at getting his secret powers back?

The Consultancy

Of all her attributes, Marianne Lavalle considered there were three that had powered her career all the way to the top.

Well, almost to the top.

Damn those short-sighted New Yorkers, handing her job to a man twelve years her junior with no verifiable experience to his name.

Thumbing through a book that fell neatly under the moniker of “workplace psychology,” she glanced at herself in a nearby mirror. She’d inherited those high cheekbones from her father, her thick, wild hair from her mother, and the skinny ankles from the family Jack Russell. The neatly clipped check couture suit with skirt cut just above the knee completed her first attribute: The Look. That was all hers. She’d shed the power shoulders some years ago, which was a shame, as when she dressed in power-pads and full battle armour, they treated her like Darth Vader, cowering away under tables, hiding in cupboards, and gasping for breath when they whispered her name.

Marianne twitched her nose.

Unfortunately, those days were behind her now. As every woman knows, business dress is wont to change with the season, and failing to evolve is route one to a loss of corporate face.

A couple of young office workers drifted into the room, laughing at a private joke. Marianne straightened her back, stood tall and froze, pretending to be a leopard stalking its prey. She curled her lip ever so slightly, bared her teeth, and let her presence expand. The youngsters fell silent and looked at each other, wide-eyed. Deciding they’d got the wrong section, they turned quickly on their heels and fled.

“Still got it at forty-eight,” cackled Marianne, checking her pose once more.

A hot flush crept across her breasts. Damn those feelings, mugging her again. It was her fault for forgetting to take her supplements with breakfast coffee. At least she’d had the foresight to make arrangements, just in case. That took balls, which was her second attribute. Thanks to her ex-husband and his secret little club of corporate raiders, her future was secure.

All she had to do was keep her side of the bargain.

Marianne replaced the tiny volume entitled *Inspiration for Leaders* and picked out the number one bestseller from the neuro-linguistic programming section. *The Omniverse* by Barry Albright. Her curiosity had been piqued at a one-day workshop she’d recently attended, and she was determined to discover more about his groundbreaking theory regarding how to communicate pictures and feelings using only vocal tones. The idea of scaring people into doing her bidding without the need for threats intrigued her.

Inevitably, her balls were going to need reinforcing and inflating too, but that was taken care of, in the form of a hired coach.

A loud voice boomed through the adjoining rooms of the labyrinthine Charing Cross Road bookstore, catching her attention. She immediately began walking towards it.

"Cu-Sith? He's an Irish devil dog, like Black Shuck. No, I don't know if he's the same dog; that's why I'm here to purchase a book on the subject."

"Sir, you want the supernatural section, not parapsychology," replied the assistant.

"It was the supernatural section that sent me here." The owner of the voice sighed in frustration.

Marianne's heart beat a little faster. It was her favourite graduate, who she hadn't seen for six months, not since that ill-fated sideways step she'd taken over the pond.

"Ferret," said Marianne, in a measured dusky tone. "How the devil are you?"

"M . . ." The consultant glanced nervously from side to side. "What an unexpected surprise."

"Relax," purred Marianne, letting her jacket fall open. "And call me Marianne."

"I thought you were in the Big Apple," said Ferret, crossing his hands over his private area.

"The promotion went to hell in a handbasket!" laughed Marianne, launching into a well-rehearsed routine. "I realised after three months of hard living that a 24/7 party town was no longer the town for me, and my shrink agreed. He told me to slow down, make some more me time in my packed agenda. So, on his advice, I jacked it all in, came home, and moved out west."

"As in Kensington?"

"Cheltenham."

"Wow. It must be a pretty special project to afford talent like yours."

"I'm acting CEO in a hush-hush merger." Marianne winked.

"Really?"

"Some slowdown, huh?" Marianne moved silently towards her prey. "I'm afraid I can't tell you who I work for, or who we're merging with, as that classes as insider trading. Of course, if the market's still your thing, you could make it worth our while."

"What are you doing in town?" asked Ferret, taking a step to the side.

"I'm here for a long weekend to meet with our lawyers and tie up some of the more unctuous merger details. What about you, Ferret? The last I heard, we were reviewing your record and scratching our heads, trying to figure out what happened to stop our most prominent rising star in his tracks."

"It's a long story."

Marianne put her finger to Ferret's lips. "Tell me over coffee."

It was indeed a long story, one which required several shots of espresso in a nearby Soho coffee bar. From there, they proceeded to a cocktail lounge and set about drinking Champagne on Marianne's expense account. Ferret complained, citing firstly the need for a book on dogs, then a requirement for

the entire Sherlock Holmes canon in hardback. Finally, he confessed to taking up computer gaming, using the forthcoming release of a new title as his reason for needing to leave early.

Marianne didn't answer. She simply ordered a round of martinis.

Ferret explained how once she'd left to join The Consultancy's U.S. arm, he'd been reassigned to work for Ross McGyver, a short, balding man of Scottish origin, who, according to the partner rumour mill, was the culprit behind the "cash for balls" scandal, in which money from the office charity tins was replaced with rolled-up silver foil. He'd denied it vehemently, of course. Ferret told a tale in which Ross forced one of the juniors to leave behind a large tip at a restaurant, then pocketed it when her back was turned, laughing at the poor lass for being dumb enough to place notes on the table.

"In his feedback I once wrote: Has the vision of a mole and the kick of mule," smiled Marianne.

Ferret laughed uncomfortably.

Sadly, Ross had sufficient top cover in place to simply shrug it off. Had she still been in the UK, he would have gone for her throat, of this Marianne had no doubt, the resulting fight being both savage and brutal. Back in the day, the winner was a sure bet. Marianne rolled her eyes. Nowadays, she was no longer confident that the battered body tossed to the crows from the battlements would be his.

"He handed me a string of poison chalices to sup from," said Ferret, slipping from his chair, martini in hand. "Once I'd made myself well and truly ill on the foul-tasting contents of his goblets — not to mention vastly unpopular amongst the people I was ordered to sack — I was unceremoniously shown the tradesman's exit on a charge of poor performance."

"I heard he gave you a verbal warning for turning up to work with pink hair."

"That was just the paperclip that held all the other charges together. If there's one thing I learnt from my resignation, it's that no matter how incompetent you are, if you're in with the in-crowd at the top, you can get away with anything."

"Sad but true." Marianne reached out and clasped Ferret's hand. "Ross was hired as a professional scalp hunter, tasked with hunting down complacent high achievers. The odd firing reminds those who remain not to coast."

"It's all water off a duck's back, under a bridge," said Ferret, using an old consultancy phrase that made them both giggle.

Marianne ordered another round of apple martinis, served with a twist of peel jutting just above the vodka line like a little green piggy tail.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

Ferret raised his left shoulder, dismissing a demon. Marianne saw the cogs whir away in his brain, but once they stopped, the divine light that had so often illuminated their partnership simply wasn't there. Was this really the same senior consultant who they'd awarded consecutive promotions to, year on year?

"What kind of kinky smut am I thinking of?"

"How could I know that?"

Marianne paused for a second, to consider her latest conquest. Something really wasn't right. Ferret used to have this intuitive way of knowing what the opposition was thinking, often before they knew themselves.

"This might sound mad," said Ferret, "but I can't connect with anything that happened before you went away. Not in colour, anyway, and heaven knows I've tried. You remember my thirtieth birthday? Apparently I had a massive argument with my father that night, a right old screamer by all accounts."

"Have you called him?"

"Sadly, he recently passed away."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Marianne, inviting Ferret to hug her, an invitation he gratefully accepted. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"My best friend is out of town and my other best friend is tied up with work, so I can't ask them about his death. They both knew, yet they kept it from me. Why would they do that?"

"Perhaps they were acting in your best interests?"

"I can't see it myself."

Marianne made her excuses and headed towards the washrooms, where she cornered one of the good-looking bartenders she'd secretly made eye contact with earlier. With a wink and a quick squeeze of the bum, she slipped him her business card.

Seductively, he caressed a Champagne glass with a cleaning cloth. "Aren't you?"

Marianne put a finger to her lips, turned on her heels, and, slinking her hips, sidled towards the ladies' room, turning her head at the last and blowing a kiss.

It was such a shame about Ferret.

Somewhere along the line he'd become vulnerable and lost the killer instinct she'd instilled in him. It happened. She'd seen it many times before, most often in women of a certain age, which was why she specialised exclusively in training men. To have it occur to one of her own . . . that was a horrible disappointment.

No wonder he'd resigned.

Except that wasn't quite true, as they both knew only too well.

He'd taken the honourable option and fallen on his own sword before they'd pushed him.

She'd heard that McGyver was livid that morning. Not only had he intended to publicly sack Ferret, he was also determined to bring charges against him for profiteering on confidential information. The Consultancy soon put a stop to that, but not before an external investigation was launched and later contained. Who could blame them? Expose one and you risk contagion, followed by the collapse of the entire house of cards, which wasn't in anyone's interests — especially the partners.

Better to bury the bodies at sea, she thought. That way it wasn't possible for a mass exhumation to take place. Certainly not on the say-so of one nasty, vindictive man, his insides consumed by petty jealousy.

Marianne checked her look in the mirror. Behind her, a couple of young things fell into one of the spare cubicles, legs splayed everywhere, reminding her of a pair of young deer on ice.

She supposed she was a cougar now, not a leopard.

They gave her that nickname when she was the same age as the silly young things in closet A, due to her ability to track men of power, drink with them until the sun came up (her third attribute), and then bed them with ruthless precision.

She rolled her eyes. The current generation really were clueless.

Some of them had The Look and some had balls, but few of them possessed the ability to discover a person's buttons and press them in the correct combination. Sure, they'd connive to bed the boss. That was the easy bit. Getting paid in full, that was trickier. Marianne craned her head, listening in on the two young things scratching away, full of spite and remorse.

"Then he dumped me."

"Tosser."

"I'll get him back online. Just wait 'til I publish those photos."

Marianne laughed privately and finished adjusting her lipstick. These days, they think they're entitled to have it all, just for putting out. When a leopard goes hunting, she must do so with passion, then turn the tables and get what she wants in writing.

She purred inwardly. Sex is his reward for being a good boy.

Believing in promises is for daydreamers, she thought. A mirage littered with the husks of promotions that never were.

"What I can't figure out is why the doors of finance are closed to me," said Ferret upon her return. "I've done everything by the book. I took my contacts with me, set up my own company, had business cards printed, made calls, called in favours, but to be honest, it's like pulling hen's teeth. I've had one job in three months and that was project managing a computer room upgrade. It wasn't even remotely connected to the City."

It was obvious to Marianne what had happened. Unable to turn the screws in an official capacity, that wily bastard McGyver had put the frighteners on half the City, effectively making Ferret unemployable. Unfortunately, there wasn't much she could do about it, except offer him a job.

That option crossed her mind for a millisecond only.

Granted, he was one half of the fighting fuckers, but their dues to each other were long paid off. She smiled, fondly remembering the night they'd gone out to celebrate a minor success, fully aware that bed was the final destination. For two years they'd fought and fucked together, working their way through The Consultancy's acquisitions portfolio, fearlessly trashing the opposition and loving every second of their new-found notoriety.

Hell, it felt like an aeon ago.

Marianne slapped herself.

If she entertained her old star performer now, it might compromise her current activities, and that was strictly *verboten*. No matter how down on his luck Ferret was, she was not about to invite him to Cheltenham.

“What about your secret society friends?”

Ferret’s eyes bulged; his cheeks turned bright pink.

“Oops,” said Marianne.

The consultant took a slurp of vodka martini. “To be honest, I’m thinking about packing it all in.”

“To do what?”

“Investigate the paranormal.”

“Are you qualified to do that?”

“Not formally.” Ferret played with the tail of apple peel, watching it bob up and down. “All of my business acumen is screaming at me not to be such an idiot, yet I can’t get the notion out of my head.”

“You’ve always been impetuous. Why stop now?”

Ferret nodded. “There’s something I’d like your advice on. Before my father went on his ill-fated cruise, he left me a letter. On one hand, the instructions seem harmless, but on the other, I hate being told what to do and I can’t trust him.”

“Is he asking you to do anything illegal?”

The consultant shook his head.

Her pulse racing, Marianne lent slowly over the table, allowing Ferret a flash of cleavage and snogged him hard on the lips. Seconds later, she withdrew. “He’s your father. Do what he says and screw the consequences. What’s the worst that can happen?”

Later that evening, back in her hotel room near Hyde Park, Marianne reflected on her encounter with the onetime superstar she’d moulded personally to her exacting specification. Ferret was good. No, he was better than good — he was brilliant. And when he was being brilliant, there was a light in his eyes that couldn’t be diminished by a mere mortal such as McGyver. That was why Ross had gone for him and savaged him so badly: He knew Ferret’s ship was listing. Of all the things he could have done, arming torpedoes and releasing them was by far the cruellest option. That was The Scalp Hunter all over. He’d made his name undermining, shaming, and firing top performers. Boot them hard, boot them often, and then keep on kicking all the way to the door.

Marianne turned her attention to her lover for the night. He was young, he was handsome, and he knew a few tricks — certainly enough to make her squeal. But when all was said and done, he wasn’t Ferret. She hoped that whatever it was that had happened to him would unhappen. The idea of bedding her rugby playing fly-half, with his intimate knowledge of all her fantasies made her bum wriggle. She held that thought as she pulled her stud roughly by the hair in a mixture of passion and frustration, determined to make the most of her first Friday night in London for as long as she could remember.

Her lawyers had been taken to a dogfight.

Unlike her, Old Man Cocks wasn't taking it lying down.

"Give it to me," she said, writhing like a hot reptile.

If this boy gave out halfway through, she'd send him home and order another. She was the boss; whatever she wanted, she got. If the Old Man didn't know that by now, he had a deep and long-lasting shock coming his way. Give up willingly and she'd show him some leniency in the compensation department. Otherwise, the big guns were coming. If necessary, she'd fuck his company into the ground, running a procession of assault weapons over the remains.

Then she'd turn the turrets on him.

She gasped, her toes tingling. There was nothing like the thought of tanks on the lawn to get the juices going.

Highgate

Ferret sat in his favoured recliner, joystick in hand, staring at the reclaimed Victorian fire surround that occupied one wall of the den. He focused in on the mantelpiece and the carefully wrapped package that Bob had delivered from his recently deceased father.

It had taken plenty of persuasion in the form of three double whiskies and a line of cocaine to open the accompanying letter. He'd hoped to find something soothing inside, an explanation perhaps for why his father had acted so unreasonably. Instead, he found contrite blame. It was Wolfgang, not Ferret, who was the wronged party.

The consultant felt he ought to be really angry and assembled a pile of kindling in the grate, tossing the package on top, striking a match, ready to let it burn. His father had been a bloody nightmare in life and now here he was, prodding away from the afterlife.

It's my fault for entertaining him, he thought, allowing the match to creep all the way down to his thumb.

"Ow!"

The source of ignition pattered out and fell to the hearth, granting the package a temporary stay of execution.

Cursing his father's name, the consultant measured out another two lines of cocaine and settled in for a marathon session of Zombie Death Camp, which, although enthralling, was somewhat ironical.

His father was dead. The thought rattled around his brain. Good riddance! No, that didn't sit right.

He'd build a memorial, celebrate his father's achievements.

That felt wrong too.

In frustration, he threw the controller at the wall, pulled on a suit from the rack marked "casual," and set out for the West End, intent on buying a couple of books and having a damn good drink. Anything to get away from the gift beyond the grave.

Passing by the bathroom, he paused to dampen down the annoying curl. Looking good, he thought. With luck, he might even come home with a lady.

Many hours later, following an unexpected meeting in a bookshop with Marianne Lavalle, his old consultancy boss, Ferret returned home and settled back into the recliner. Once comfy, he poured another tumbler of whisky and did something he'd spent his entire life priding himself on not doing: thinking. And the more he thought about his father and his childhood, the more he realised none of it felt real. He tried to remember his thirtieth birthday, which remained mostly blank. He thought about the day he'd resigned to the practice head and the distorted look on McGyver's face when he'd discovered he was too late in delivering the fatal blow. He'd watched the spittle run down the Scalp Hunter's chin, foaming as it dripped onto his tie, forming a most splendid stain.

He remembered those tiny shrimp-like eyes, black to the core, intent on conveying fear and intimidation as they tried to burrow deep into his skull.

Ferret watched himself laugh at the weird brain-eating crustacean from another planet; he saw everyone else in the open-plan office make themselves busy, pretending not to listen.

He recalled the first of his cock-ups, that horrible affair with the Swiss bond broker. Instead of walking away from the deal, he'd put inappropriate details the way of his friends at exactly the wrong moment. Thanks to his impeccable record, he got away with it.

However, attitudes changed.

His team eyed him with suspicion rather than awe.

He thought about Millfield and his time on the rugby pitch captaining the winning team, the applause from the crowd deafening as he scored the only try in the most important game of his career.

It was horrible.

Instead of being illustrated in colour, all of his favourite memories were faded, transmogrified into dog-eared black and white.

The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that everything changed on the night Bob collected him from his father's apartment. He tried really hard to remember what had happened, but the more he tried, the less tangible everything became. He tried distraction, deliberately not thinking about it, hoping it might come to him. Then he tried sneaking up on the evening from behind, eyes closed, opening them only at the last.

Nothing.

He abused alcohol to supercharge his memory. Then he added Peruvian flake into the mix, which only served to make him restless for more drink.

Exhausted after a sleepless week of thinking, the consultant took a hot shower followed by a cold bath. Still feeling empty inside, he pulled on a pair of slacks, an England rugby shirt and a tweed jacket, and headed into Camden to try to purchase marijuana from a series of likely looking lads, all of whom insisted on trying to deal him crack for money up-front. Disappointed, he sought refuge in the nearest public house, aptly named The World's End, where he intended to resume drowning his sorrows.

Mixed groups of tourists huddled around a smattering of tables, shopping bags on display, chatting away in Spanish, French, and Japanese. Ferret ordered a double gin and tonic. For a Friday afternoon, the pub was pretty dead. He'd missed the lunchtime crowd; he supposed it was still too early for the party brigade. Turning around, a tiny Asian girl dressed in a tight school uniform caught his eye. Captivated by her costume, he stepped away from the bar and clattered straight into another customer, spilling his drink over her boots and knocking a pint from her hand.

"You clumsy oaf!"

"I'm terribly sorry," said Ferret, offering up a handkerchief. "Let me buy you another."

"Cider. And not the cheap rubbish."

The girl he'd bumped into was in her early twenties, slim, and pallid, with hair the colour of burnished copper. She was dressed in a tight brown corset with bronze fittings and frills, topped off with the most ardent undertaker's hat he'd ever seen. To seal the deal, the hat was decorated with watch cogs and dials, and a nifty attention-grabbing feather.

"I'm Ferret," he said, handing over a replacement pint. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Emily. Before you start with any of that posh-boy chatting-me-up nonsense, you're not my type."

"You're not really mine either. To be honest, I hadn't intended to get drunk. I was trying to buy marijuana, but everyone wanted to sell me crack."

"Voice down," said Emily. "There are plainclothes about. Your business isn't their business."

Ferret apologised again, intending to end the conversation, but his mouth had other ideas. Before he knew it, he'd blurted out that his father was dead, he'd had a run-in with a devil dog, he was no longer sure who he was (except he was going to become a paranormal investigator), and he simply had to get stoned, in order to try and make sense of it all.

"Calm down." Emily shook her head, flicking her hand through long curls. "I've got a friend who may be able to sort you out. Let's sit down and finish our drinks first."

Emily's friend, it transpired, lived in Highgate, but before an introduction was to be made she insisted on having a second drink, to get to know Ferret a little better. To this end, he bought two pints of cider with brandy depth-charges and proposed a race to the bottom. Having drawn the first round, Emily lined them up for a repeat race. Ferret professed he was more of a distance drinker than a speed drinker, and the last time he'd competed in such a race, a hair dye forfeit had cost him his job. Chatting away, their mutual love of over-indulgence soon became apparent. As he predicted, Ferret lost round two.

They finished up with a pair of schnapps chasers, falling out of the pub arm in arm. Pulse racing, the consultant raised his arm to hail a cab. His new friend waved the cab away.

"I'm not taking you anywhere dressed like that." Emily took hold of his hand. "If you want to score drugs, you've got to look the part."

The consultant hadn't thought to ask Emily what she was doing in Camden. He discovered she owned a gothic clothing shop, located just off the high street. Business had been slow, so she'd locked up early and snuck off for a drink. Now she was opening up again for a personal fitting. From the racks, she chose a pair of sharp, black, frosted trousers with laces up the side, some unfeasibly pointy shoes, and a shirt with the most outrageous frills Ferret had ever seen. He flounced in front of the mirror, excited by the new look.

"That's better, my Lord." Emily's face lit up in delight, her hand flitting along a row of purses, eventually settling on a black heart-shaped one. "Let's go."

"Which part of Highgate?" asked Ferret, giggling at the shoes.

“The cemetery.”

Lord Ferret flagged down a cab and instructed the cabbie to take them to their destination. Emily stopped the driver before he reached the gates. Ferret paid. His accomplice swore him to silence, on his dead father’s grave. Once he’d crossed himself and said the words, Emily told him how she used to come here as a teenager and hang about the West Cemetery, where many a Hammer Horror film was shot. She knew a secret entrance.

Once over the collapsed wall, they fought deep undergrowth and eerie, clinging tree roots, aiming towards a rough path hewn through the ivy. Free of the jungle, they frolicked amongst ancient tombstones and memorials, drinking green chartreuse from a black-and-copper hip flask. Ferret wondered where Emily’s friend might be hiding. What did he look like? How much might the merchandise cost? Although he’d heard about the therapeutic qualities of cannabis, he hadn’t actually tried it. Would he even know whether it was the real thing?

Arm in arm they walked the Egyptian Avenue, the entrance flanked by mock pylons, borrowed under licence from the Temple of Karnak. Lady Emily showed Lord Ferret the Circle of Lebanon with its ring of cedar trees and stone tombs, packed together as tightly as single-storey Victorian townhouses. She confessed that as a young girl, she’d once sent out party invites to every Hammer Horror monster she knew by name, requesting they meet her here on her birthday. Sadly, none came. In theatrical malaise, she recited a fine soliloquy, paying tribute to the bones of her adored Shelley, who Ferret assumed to be a favourite pet, most likely her dog. In turn, he tried to say positive things about his father, but what started as a eulogy soon turned into a gesture of defiance.

They waltzed among the graves, a whirl of frills, drinking and dancing together. Lady Emily encouraged him to imagine his father’s corpse and describe it, growing ever more animated with each sordid image. Lord Ferret learned that his Lady was a fan of steampunk, her costume being one of her own creation. He complimented her on her skills. She pushed him against the trunk of a tree, painting his eyes with thick black eyeliner, darkening his eyebrows and adjusting his cravat for maximum effect. Finally, she handed him her hat, posing him for a ream of sepia photographs against a mausoleum that she’d once identified as the resting place of the Highgate vampire.

In need of a breather, the cute little steamstress sat down, cross-legged, atop a nearby grave.

“Where’s your friend?” Ferret was beginning to think the trip one big charade.

Emily blew a kiss.

“Do you intend to mug me when he arrives and make off with my wares?”

“You posh boys can be such dunces.” Emily retrieved her hat from his head and from inside the rim produced a roll-up. She motioned him over.

He took a swig from the flask, and then another. Emily warned him to slow down, a suggestion which he, as a seasoned pro, ignored. When she

doubly warned him to be careful with the smoke, he ignored this suggestion too. Three or four puffs later, relaxing against the grave's headstone, Ferret felt his head inflate with helium.

"Blowback," said Emily, hastily applying a layer of burgundy lipstick.

"A what?"

"Stay there."

Emily inserted the burning end of the joint inside her mouth, leaving most of the filter protruding from her closed lips. Lifting her dress, she squatted low over his middle, put the filter between his lips, almost touching his mouth with hers, so tantalisingly close, and gently blew, instructing Ferret to suck. He felt a stirring in his pants. They reversed the process. By the time Lady Emily collapsed against him, giggling, he was floating away amongst the clouds.

"This is so naughty," said Emily adjusting her dress and unlacing his fly.

Ferret felt Emily grab hold of his ears. They touched noses. She frotted slowly from side to side, her luscious rear moving in a tight figure eight.

The volume cranked up; Ferret's ears roared.

He heard each note of every bird's individual call.

Perfect.

"Wow." He pulled Emily close, his nose alive with hints of musky perfume.

"You are so wasted," she laughed, placing his hand on her breast.

"And horny."

As indeed was she: Her briefs were sopping, a counterpoint to the coffin handle in his trousers.

Emily leaned in and kissed him, her tongue tip brushing his, hair falling in cascades around his neck.

He imagined they were skipping along the edge of a dark passion play, ready to fall into each other.

Why could he not feel the truth of it?

Lord Ferret's peripheral vision played tricks with the light and shade, revealing creepy creatures amongst the graves; colours swirled brightly, amalgamating under the canopy of trees, the dancing shadows a cinematic extravaganza of horror from the early days of film.

Emily adjusted her undies, and taking hold of little ferret, winked.

Ferret braced himself, fingers flexing. Grasping the top of the raised memorial, he gazed deep into her eyes.

He felt the annoying curl on the side of his head spring erect. His stomach growled; tentacles spread out inside him. He felt a surreal Dali octopus fill up his shell, dappled with spots of pink, red, and green.

"Tell me again how your father died," whispered Emily, wriggling her bum up and down.

Ferret gasped. "He drowned."

"Louder."

"Drowned. Lungs . . . exploded . . ."

"Ohh . . . More . . ."

"Eyes . . . popped . . . out . . ." Without warning, he turned his head to the side and threw up, ejecting the meagre contents of his stomach.

"Ohh . . ."

Ferret felt the whole inside of his being rush for the exits. The black-and-white memories of Millfield came first, tumbling out of his mouth, followed by the Scalp Hunter's disdainful grin, spewing forth from his nose. The octopus brought up the rear. His memories mixed in a sorry puddle of puke, soaking into the stained grass. Apologetically, he composed himself. Miraculously, his shirt was unspolit, unlike the moment, which lay dead and buried.

Ferret swung his legs over the side of the raised grave and tried to jump down. Another rush caught him unawares, bowling him over. Wave upon wave of nausea engulfed him, forcing him to his knees. With the past, present, and future colliding around him, he finally realised what was missing from his life: He had no sense of connection between body, mind, and soul.

Emily consoled him.

Attempting to brush away the mess, he caught a trouser lace on the edge of a headstone and ripped a mighty hole in the pants.

Curse words echoed across the graves.

"And people get stoned for fun?" Ferret coughed, wiping himself down in the cemetery's washrooms.

"It doesn't always mix with alcohol," said Emily.

"Where's the fun in that?" Ferret laughed merrily. "If it doesn't mix with alcohol, surely it's no fun at all."

Lord Ferret instructed the cabbie to drop Emily back at The World's End and headed off home, determined not to think any more. Thinking led to complications. What he needed was to get out more, get back in touch with his feelings. Dressing up on a whim, whirling through a cemetery, making up speeches, that was life itself. Steadily, the consultant's thoughts turned to the joys of sex.

Rewind.

He'd abandoned Emily without a second thought.

"Driver. Back to the End."

It was no use. By the time they reached the pub, Emily was long gone. Her final words came back to haunt him: *So long, posh boy. There are worse ways to die.*

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" They were a hot item and Ferret hadn't even realised. He slapped himself. "The Regent's Park."

Lord Ferret watched the world whiz past while he counted the number of times he'd had intercourse between his birthday and the graveyard. He was appalled to discover he needed zero hands on which to do the reckoning.

He shook his head, catching the reflection of his longer-than-average nose in the driver's mirror. His eyes were smeared with makeup, and across his forehead, written in burgundy lipstick, was a single three-letter word:

TIT.

The consultant mooched his way up to the den and slumped down in his favourite recliner to read his father's letter one more time. The instructions were quite specific. He was to make himself familiar with the files contained on the enclosed memory stick, taking care to keep the contents private. And then . . .

Unable to bear it any longer, he ripped the package open and undid the catch on a small wooden box contained within. He removed the glass phial to which the letter referred, holding it up to the light, observing how the liquid moved when he sloshed it gently from side to side.

Was he really going to do as his father asked?

Perhaps later, he thought. Or perhaps not at all. No, he'd had enough of feeling disconnected from the world.

Ferret removed the stopper from the phial, closed his eyes, and with a nervous gulp, let the ritual begin.

