

Cthulhushire

The Thing in the Woods

By Stephen J Dutton



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Hoping to gain more information on paranormal goings on around Wellslaw, Prudence approaches the local newspaper with an offer to write a column on the subject and this leads her and Michael to a nearby farmer whose cattle have been disappearing. The issue of missing cattle is just the tip of the iceberg though as the investigators uncover a plot to summon a supernatural being of incredible power...

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1.

Being a Friday evening the pub was filled with groups of drinkers marking the end of the working week and Michael Lester and Prudence Brent were no different. They were joined by Michael's girlfriend Emma Thatcher who worked at a bank close to where the pair had an office for their private investigation company and while Prudence went to the bar for drinks Michael and Emma found them all somewhere to sit.

"Here we go." Prudence said as she arrived with their drinks and she handed out the glasses.

"So is this where you say 'I suppose you're wondering why I've gathered you here tonight'?" Emma asked as she picked up her glass, "Or is that Michael's line?" and she smiled at her boyfriend as she sucked some of the drink through a straw.

"I've never actually done that." Michael pointed out, picking up his own drink as well.

"I thought we should talk about the weird cases we've had." Prudence said and Emma winced.

"Oh not more tales of lizard people and time travelling dogs." she said.

"Those things are real." Prudence said, sitting down opposite Emma, "I think we should start hunting them and I'm pretty sure that John agrees."

"Ah yes, where is the nutty professor?" Emma said.

"John Midland is not nutty." Michael replied.

"Where is he do you think? At home looking at that book of fairy tales from the Middle Ages?" Emma said.

"They aren't fairy stories." Prudence commented.

"Then maybe he's taking broomstick flying lessons from that witch you told me about Michael." Emma added.

"What did you have in mind Prudence?" Michael asked and she smiled.

"I thought I'd go to the local paper." she told him.

"How is that going to help? If the police don't believe anything you tell them why should the local paper?" Emma said.

"It might not be good for business if all our cases start appearing in the press. Even a minor local paper like ours." Michael pointed out.

"I'm not going to ask them to write about us, I'm going to ask to be able to write a column for them. A column about local legends and strange goings on. That way we can have people contact us about anything out of the ordinary they've seen." Prudence explained.

"Do you think they'd agree? You told me they'd turned you down for a job before." Michael said.

"That was as a reporter. Writing a column is different. They'd only pay me for what they printed." Prudence told him.

"And who'd be paying for all the time you miss from real cases Michael?" Emma said to her boyfriend.

"This stuff has got me kind of interested." he replied and she sighed.

"You're kidding me." she said.

"There are things going on that I think I want to know more about. If only so I can protect us from them. Someone around here has a book that caused the deaths of four people." Michael said.

"There is a lizard man out there who has a gun and a score to settle against us as well." Prudence added, nodding and Emma sighed again.

"Emma still thinks he was a guy in a Halloween costume." Michael said, smiling at his girlfriend, "There's also the issue of that group that have the book used to summon that time travelling hound. If they see you asking about strange goings on they might be tempted to get in contact about it. So when will you go to the paper?"

"I was thinking about the first thing tomorrow. The paper comes out midweek so the letters are starting to come in about articles on a Saturday and that means the editor will be there. What do you think?" Prudence said.

"Well it can't hurt to try." Michael answered and Emma groaned.

"Just promise me that you won't let anyone at the bank find out about this. I don't think my manager will like the idea of my boyfriend running around looking for monsters under the bed instead of working. It would look bad on any mortgage application we made together." she said and Prudence smiled.

"Wait, are you two going to move in together?" she said.

"We've been discussing it, yes." Michael replied.

"Then we should be celebrating." Prudence said.

The next morning Prudence took a bus from her home into the centre of Wellslaw, making her way to the office of the local newspaper and she went inside where she found a woman sat behind a reception desk. The woman smiled when she saw Prudence, remembering her from her application for a job with the paper as a journalist.

"Prudence isn't it?" the woman said and Prudence smiled.

"That's right. Is Greg Mellor in?" she asked in reply, "I'd like a word with him about an idea I have."
"Yes, I'll see if he can fit you in." the woman said, picking up the telephone on her desk and she dialled the editor's office, "Hi, Prudence Brent is here. She'd like to talk to you. She says she has an idea for the paper." Prudence watched as the woman nodded silently before putting the phone down again.
"Okay he says you can have ten minutes. Do you remember the way?" the woman said and Prudence smiled at her.
"Through the door and straight on, right?" she said.
"That's right." the woman replied and Prudence headed through the door.
The room on the other side of the doorway had several desks in it for the paper's reporters to work at but at this time there was only one man there working at his computer and he glanced up at Prudence as she walked towards the editor's office.
"I'm here to see him." she said, pointing towards the office and the man went back to work without speaking. The door to the editor's office was open but Prudence still knocked as she stood in the doorway and Greg Mellor, the editor, looked up from his computer.
"Ah Prudence Brent, do take a seat and tell me what brings you here." he said.
"I'd like to write for your paper." Prudence replied as she sat down and Greg frowned for a moment.
"Prudence we still don't have any vacancies for journalists." he told her.
"Oh I know that. I was thinking about a column instead. Something that didn't need to be a regular thing. Instead I could just write pieces on a particular subject and submit them to you. You could just print the ones you liked." Prudence explained and Greg considered this.
"What subject did you want to write about? There's not much goes on around Wellslaw in terms of fashion and I already have people covering cultural events." he said.
"Actually I was thinking about writing about weird goings on." Prudence said and Greg hesitated.
"What like UFOs and big foot sightings?" he said.
"If that's what gets reported, yes. But I was mainly thinking about local myths and legends and the way people may think they've seen evidence of them. You know this part of the county has all sorts of weird legends. Think about Elder Edge alone." Prudence replied.
"So how would this work?" Greg asked.
"First we'd print a small article about what I'm going to do and we'll let people send in their tales. Then I'll pick out the most promising ones and see what I can find out." Prudence answered.
"Okay I'll give you a chance. In fact here's something to get you started." Greg said and he turned back to his computer for a few moments, quickly calling up an e-mail and then the nearby printer started up, "I've receiving a few messages from this farmer out past Quarry Side. He says that he's losing livestock and that the police aren't interested in doing anything about it. I actually contacted them when I got the first message and they said that it was nothing but foxes or loose dogs picking off weak animals but the farmer's continued to write. He says that there's something bigger in the woods around here and that there's some sort of conspiracy to cover it up. Try turning that into a column. If you can do a good job I'll print it on our standard terms along with a request for more stories to follow up. All the contact details are on there."
Prudence smiled back at Greg as he passed her the printed e-mail.
"Thanks." she said, "We'll get right on it."
"We?" Greg commented.
"Well you know I work for a private investigator now?" Prudence said.
"Yes, I heard that." Greg responded.
"He's agreed to help me out with this." Prudence said.
"As long as neither of you expect me to be paying him as well." Greg said.
"Oh don't worry about that. I'm pretty sure he thinks that pretty much every journalist that ever lived is a communist infiltrator." Prudence replied and then she glanced at a photograph that showed Greg and his wife on holiday standing outside the Kremlin in Moscow.

Prudence took out her mobile phone and searched through the contacts as soon as she stepped outside of the local newspaper office, locating Michael's number and calling it.

"Hello Michael." she said when he answered.

"Hi Prudence. How did the meeting go?" Michael asked.

"Pretty good I'd say. The editor said he'd give my idea for a column a go and he's even given me something to work on. How soon can we meet?" Prudence responded.

"I'm in the office now just compiling the notes from that divorce case." Michael told her and Prudence winced as she remembered what they had seen over the last few days trailing a wealthy businessman.

"Ugh. I'd rather see a thousand more lizard people than what we saw on that." she said.

"Me too. Hunting monsters will be a refreshing change. Come on over whenever you want. I'll wait." Michael said.

"I'm just outside the newspaper office. I'll be there in ten minutes." Prudence replied.

It was only a short walk from the newspaper office to the building that Michael and Prudence worked in and Prudence had a key to let herself in without needing to use the intercom. Heading upstairs to their office she found Michael sat behind his desk at his computer.

"Here we go." she said, holding up the piece of paper she had been given by the newspaper editor, "Our first case officially investigating the unknown."

"So what is it? Does it look like anything we've seen before?" Michael said.

"I don't know." Prudence said as she looked at the paper again, "All this talks about is cows being killed and there being a conspiracy by the police to cover it up. Sounds right up your street."

"What do you mean by that?" Michael asked.

"Well you don't exactly have the highest opinion of the police, do you?" Prudence pointed out.

"No but suggesting that they are involved in a conspiracy would suggest that they were willing to put in the effort to keep it going. I think laziness is far more likely." Michael responded.

"And the farmer?"

"I expect a farmer to know how many cows he has and to know what sort of wildlife there is in the area that could threaten them. I've heard of instances where foxes will attack calves and if a cow happened to die I'm sure that there are all sorts of things that would eat what they could of a corpse before it was removed but I'm pretty sure a farmer would know that as well." Michael said.

"So you think it's worth taking a look at then?" Prudence asked.

"Yes I think so. For formality's sake you might want to ask the police why they didn't investigate but not now obviously." Michael said and Prudence frowned.

"Why not now?" she said and Michael grinned at her.

"It's Saturday." he pointed out, "The police station is closed on a Saturday."

2.

The area surrounding Wellslaw was littered with farms and as they were driving to the address included with the e-mail Prudence had Michael glanced out of the window of his Range Rover at a field with livestock in it. "Interesting." he said.

"What, cows?" Prudence asked and he smiled.

"Sort of." he answered, "This farmer says that he's been losing livestock, right?"

"Yes. That's right." Prudence said, nodding and she checked the e-mail again, "This says he's lost six."

"But the police claim it's just animal attacks. If that was the case then why haven't other farmers in the area been complaining about the same thing?"

"That sounds like a question we need to ask. Look, here's the one." Prudence said and she pointed to a gateway that had a sign up with the name of the farmer painted on it.

Michael turned the Range Rover to drive through the open gateway and along the drive until he reached the farmhouse. Two vehicles were parked in front of this, one was a four wheel drive vehicle like Michael's Range Rover only not in the pristine condition that Michael's vehicle was. The second was an estate car that the farmer obviously used for day to day motoring. Michael parked beside these two vehicles and he and Prudence got out.

"Can I help you two?" a man's voice said and Michael and Prudence turned to see a middle aged man approaching them.

"Are you Kevin Conor?" Prudence asked and the man nodded.

"I am. Who are you and what are you doing here?" he said and Prudence produced the printout of the e-mail she had been given at the newspaper office.

"My name is Prudence Brent and my associate is Michael Lester. I understand you've been reporting the loss of livestock to the police but they haven't been doing anything." she said as she held out the paper.

"That's right. Six cows I've found dead and half eaten now. I can't afford to keep losing cattle like that. So are you from the paper?" Kevin said.

"Not exactly." Michael said.

"Your e-mails suggest that there's something going on that is out of the ordinary and that's something that we take an interest in. The local paper is considering a column about these things and we'd like to ask you a few questions if you don't mind." Prudence added.

"Sure, come on inside." Kevin said and he started to turn towards the nearby farmhouse.

"Actually if you don't mind we'd like to see where you found the remains of your cattle." Michael said and Kevin nodded.

"Just wait here a minute." he said before he continued into the house.

"I guess he probably went for keys to the Land Rover." Prudence commented.

"And something else too." Michael added when Kevin reappeared with a double barrelled shotgun and Prudence recoiled.

"Whoa!" she exclaimed.

"Calm down, it's just a shotgun." Michael told her, "It isn't even loaded." he added seeing that the weapon was in the open position without rounds in it.

"Sorry but you know I'm not as used to guns as you are." Prudence said.

"If you think I'm heading off without this then you're mistaken miss." Kevin said and he pointed to his battered Land Rover, "Now get in and I'll show you where my cows have been dying."

Kevin drove Michael and Prudence from the farmhouse out to the fields of grass where farmers were letting their cattle graze. He continued to drive past these though to a field that was empty.

"I don't see your cows." Prudence commented and Kevin shook his head.

"No. After the last one died here I've moved them all to another field. My son is there keeping an eye on them right now. All the cattle were lost at night so I'm pretty sure that whatever is responsible for it is nocturnal but I'm not taking any chances." he answered as he pulled up beside the gate leading to the field and parked the car.

"When did the last one die?" Prudence asked.

"Wednesday night. Before that it was about one every three or four days or so." Kevin said as the occupants got out of the Land Rover Kevin reached into his pocket and took out a pair of shotgun shells that he inserted into his weapon. For the time being at least though he left the shotgun open and draped over his forearm as he walked into the field.

"Which would make you about due to lose another one tonight." Prudence commented.

"That's why my son and I moved them all yesterday." Kevin responded.

"So were all the cows killed in this field?" Michael asked as he and Prudence followed Kevin into the field.

"Yes." Kevin answered, nodding and Michael looked around. While most of the fields filled with cattle were bordered by other open spaces this one ended at a wooded area and Kevin pointed towards these woods.

"I found them all over there." he said as they all walked across the field.

"Oh I wish I'd not worn these heels." Prudence commented.

"Were they all in the same place?" Michael asked.

"No, they've been spread out all along the treeline." Kevin said.

"So where was the first one?" Prudence said and Kevin pointed again.

"Right over there by the rock." he said as he indicated where a wide but low rock protruded from the ground just outside the trees.

"We were told that the police have said the killings were done by foxes." Prudence said and Kevin nodded.

"Yes or dogs. You know they managed to make that determination without even coming out to see this." he said and Michael snorted.

"Yeah, that sounds like them." he said.

"Well I've seen dog attacks and nothing I've seen on my cattle looked like them. Whatever killed my cattle was much bigger." Kevin added as they reached the rock.

The rock had a roughly level top and there were still signs of the blood that had been spilled on it. While on the far side was a simple wire fence that prevented the cattle from wandering out of the field into the woods.

"So was the cow on this?" Michael asked.

"Oh no, it was right here where we're standing." Kevin answered.

"So how did it's blood get on the stone?" Prudence said.

"Its belly was split wide open and its guts were spread out over the stone." Kevin said, waving his free hand over the stone, "It must have been dead several hours by the time I found it."

"And the others?" Michael said.

"As I said, all along the treeline. They were ripped apart as well. Even a big dog couldn't do that." Kevin said, "I even found bits of them on the other side of the fence."

"What about tracks?" Michael asked and he walked up to the wire fence.

"That's the strange thing, there weren't any." Kevin said, "The ground right here is pretty firm and covered in grass and you'll see that we're not leaving much in the way of footprints. Or at least you and I aren't. Your lady friend's high heels on the other hand-"

"Just go on." Prudence interrupted, still regretting not having changed her footwear for the wellington boots kept in a bag in Michael's Range Rover for instances just such as this.

"Well it gets muddier further up that way," Kevin said, waving his hand along the fence, "and I found two of the cows up there but there were not tracks there either. Not even from the cows."

"How does a cow not leave tracks?" Prudence asked.

"They can't. The amount they weigh they'd leave tracks alright but there's nothing around them but apart from the first one there's nothing. It's like something lifted them up and dropped them here by the fence." Kevin said.

"But left no tracks of its own?" Prudence pointed out.

"What about the damage to the fence itself?" Michael asked as he looked at the wire in front of him. The fence was of basic construction, having three parallel wires running between wooden posts at roughly regular intervals. This was enough to stop a cow idly wandering from the field but would do little to stop one charging through it.

"What damage?" Kevin responded, "There wasn't any."

"This repair looks recent." Michael said and Kevin frowned as he walked closer.

"I've not needed to make any repairs to this fence in months." he said.

"Well look at these two posts." Michael told him and he pointed to the closest posts either side of the flat rock. Here the wires coming in from either side could be seen to terminate at the post, being wrapped around the staples and then twisted back on themselves. Then separate lengths of wire had been used to bridge the gap.

"Well I'll be damned." Kevin said when he saw this, "I never even bothered to check for that. I saw that the fence was intact and didn't check."

"Animals can't mend fences." Prudence commented.

"No they can't but people faking animal attacks can." Michael replied and he turned to Kevin, "How well would you say that you got along with your neighbours?" he asked.

"By and large we get along fine." Kevin answered.

"By and large? So not always?" Prudence said.

"Well we've had occasional disagreements over the years when animals have escaped and there's been damage but nothing serious. I can't believe that one of them would come here and start killing my cattle." Kevin told her.

"But none of them have lost animals recently?" Michael added.

"Not that they've mentioned, no." Kevin replied and he shook his head.

"And that doesn't seem odd to you? That your herd could be the only one attacked?" Michael said.

"I just thought that whatever it was that was taking my cattle had a territory. This field is the last in the area before you just hit woodland so it seemed likely to me that it had a lair in the woods and came here when it was hungry." Kevin explained.

"Can you show us where the other dead cows were found?" Michael asked and Kevin nodded.

"Follow me. The nearest one was this way." he said and he began to walk along the edge of the field, "They were all along the fence, two this way and three in the other." he continued.

"Was there any sort of pattern?" Prudence said, looking down as she did her best to avoid stepping in any of the mud that was increasingly common in this part of the field.

"Not that I noticed." Kevin replied before he came to a halt, "Okay this is it. The fourth dead cow was found about here." he added and he stomped his booted foot on the ground.

Michael made his way to the fence and inspected it again, checking the posts for the same kind of subtle repair he had seen on those by the rock. However, this time there was no evidence that the fence had been damaged.

"It doesn't look like anyone has made any repairs here." he said and he looked up at the trees that overhung the fence here, "Whoever or whatever killed this cow must have come over or through the fence without damaging it. The lack of tracks in the mud suggests they came over but the branches of these trees don't look strong enough to support a person coming over unless they didn't weigh very much."

"So different from the first one." Prudence commented and Michael nodded.

"Yes." he said before he looked at Kevin again, "You said there was another corpse found in this direction. Where was the other one discovered?"

"Up near the end of the field." Kevin told him and he pointed along the fence to where it met the stone wall that marked the far end of the field.

As they walked towards this corner of the field it was obvious that no-one could have used the trees on the other side of the fence to get over it. The treeline retreated away from the fence in this direction, only by a few yards but it was enough that their branches did not overhang into the field

"So this is where you found another cow?" Michael asked when Kevin came to a halt once more just a few yards short of the end of the fence and the other man nodded.

"This was the most recent one to be killed." he said.

"Is that blood on the wall?" Prudence asked when she saw dark marks on the nearby stone wall.

"Yes, there was blood all over and crows picking at what was left." Kevin said, "The cow itself was practically torn in half. There's no way a man could do that without a chainsaw or something like that, let alone a fox like the police still claim it is."

"Did you take pictures of any of the dead cattle?" Michael said.

"Yes after the second one I photographed the wounds to show the police that it wasn't just a fox or a dog but they wouldn't even look at them." Kevin answered.

"I think we're going to have to." Michael said as he took a business card from his pocket, "You can send them to us here." he added, pointing out the e-mail address printed on the card, "Then we're going to have to search this entire area, all along both sides of the fence."

"Can I at least change my shoes first?" Prudence asked.

"Of course. There are a few things I'd like to get for myself as well." Michael said before turning back towards Kevin, "Can you tell me how far your property line extends? Does it end with this fence?"

"No it goes about half a mile the other side. Why is that significant?" Kevin said.

"It might be to the police." Michael responded, "You see you're not the only one of us who owns a shotgun and I think you've got the right idea to be protecting yourself. I just need your permission to be carrying my own."

Prudence took her shoes off before getting back into Michael's Range Rover and she spent the drive back to her house rubbing them with paper towels he had.

"So do you think it's more of those lizard people we encountered up near the Edge?" she asked.

"I doubt it." Michael said, "They were pretty small. I really don't see them being able to rip a cow in half. Plus the way that fence was repaired indicated some level of knowledge that I don't think they have. The weapons they carried looked like they came out of the Stone Age. Even if they did find some of the correct wire lying about somewhere I doubt they'd be smart enough to be able to make the repair I saw on that fence."

"The lizard man impersonating Harold Farrow was smart. Maybe it's something to do with him." Prudence suggested.

"He could be involved I suppose but whether or not he could tear a cow in half is another matter. If he could I doubt that he'd have needed that revolver to threaten us with." Michael replied.

"So what's your plan then?" Prudence asked.

"First obviously we get what we need." Michael answered and he smiled as he glanced at the shoes she was

wiping clean, "Proper clothing for example. Also something to eat and drink. We might be out in that field for a while."

"And your shotgun?" Prudence said, grinning and Michael smiled back.

"Yes and the shotgun and some ammunition. Did you notice whether we had a phone signal up in that field?" he said.

"No I didn't check my phone, why?" Prudence said.

"Because if we find anything odd that looks like it could be related to any of the other strange goings on we've seen then I'd like to be able to get hold of John quickly. It would be a pain to have to drive back to the middle of Wellslaw just to ask a simple question." Michael explained as he turned into the road where Prudence lived, "Well here we are. You get everything you think you'll need and I'll be back to pick you up in about an hour. Okay?"

"Okay that's great. I'll see you then." Prudence said as she opened the door and swung around so she could put her shoes back on before getting out of the car. Then she hurried across the road and to her front door.

"Pru is that you?" the voice of the woman Prudence shared a house with called out.

"No Jane." Prudence responded, "It's the burglars we gave a key to."

"What took you so long? I thought you were just going into Wellslaw." Jane said as she emerged from the kitchen just as Prudence was heading up the stairs.

"The paper's editor gave me a trial assignment and Michael and I had to go and visit a local farmer. Something strange has been happening to his cows. I've just come back to get some stuff and then we're going back to take another look." Prudence told her and Jane smiled.

"Sounds interesting. How long do you have?" she asked.

"Oh about an hour."

"Oh good. Then I can make you a cup that tea you like and you can tell me all about it." Jane said as she turned back towards the kitchen.

The first thing that Michael noticed when he returned to his apartment was that the alarm was not set when he entered and he paused.

"Emma are you here?" he called out, knowing that his girlfriend would often use her key to let herself in when she visited.

"In the lounge Michael." she responded and Michael relaxed now that he was not expecting a murderous reptile to leap out at him with a revolver.

"I'm afraid I don't have long. I just came back for a few things then I have to pick Prudence up before we go back out." Michael said.

"Another investigation? Is this a serious one or are you chasing fairies again?" Emma asked as she emerged from the lounge into the hallway just as Michael was going into his bedroom and she followed him.

"Prudence was given a lead on something attacking livestock." Michael answered and from the doorway behind him Emma gasped when she saw him unlocking the steel cabinet that was hidden inside a wardrobe.

"Your shotgun? Michael what are you doing?" she exclaimed as he took out the double-barrelled weapon and laid it on the bed before heading to the second concealed safe that held the ammunition for it.

"Something out there can rip cows apart. We'll be on private land and the owner has given me permission to carry this. Would you rather I was defenceless?" Michael replied.

"I'd rather you stop believing in monsters under the bed and took the weekend off like most normal people do." Emma replied.

"Well we're committed now. You can come too if you're that worried. We can swing by your place and—" Michael began.

"I'm not getting my shotgun so we can go wandering around the countryside like Mister and Missus Elmer Fudd." Emma interrupted.

"In that case I need to get a move on. Prudence will be waiting for me."

3.

Prudence was waiting by the window when Michael pulled up outside and she quickly grabbed the bag she had prepared. Since he had dropped her off she had changed from her formal clothing to a more durable and practical outfit, in particular swapping her shoes for a pair of walking boots instead.

"Jane I'm off now." she called out as she ran out of the house.

When she reached the Range Rover she opened one of the back doors to toss her bag onto the back seat before she got into the front.

"Ready?" Michael asked and Prudence nodded.

"Let's go and catch ourselves a cow eating monster." she replied, then when she spied Jane looking towards them from the house she waved to her, "I bet she thinks she'll catch us making out or something." she added before Michael drove off.

"Kevin sent me the pictures of his dead cows by the way." Prudence said when they were underway.

"What do they look like?" Michael asked.

"Gross. He wasn't kidding about them being ripped apart Michael. They were either hollowed out or ripped to pieces. It's obvious a fox couldn't do that." Prudence said, "I tried to gross out Jane by showing her but they didn't seem to phase her. I never knew she had such a strong stomach."

Rather than return to Kevin Conor's farmhouse, Michael drove them directly to the now empty field where the cows had been killed and pulled in outside the gateway.

"Okay let's unpack." he said as he switched off the engine and getting out of the vehicle he headed for the back.

Two bags were always kept in the back of the Range Rover, one each for Michael and Prudence that contained items that could be of use to them, a change of clothes, sturdy torches that could be wielded as a baton in an emergency and body armour that had been acquired as surplus. In addition to these bags was an extra bag that Michael had brought that like the one Prudence had put on the back seat contained food and drink so they could remain out here for an extended period of time. Michael's bag also contained a box of shotgun shells though and the shotgun itself was in a longer rigid case that he slid to the very back of the Range Rover before opening it up.

"Well you'll be glad to know that I've got a phone signal. There must be a mast nearby." Prudence said, checking her mobile phone as soon as she got out of the car and took the device from her pocket.

"Good. That'll save a lot of time if we need to contact anyone else." Michael replied.

"Like someone to come and rescue us from monsters? Oh wait it's Saturday. The police don't exactly do much work at weekends around here." Prudence commented.

"It's not like they do much for the rest of the week either." Michael muttered.

"So that's your shotgun?" Prudence added as she walked around to the back of the Range Rover as well and saw Michael unpacking the gun, "How come it looks different to the one the farmer had?"

"What do you mean?" Michael asked.

"I mean that his had the barrels beside one another. Yours has them on top of one another." Prudence said.

"Because his gun is meant for pest control. Mine is a target gun, putting the barrels above one another makes it more accurate because it doesn't shift from side to side when I fire it." Michael explained.

"I don't suppose there's another of those in there for me is there?" Prudence said and she peered into the back of the Range Rover to see if there was a second gun case.

"No. Given that you've never handled a gun before I didn't think that would be a good idea. I've got these for you though." Michael said and he handed Prudence a small cardboard packet from his pocket while keeping a second one for himself.

"Earplugs?" she commented when she saw what they were and Michael nodded.

"A shotgun can make quite a bang." he said.

"It would be nice to have another though." Prudence added.

"I did ask Emma if she wanted to join us but apparently going monster hunting isn't her idea of a fun way to spend a Saturday afternoon." Michael said, setting the shotgun down in the back of the Range Rover before he reached for the bags normally kept in there and dragging them towards him.

He and Prudence opened these and took out the stab vests kept inside them, putting these on as well as moving the torches to the other bags they had with them. Then with all the equipment they expected to need inside them, they slung these bags over their shoulders.

"Aren't you going to load that?" Prudence asked as Michael closed the back of the Range Rover with his shotgun tucked under his arm, the chambers open.

"No, not until I need to. Carrying a loaded gun around is an easy way to get someone shot." Michael told her, "If you say so. So where do you think we should start?" Prudence said.

"Where the killings did. Over by that rock." Michael told her and they began to head across the field towards the flat-topped rock, "Listen." he said as they walked.

"To what?" Prudence asked.

"Everything. Have you noticed the sounds of the birds?" Michael said.

"Yes, those are normal aren't they?" Prudence responded.

"Yes, they're normal but have you noticed that they're all coming from the fields behind us and not from the woods ahead of us?" Michael said and Prudence winced.

"I hate the way you make that sound so ominous." she said as they reached the rock and Michael set both his bag and shotgun down on top of it.

"Now let's see what we've got here." he said, opening the bag he had brought with him and taking out a trowel.

"I never had you pegged as a gardener." Prudence said as she crouched down beside him.

"I'm not. I can barely keep a potted cactus alive. I went out and bought this before I picked you up." Michael replied as he began to scrape at the earth at the base of the stone.

"So are you going to tell me what you're looking for?" Prudence said.

"This stone could just be convenient but if that lizard man and the Hound of Tindalos have taught me anything then rituals play a big part in all this weird stuff. Someone built that stone circle up by The Edge in the eighteen hundreds and I'm thinking that maybe someone put this stone here deliberately as well."

Michael said.

"So you're looking for proof that it's not something that's here naturally? Like some kind of markings that we can photograph and send to John?" Prudence said and Michael nodded.

"That's the plan." he said and then he smiled, "In fact I think I've just found something, look." and he pointed to where he was scraping more earth away from the stone. Prudence leant in closer to look and as she did she thought she recognised the shapes she saw etched into the stone.

"Are those letters?" she said.

"I think so, which means you need to keep digging to clear as much of the writing as possible." Michael told her and Prudence frowned.

"Why me?" she asked, "What about you?"

"I'll be standing watch." Michael responded as he got back to his feet, set the trowel down on the rock and instead picked up his shotgun. Prudence sighed and reached out for the trowel before she began to scrape away more earth from around the stone.

"I told you he brought people up here. Now they've found the calling stone." one of the pair of figures watching Michael and Prudence from behind a stone wall said.

"It doesn't matter." the other said, "The calling stone is of lesser importance now that the guardian is already here. The temple to The Mother matters far more and if they going for that they will never reach it alive."

4.

Prudence stared at the letters she had uncovered and tried to figure out how they ought to be pronounced. "I give up." she said, "I can't say this."

"Let me see." Michael replied as he crouched beside her, his shotgun still in his hands and looked down at the writing as well, "It looks like Latin." he said and Prudence smiled.

"Then I suppose it's a good job we know a guy who knows how to read this stuff." she said and she put the trowel down on top of the rock as she took out her mobile phone and activated the camera. Then aiming her phone at the base of the stone she started to photograph the writing. There was a lot of this and rather than trying to capture it all in one image she instead began to photograph sections of it at a time so she could preserve as much detail as possible, "Sending this is really going to chew up my data package." she muttered before she lowered her phone, "There, all done in about a dozen images."

"I'd suggest ringing John first." Michael said and Prudence nodded as she searched through her contacts to find the number for John Midland.

"Hello Prudence." John's voice said when he answered the call and Prudence quickly switched her phone to speaker mode so that both she and Michael could talk to him.

"Hi professor I'm with Michael and we've found something that might interest you. Are you able to talk? I know this is the weekend." she said.

"Of course." John replied, eager to find out what they had discovered this time.

"We've found what looks like some kind of altar stone in a field where cows having been killed by something big and strong. It's got writing on the-" Prudence began.

"What does it say?" John interrupted impatiently and Michael smiled when he heard this.

"That's just it, it's not in English." Prudence answered.

"It might be Latin." Michael added.

"Just read it out loud." John said.

"Read it? Professor I don't think I can pronounce this." Prudence said, "But I have taken pictures of it. I can send them to you now. You'll have to put them-"

"That's great. I'll figure out how they fit together." John said without waiting for Prudence to finish again.

"Okay I'll get them sent over to you right away." Prudence told him.

"Where is this stone by the way?" John asked.

"In a farmer's field outside Quarry Side." Prudence answered.

"Can you send me directions? I may need to see it for myself." John said.

"Sure. I'll text you the postcode of the farm and where to turn off to get to the field. Michael's car is right by the gate so you can't miss it." Prudence said.

"Thank you. I may see you soon. Bye." John said before he hung up and Michael and Prudence smiled at one another.

"He's as eager as ever." Prudence commented and she began to send the photographs she had taken to John's phone.

"That's the thing about academics. We've offered him more knowledge and now he can't get enough. I wouldn't be surprised if he decided to write a book about all this." Michael replied.

"As long as I get a mention in the forward." Prudence said while still sending the photographs.

"And as long as that mention isn't worded 'Dedicated to the memory of-'" Michael added.

"There, all sent." Prudence said, smiling as she put her phone away again, "So now what? Do we wait to hear what John has to say about that writing?"

"No, now I want to take a look in those woods." Michael said and he turned to look past the fence into the woods on the other side, "Something has to be in there and I want to know what it is."

Getting past the wire fence was easy for Michael and Prudence, the thick, horizontal wires were not intended to block anything other than wandering cattle and the two investigators were able to simply pull them wider apart so they could squeeze through the gaps between them. Standing at the edge of the woods on the other side of this fence they looked around and Michael reached into his bag for a pair of shotgun shells.

"I thought it wasn't safe to load your gun." Prudence commented.

"As long as I keep the breech open it'll be fine, I just don't want to get caught by surprise in these woods."

Michael replied, "Take a look around, our line of sight is far too limited for me to be rummaging through my bag for shells. Anything that could move even as fast as a person would be on top of us before I could be ready to shoot it." then he took an extra pair of shells from his bag and put them in his coat pocket where he could get to them quickly and added, "Now come on." and he began to walk into the wood.

"So what are we looking for exactly? Footprints?" Prudence asked.

"Tracks, certainly but also any droppings or the remains of a kill. Anything that would indicate the presence of a large predator." Michael told her.

"What about this?" Prudence said when she saw a nearby bush that looked as if it had been partially ripped out of the ground and Michael turned to look.

"Yes, that does look interesting." he said, "If that was done by a creature passing by it though then it would have to have been huge."

"How huge?" Prudence responded nervously and she reached into her bag for her torch, not for illumination given that there was plenty of light in the woods during the day but for what limited protection it would give her as a baton.

"Bigger than a cow for starters." Michael said, advancing towards the damaged bush and he looked down at the ground, "Yes, the ground's soft here and it's all churned up. Do these look like hoof prints to you?"

"I suppose so. I'm guessing you're going to say that they weren't left by a cow though." Prudence answered.

"No, they're far too big. No cow or bull left these." Michael said, crouching down to inspect the imprints in the ground more closely.

Prudence looked around while Michael was inspecting the ground.

"You know Michael I just remembered some old tales I heard of giant hoof prints left in the snow in winter.

They were called the 'Devils hoof prints'. You don't think that someone-" she said.

"Summoned the devil?" Michael interrupted with a smile, "Well I hope not because I suspect that Satan himself isn't going to be slowed down by two barrels of twelve gauge shot."

"There's another squashed bush over there." Prudence added when she saw more damaged vegetation and she walked towards it slowly. As she did so she noticed that the damage was not confined to ground level,

"Hey Michael come take a look at this." she called out as she looked at the side of a tree where a branch thicker than her arm had been ripped free as well as a large section of bark. Approaching this Prudence took her attention away from the ground and she suddenly heard a squelching sound as she took another step and she winced, "Oh no." she said.

"Something wrong?" Michael asked as he approached her and then they both looked down at Prudence's feet where they saw that she had just stood in the remains of a dead rabbit.

"Yuck." Prudence said, taking a step backwards and rubbing her foot back and forth on a nearby patch of grass as she tried to clean the bloody mess off her boot, "Do you think that whatever killed the cows did this?"

"It certainly looks like feet much bigger than yours have trodden on it Prudence." Michael said and Prudence frowned.

"If you didn't have a shotgun I would punch your arm right now. I have dainty feet." she said.

"That's why I said 'much' bigger." Michael said, "Anyway I'd say that the rabbit was probably dead already of something before it was flattened. You'd have to be very quick to step on a live rabbit and I don't see anything as big as we're looking for being that fast. Of course this does raise another question?"

"Which is?" Prudence asked and Michael smiled at her.

"What scared off everything that would normally have eaten the corpse?" he said.

John Midland moved the photographs that Prudence had sent him from his phone to his computer so that he could examine them more closely. The overall size of the images of the carvings on the stone were still too large to all fit on his screen at once so he sorted them into order so that he could follow from one to the next and read the text. As Michael and Prudence had thought the writing was in Latin, although there was nothing to specifically indicate that the carvings had been made by the Romans themselves, despite them having had a significant presence in the county during their control of much of Britain. Their language had long outlived their empire. John was fluent in Latin, along with a number of other ancient languages that were no longer spoken and as he read the text he began to translate it in his head and it did not take long for him to reach some words that he knew were not ordinary Latin ones but that he recognised none-the-less.

"Shub-Niggurath." he muttered to himself and he turned away from his computer to a large, old book that rested on his desk right in front of his chair.

He opened the book and began to flip through the pages of medieval Greek that it was written in until he found a passage that contained the reference he had been looking for, a description of the creature known as Shub-Niggurath. After reading this John leapt to his feet and grabbed hold of a notebook that was on his desk beside the larger printed book and he rushed from the room. Pausing only to grab a coat and to make sure that his home's alarm was set he got into his car.

"Look, I think there are more tracks over there." Prudence said when she noticed a patch of bare ground in which there appeared to be another imprint.

"There's something odd about these tracks." Michael replied as they walked over to this imprint and found that it was one of several through a patch of soft ground.

"Other than their size you mean?" Prudence commented and Michael smiled.

"Yes, other than that. Tracks left by bipeds and quadrupeds have a distinct pattern to them and these don't match either of them. Look how they seem to splay apart from one another instead of pointing in the same direction. It's as if whatever made this had three legs arranged in a circle pointing outwards." he said.

"So as well as looking for something much bigger than anything living in these woods should be we're also after something with the wrong number of legs." Prudence said and Michael nodded.

"Pretty much, yes. The problem is that we're getting further away from the field and we still haven't found anything to tell us what it is that's causing all of this. If it wasn't for the carvings on that stone then I'd say that this was all just a hoax. A dairy farmer's version of a crop circle." he said.

"Perhaps we should go back to the field and look along the fence. Maybe there's something where the other cows were attacked that will give us a few hints." Prudence suggested.

"It's worth a try." Michael replied, "We'll finish up here and then head back."

John followed the directions given by his car's sat nav towards the Conor farm until reaching the turning Prudence had told him about to reach the field instead of the farmhouse and he soon found himself driving towards Michael's Range Rover. Parking beside this John got out of his car and looked around, searching for Michael and Prudence but he could see neither of them. However, he did see the flat stone by the fence that Prudence had told him about and with his notebook in his hand he smiled and began to walk across the field towards it, unaware of the two figures watching him as he did so.

"Remarkable." he said when he reached the stone and he crouched down to study the writing on the side, reaching out to run his fingers along the lettering.

Taking out his phone he photographed the stone as a whole and then he began to make notes in his notebook, adding a quick sketch that he could annotate. While he was doing this he heard the footfalls of more than one person running towards him and he turned around, expecting to see Michael and Prudence returning from wherever they had gone. Instead though he saw two figures in hooded jackets with scarves covering most of their faces rushing towards him and the first of them knocked him to the ground.

"Get off me!" John yelled before the man who had struck him kicked him in his ribs and he cried out in pain. While the first man continued to beat and kick John, the second noticed his notebook and picked it up to examine it and as soon as he saw the information inside he reached out and put a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"The magister needs to see this." he said, "Leave him, let's go."

"No!" John gasped, "You can't have that!" and he reached out to grab hold of the second man's leg to prevent him escaping with the notebook, holding on tightly when the first man began to beat him again.

"Did you hear that? It sounded like a scream." Prudence said as she and Michael were on their way back towards the field.

"Yes, come on." Michael replied and he broke into a run, rushing towards the edge of the woods and as he came within sight of the wire fence he saw the two masked men attacking John, "Hey!" he called out to them, continuing towards the fence and they both turned around when they heard him.

The attention of the two men was immediately drawn to the shotgun that Michael carried and the first of them gasped when he saw it.

"He's got a gun! Let's get out of here!" he exclaimed and without waiting for his comrade he simply turned and began to run across the field. Meanwhile the second man continued to try and get free of John's grip.

"Let go of me old man!" he snapped.

"You can't have my book." John replied and the hooded man looked back into the woods where Michael and Prudence were closing on him rapidly. In addition to the shotgun Michael was armed with the man could also now see the torch that Prudence was carrying but from the angle he saw it from it looked to him like a police baton. Unwilling to risk his life for the notebook the man let go of it, dropping it to the ground and John let go of him. This allowed the man to make his escape, rushing after his comrade while Michael and Prudence were climbing over the fence.

"John are you okay?" Michael asked as he rushed to the prone man.

"My notebook." John said as he reached out to take hold of the dropped notebook.

"Is he-" Prudence began.

"He's alive and conscious but we better get him an ambulance. Call nine-nine-nine." Michael interrupted before he looked down at John.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I came to see the stone and to warn you." John answered as he began to try to get to his feet.

"Take your time." Michael said, steadying him.

"I'll be fine. I'm not that old and I don't think anything's broken." John replied.

"You're bleeding." Come on, I've got a first aid kit in the car." Michael said.

"The ambulance is on its way as well." Prudence added and Michael nodded.

"Help me get him back to the car." he said and between them he and Prudence supported John as they made their way back across the field.

"So what did you want to warn us about?" Prudence asked.

"Those men I think." John said.

"What do you mean?" Michael asked.

"I mean that the writing on that stone contains a reference to Shub-Niggurath, a pagan deity of some sort that has been worshipped by various occult groups for hundreds, or more likely thousands of years. I'm not just talking about a few mad sorcerers here and there, I'm talking about organised cults. I think that the stone is a sacrificial altar that might still be in use." John explained.

Reaching the field's main gate, Michael unlocked the Range Rover and pointed towards the back.

"The first aid kit is in the boot." he said and he and Prudence helped John to the back of the car. Opening this Michael put his shotgun and bag into the back of the Range Rover and grabbed hold of the small green bag marked with a white cross and the words 'FIRST AID'.

"What's so important about that notebook that you didn't just let them have it?" Prudence asked, looking at the notebook John still held tightly while Michael opened the first aid kit.

"It contains my notes about the Necronomicon and the information you obtained from Harriet DeLuna. That information would be invaluable to a cult. They can't be allowed to have it." John said before there was the sound of a siren in the distance.

The ambulance arrived a few minutes later and the two paramedics immediately began to examine John's injuries. Fortunately it was rapidly determined that these were not life threatening and they were continuing the treatment Michael had started when another vehicle arrived, this one a police car and a uniformed officer got out of the driver's side while a detective got out of the other.

"Oh great. Him." Prudence muttered when she saw the detective walking towards them.

"Mark." Michael said to the detective, "Sorry to interrupt whatever it is you guys actually do at the weekends while you're ignoring the public."

"Spare me your opinions on the police Mister Lester." the detective replied, "When I heard that your friend had just reported an assault I thought it warranted my personal attention."

"Lucky us." Michael commented and it was at that point that the uniformed policeman noticed the shotgun in the back of the Range Rover and nudged Mark to point the weapon out to him.

"Yes, believe it or not but Mister Lester here actually has a shotgun licence." Mark said before he looked at Michael, "I take it that you have the permission of the land owner to have that weapon here though?"

"Of course. Feel free to ask him." Michael replied.

"Aren't you even going to ask about the attack on John Midland?" Prudence said.

"Of course, how is he?" Mark said, looking towards the back of the ambulance. This was open and allowed him to see inside where the paramedics were treating John.

"It looks like cuts and bruises mainly, though I think we should take him to casualty for an X-ray just to be sure that his ribs aren't broken." one of the paramedics told him and Mark looked back towards Prudence.

"You reported the attack I understand, how about you tell me what happened?" he said.

"Michael and I had been searching the woods and when we returned to the field we saw two men attacking John. Michael shouted at them to stop and they ran off." Prudence told him.

"And what were you searching the woods for exactly?" Mark said.

"We were doing your job for you Mark." Michael responded, "Trying to find out what's been killing the farmer's cows."

"Oh and let me guess it's going to be another of your monsters isn't it? Like the lizard man who ran off or the dog that can travel through time. So what sound does it make when Old MacDonald has a demon on his farm?" Mark said sarcastically.

"Two men attacked our friend and tried to steal his notes about all of the things we've seen. Doesn't that prove that there is something to them?" Prudence replied.

"It was an attempted mugging, nothing more." Mark said.

"Are you saying you're just going to ignore it?" Prudence said, frowning.

"Did you get a good look at the muggers?" Mark asked.

"No, they had the hoods of their coats up." Prudence answered.

"What about you?" Mark added, looking at Michael.

"You know I'm going to tell you the same thing. So why ask?" Michael responded.

"Just being thorough about doing my job." Mark said, smiling.

"But you're just giving up." Prudence commented.

"Of course not. I'll take a statement from Mister Midland-" Mark began.

"Professor." Michael interrupted, "It's Professor Midland."

"He's a respected academic who has seen the proof of what we've been trying to tell you." Prudence added and then she pointed towards the flat stone at the side of the field, "Or you could just wander over there and

see for yourself. There are carvings on the stone and footprints in the woods that don't come from any ordinary animal."

"Then I'll take a statement from the professor once he's well enough to give it but I've no intention of wasting my time looking at random scratches in rock or imprints that could have been made with a few bits of wood pushed into the ground." Mark said before he looked at the uniformed officer beside him, "Let's go." he said and they both went to get back into their car. As he was getting in though Mark paused and looked at Michael, "Oh and do keep in mind that your licence doesn't cover pointing that shotgun at people in the woods, even if you think they're Satanists or something." he added before he got into the car and shortly after the two policemen drove away.

With the police gone Michael and Prudence turned their attention back to what was happening in the ambulance.

"We're ready to go. We'll get you to hospital for an X-ray." one of the paramedics said.

"John, give Prudence your keys. She can drive your car back to your house and then I'll drive us both to casualty to meet you." Michael said.

"Yes of course." John replied and he winced as he reached into his pocket for his car keys.

"Careful." a paramedic told him and he nodded.

"I am being." he said before tossing his keys to Prudence who caught them in both hands, "Wait, you'd better take this as well. I don't want it getting lost at the hospital. Bring it with you though, it will help me explain what I've found to you." and then he picked up the notebook from beside him and held it out.

"Of course. We need to speak with the farmer first but we'll meet you as soon as we can. Don't hesitate to call if there's anything you want us to bring with us." Michael said.

"Actually there is one thing." John said.

"What's that?" Prudence asked.

"I think we're dealing with an organised cult here. Harriet DeLuna may be able to shed some light on that."

John answered and Michael nodded.

"Okay, we'll see if we can get hold of her." he replied.

5.

As soon as the ambulance had departed to take John to hospital Michael and Prudence headed back to Kevin's farmhouse, with Prudence driving John's car. When they got to the farmhouse they found Kevin about to get into his Land Rover.

"I was just heading off to give my son a hand with the herd." he said.

"Has another cow been killed?" Prudence asked.

"No, the killings only ever happened at night. That's why I'm bringing the herd in. I'll use the second field in the day and keep them sheltered at night. It takes a couple hours each morning and evening but if it keeps my herd safe then it's all I can do. Have you found anything?" Kevin answered.

"Some strange markings, signs of something large moving about in the woods." Michael replied, "But that's not what we wanted to speak to you about."

"Really? Then what is it?" Kevin said.

"Our friend was attacked." Prudence told him.

"By the thing that's been taking my cattle?" Kevin responded.

"No, two men attacked him while he was taking a look at that big flat stone." Michael said, "You told us you got on well with your neighbours. Have you spotted anyone else hanging around recently acting suspiciously?"

"This is the countryside, you get people wandering around quite often. Joggers, dog walkers, they all think they can go anywhere they want. I had to use my gun to deal with a loose dog once but that was a while back." Kevin answered then he hesitated.

"Remembered something?" Prudence said.

"There was a guy a few months back taking pictures of the stone where the first cow was killed. I thought maybe he'd tripped over it and was planning on trying to sue me so I went over to see what he was up to. He asked me if I owned the field and any land on the other side of the fence. I told him I did and he asked if it was for sale." Kevin said.

"You told him 'no' I presume." Michael said.

"Oh I invited him to make me an offer but it was far too low. Then he just went away and I didn't think about it again until now. You talking about that stone reminded me." Kevin replied.

"Is there something special about the stone?" Prudence said.

"Not that I know of, it's just a lump of stone in the ground. Why?" Kevin responded.

"The markings we found are etched into that stone in Latin. Do you know how long it's been there?" Michael said.

"As far as I know the thing has always been there. No-one's ever mentioned anything about strange markings though." Kevin told him.

"They were buried." Prudence pointed out, "They may have been hidden for hundreds of years."

"Hello?" the man said when he answered his phone.

"Magister we have news." the voice of one of the men who had attacked John Midland said.

"Would this have anything to do with you and Dean attacking someone in broad daylight?" the man referred to as magister asked.

"You already know?"

"Of course I already know James. One of our sistren works with the police. She told me about the call from Quarry Side where I'd sent you. What on earth did you two think you were playing at?" the magister demanded.

"The first two people had tampered with the sacred calling stone and he was examining it. We wanted to find out what he was doing. I know that the stone is secondary now but when someone else arrived I thought we should know what they knew about us." the man called James explained to his leader.

"And what did you discover?" the magister asked.

"He had a notebook that contained information similar to your teachings magister. I tried to take it from him to bring it to you but the man fought back. Dean and I would have overpowered him but the first two returned. One of them had a shotgun." James said.

"You saw this notebook though, you read what was inside?" the magister said.

"Only briefly magister but it was clear that he had knowledge of us. The name of the mother was written in his notebook." James answered.

"If he knows of our ways then his friends may as well. Do you know who any of them are?" the magister said.

"No magister. We watched them but we were too far away to hear them speak." James said.

"We need to find out how much of a threat they are to us. We may be able to find out from the police but I need you and Dean to stay out of sight until we can be certain that they aren't looking for you. The ceremony will be soon and I don't need to tell you what we risk if it is delayed." the magister said.

"No magister. There is one more thing though, the information we received about the farmer was true. He has moved his herd to a different field. When the guardian comes to feed-" James began.

"When the guardian comes to feed it will be fed." the magister interrupted.

After dropping John's car off at his home Michael and Prudence drove south, heading for the sparsely populated area known as Chorleaf to collect Harriet DeLuna. Harriet was the leader of a small pagan coven who had a large library of occult knowledge that included first hand accounts of events in the area surrounding Wellslaw that went back centuries and as soon as Michael pulled up outside her house she came rushing out to meet them.

"I hope this isn't too much of an inconvenience to you Harriet." Michael said as she got into the back seat of the Range Rover.

"Not at all. Do you know what it is that John wants to talk about?" Harriet asked.

"He thinks that we could be dealing with some kind of cult activity. He probably wants to find out what you know about that." Prudence said.

"Well there have certainly been a number of cults and covens in the area over years." Harriet said and then she smiled before adding, "Including my own little one."

"Well unless you've been out slaughtering cows and leaving giant hoof prints in the woods then I think that you're in the clear." Michael said.

"Hoof prints in the woods?" Harriet replied.

"Yes. Why, does that mean something to you?" Prudence asked.

"Nothing specific, there are a number of references in my library to the presence of imprints from cloven hooves being left. Of course the Christian church often portrayed the Devil as having cloven hooves. Some of the strange prints people have claimed to have seen were called the Devil's footprints. Although the story around those seems to have been massively misinterpreted." Harriet replied.

"I hope so. I don't fancy meeting the Devil himself." Prudence commented.

It was starting to get dark when Michael parked the Range Rover in the hospital car park and then he, Prudence and Harriet all looked at the sign pointing the way to the various different departments.

"Do you know where they were taking him?" Harriet asked.

"The paramedics said that they thought he should get an X-ray to be sure that he hadn't broken anything." Prudence said.

"They would probably have taken him to casualty first though." Michael pointed out, "Given that they thought he wasn't too badly hurt he may still be waiting to be seen there. I think that's where we should start."

The trio made their way to the entrance to the hospital's casualty department and when they entered it they found it crowded with people waiting to be seen for their injuries but looking around they could not see John.

"Perhaps we should ask." Prudence suggested and they walked towards the check in desk, "We're looking for John Midland. He should have been brought in by ambulance." Prudence said to the man behind the desk and he checked his computer.

"John Midland is being seen now." he said.

"Here? Or has he been sent to X-ray?" Michael asked.

"He's still here. You can wait over there." the man answered and he pointed towards the seating area despite there not being any empty seats.

"Thanks." Michael said as he and the two women turned away from the check in desk.

"So where do we wait?" Harriet asked.

"Over there I think, we can see who's coming out of the treatment area from there." Michael replied, pointing to the large doorway that led from the waiting area to where patients would be seen by doctors, "Hopefully this won't take long."

As it happened John was brought out of the treatment area in a wheelchair just as the trio were walking towards the doorway and he waved when he saw them.

"They saw me quickly because I had a head injury." he told them, "Now I'm being taken to X-ray."

"We can handle that for you." Michael told the nurse pushing John's wheelchair.

"It's okay, these are my friends." John added and the nurse smiled.

"Thanks. Here, take this and follow the green line to X-ray." she replied and she handed the notes regarding John's condition to Michael before pointing to the lines in various colours painted on the floor. Signs on the walls matched each colour to a specific department so that it was possible to reach them just by following the matching colour of line.

"Do you have my notebook?" John asked as Michael was pushing his chair away from the casualty department.

"Yes, right here." Prudence responded and she took the notebook from her handbag and handed it to him.

"Thank you. You have no idea how dangerous this could be in the wrong hands." he said as he took the notebook from her.

"Your notes about the Necronomicon?" Prudence said and John nodded.

"Some of them, yes. Most of them are at home on my computer but the most useful ones are here. Plus what I was able to determine about that stone." he said.

"And what was that?" Michael asked.

"The stone is related to a deity called Shub-Niggurath. The author of the Necronomicon mentioned this deity prominently several times, it was obviously important to the pantheon the book describes." John told him.

"So how does it relate to the deaths of cows?" Prudence asked.

"It doesn't, not directly." John said, "But there are other creatures related to Shub-Niggurath that could be. One name for Shub-Niggurath is the 'black goat of the wood with a thousand young' and the Necronomicon also talks about these so-called dark young. They can be summoned with an animal sacrifice in or close to woodland."

"These young wouldn't have three legs and cloven hooves would they?" Michael said.

"The description in the Necronomicon is somewhat vague but I think that would be a good description of them, yes." John replied.

"So what would someone want one of these things for?" Prudence said.

"Perhaps to worship or perhaps to use for protection. I suspect a creature like this would be extremely hard to kill." John said.

"So what do we do about it?" Prudence said.

"You have to go after the cult that summoned it. Find out who they are and hopefully you'll find out what they are planning to do. That's why I wanted you here." John said and he looked at Harriet.

"Because my library has information on local cults." she said and John nodded.

"I suspect that this cult has significant knowledge which suggests experience. I'm hoping that they've been noticed by someone before." he said and he handed his notebook back to Prudence, now open to a specific page, "Take this with you, this is the page that I made my notes about Shub-Niggurath on. I'm afraid I'd only just begun notes about that altar stone when I was attacked."

"That's okay professor. I'll take good care of this." Prudence replied as she took the notebook back from him.

"Thank you. Now I can get a taxi home, you should go and see what you can find in Harriet's library. I'll check the Necronomicon for any additional information and call you." John added.

6.

"Ia! Ia! Shub-Niggurath!" the magister called out, his face hidden beneath a plain hooded robe and the crowd of more than twenty other robed figures gathered in the otherwise empty room with a representation of the solar system marked on the floor repeated his call.

"Ia! Ia! Shub-Niggurath!"

"We praise the name of the black goat of the wood with a thousand young." the magister said.

"Ia! Ia! Shub-Niggurath!" the other cultists called out again before the magister lowered his hood and the congregation copied him, allowing them all to see one another's faces.

"Brethren and sistren our great work is nearing completion. Soon the consecration of the temple shall be complete and the guardian will lead us in bringing Shub-Niggurath to this world." the magister said.

"Ia! Ia! Shub-Niggurath!" the other cultists called out at the mention of their deity before the magister signalled for quiet.

"However, a problem has arisen that could threaten us. Unbelievers have been sighted near the calling stone and in the sacred woods. The farmer Conor brought them into this and they have knowledge that could threaten us. They know of the black goat of the wood and may suspect what we are trying to do. They must be stopped before they can interfere." the magister said.

"How?" one of the cultists asked.

"Tonight the guardian will require its tribute of flesh near the calling stone. Conor has moved his cattle away so an alternative must be found. I say let the unbelievers be the tribute." the magister answered, "The sacrifice of the flesh of an intelligent being has more worth than that of an animal. At the same time as we rid ourselves of a threat we will demonstrate our dedication to Shub-Niggurath. Ia! Ia! Shub-Niggurath!"

"Ia! Ia! Shub-Niggurath!" the cultists repeated.

"Magister how will we get the unbelievers to the calling stone at night?" one of the cultists asked.

"I know who they are." a female cultist responded, "A detective I work with has had prior contact with them and spoken of them. The unbelievers are private detectives with an office in Wellslaw, we can contact them there."

"And tell them what?" another cultist asked.

"Whoever contacts them will tell them that they have information about us that they are willing to share. When they arrive we will trap them by the calling stone for the guardian to devour." the magister said.

"What if they are armed?" the cultist James asked.

"Their weapons will not help them against the guardian." the magister answered and there were murmurs of agreement from the other cultists.

"We'll have to act quickly. The hour is almost on us when the guardian will emerge." one of them said and the magister nodded.

"Yes, which means we must decide who among us will make contact." he said.

"There's something here about someone who came back from Indonesia with a statue of a winged creature that had the head of an octopus." Harriet said as she flipped through a loosely bound folio of notes that dated back almost two hundred years. In addition to the printed books she had collected in her library, Harriet had also been able to add a number of unique manuscripts to it during her years of building it up by visiting rare bookshops and auctions and many of the more interesting pieces of information were to be found in these handwritten notes, "Apparently he formed a cult intended to bring about the arrival of this creature when the stars were in a specific configuration."

"Could that be this Shub-Niggurath?" Prudence asked

"It doesn't say." Harriet replied.

"Then I think we should keep looking." Michael added before his phone began to ring, "That's probably Emma wondering where I am." he said but when he looked at the screen he saw that it was not his girlfriend's number that was calling him, "This is being forwarded from the office." he said.

"Strange time to call isn't it?" Harriet said.

"That depends on who it is." Michael responded before he answered the call, "Lester Investigations." he said.

"Is that Michael Lester?" a man's voice said.

"Yes, who's speaking?" Michael replied.

"Someone who knows the two men who attacked your friend. The one with the notebook." the man said and Michael's eyes widened for a moment. Then he raised his finger to his lips for Prudence and Harriet to remain quiet while he switched the phone to speaker mode so that they could hear what was being said, "You seem to have me at a disadvantage. You know who I am but I don't know who you are." Michael then said to the man.

"There's no time for that now. I'm not okay with people being attacked and when those pair of thugs beat your friend I decided that I'd had enough. Meet me and I'll show you exactly what's going on." the man said.

"Okay, where and when?" Michael said.

"It has to be quickly. The others are moving things away. Meet me by the calling stone as quickly as you can." the man told him and then the line went dead.

"Do you think that was for real?" Prudence said.

"I don't know. Maybe we really have found a defector from the cult who will tell us what all this is about. On the other hand it does sound like a trap. I don't see how someone in the cult would have known how to get in touch with us in the first place. The only person involved in this that I gave a card to was Kevin Conor. Plus the urgency and the need to be in a specific place don't add up, especially when the time and the place match up with where and when we think that whatever it is that's wandering around in the woods could be wanting to feed again." Michael said.

"So what if we head back to your apartment to collect your shotgun first?" Prudence suggested.

"Not when we're supposed to be meeting with another person. Mark was right when he said that my licence doesn't cover using it to threaten people." Michael said, "We're going to have to be a bit more subtle, that's all."

"You mean you're actually going?" Harriet asked in surprise, "But isn't this a trap of some kind?"

"Possibly. Which is why I want you to call the police if you don't hear from us by tomorrow morning." Michael told her before he looked at Prudence and added, "Assuming you're coming along as well." he said and she nodded.

"Just try and keep me away." she said.

When Michael turned off the road leading to Kevin's farmhouse to head towards the field instead he immediately reduced speed and turned off the headlights of his car.

"What are you doing?" Prudence asked.

"If this is a trap I'd rather not just blunder right into it." Michael replied, "We'll stop just up ahead and go in on foot. We'll take the torches of course but we won't turn them on. I want to keep our night vision as much as possible. Same goes with our phones, we'll turn them off just in case anyone rings." Michael explained and Prudence nodded, taking out her phone and turning it off.

"Okay I'm set." she said and Michael pulled over to the side of the road.

"Right this is it. Let's get our armour and torches and then we walk from here." he said, turning off the engine and then also his phone.

As Michael had said they put on their stab vests and carried the large torches with them but did not turn them on, they were being carried mainly for protection should their supposed informant turn out to be leading them into the trap they expected this meeting to be. Rather than following the road directly to the field where the meeting was supposed to take place Michael led Prudence to another nearby field.

"Well get there quicker if we go directly across country rather than following the road." he said before he climbed over the locked gate, "Are you okay there?" he added when he saw Prudence trying to climb over it as well.

"I could do with a hand." she replied and Michael smiled as he helped her over the gate into the field.

"Now stay low. If you see or hear anything strange just freeze, don't try to run or duck because the movement might give us away." Michael said and then they both began to make their way across the field in the dark, keeping their torches switched off to avoid the light giving them away.

The field Michael and Prudence were crossing ran right up to the one Kevin owned and Michael and Prudence crouched behind the stone wall that divided them before peering over it.

"I don't see anyone." Prudence said, "Maybe that guy's not here."

"He'll be somewhere whether this is a trap or not. If it is a trap then he's the bait." Michael said.

"What if he was on the level but his friends found out he was planning to sell them out to us and they killed him?" Prudence asked.

"Then I'd expect someone else to be waiting for us to draw us in." Michael replied.

"So what do we do? Do we just wait here until someone shows themselves?" Prudence asked but Michael shook his head.

"No, we can circle round to where the wire fence meets the wall to that side of the field." he said and he pointed towards the wall that met with the wire fence, "That'll get us closer to the altar stone and while we're walking I'm going to think about how spending the money needed to buy some night vision kit would be well worth it."

Michael and Prudence followed the wall they were hiding behind around the edge of the field, periodically looking over to see if there was anyone waiting for them. However, by the time they had reached the end of the wall where it met the wire fence they had yet to see anyone.

"So now what?" Prudence said.

"Now we've got a choice, we either climb over the wall and go straight across the field to the altar stone or we carry on moving around it along the edge of the woods." Michael said and Prudence frowned.

"I don't like the idea of going through these woods in the dark. The last time we did that I ended up face to face with a lizard man." she said.

"Okay, across the field it is. If we run into any trouble we head back for the car." Michael told her before he climbed over the wall and then paused to look around while Prudence followed.

"A little help here?" she said and Michael turned to help her over the wall. This time though Prudence lost her balance and she gasped as she fell, dragging Michael down with her and landing on top of him, her chest pressing into his face, "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Fine." Michael responded, "We just won't tell Emma about that, okay?"

"Agreed. If she shoots you with her shotgun then she'd still have a barrel left over for me." Prudence said as the pair started to pick themselves up. However, all of a sudden Michael grabbed her arm.

"Stay still!" he hissed, looking along the length of the wire fence towards the altar stone.

"What is it?" Prudence replied.

"I think I heard something in the woods." Michael whispered and moments later they both saw the shape of a person as it emerged from the woods by the stone.

"Hello? Is someone there?" a man's voice called out and Michael recognised it from the phone call that had invited them here.

"Over here." Michael said, getting back to his feet and he waved to the man but kept his torch off then he reached down to help Prudence up as well.

"Who are you?" she called out to the man.

"Someone who wants to help. The group has gone too far and I can't follow them any longer. If we hurry you can stop them." the man said.

"Stop them from doing what? And as my friend asked, who are you?" Michael said.

"My name is Graham, now come quickly. I'll show you what's going on." the man responded waving Michael and Prudence towards him.

"Why don't you start by explaining what's happening?" Michael said.

"This way, it's in the woods." Graham replied.

"What's in the woods?" Prudence said, then she leant her head towards Michael and added, "This guy is making no sense."

"The cult is planning to summon something. Something big, but the ritual is very precise and any interruption will stop it. Hurry, before they realise that I'm not there." the man calling himself Graham replied.

"What do you think we should do?" Prudence asked.

"Go with him I suppose. Keep close to him though, if he is leading us into a trap then I expect he'll want to get away from us when it's sprung." Michael said softly before he called out to the man, "Okay, we're coming."

"This way." the man said when Michael and Prudence reached him and he beckoned for them to follow him as he squeezed through the wire fence and headed into the wood.

"Quick, don't let him get too far ahead." Michael reminded Prudence quietly before they both followed the man through the fence and into the woods beyond.

The woods were almost totally pitch black now that the sun had set and the only illumination came from a torch that Graham held. This was neither very large nor bright and it was only able to light up a small area of ground right in front of him while Michael and Prudence remained in the shadows behind.

"Think we should still keep these things turned off?" Prudence whispered to Michael, holding up her torch but Michael shook his head.

"No." he whispered back to her, "As long as we can follow him we'll be fine. This way there's less chance of us being spotted by someone else."

"Quickly, keep moving." Graham said, picking up his pace and Michael and Prudence sped up to stay as close to him as they could.

All of a sudden there was a loud 'thud' sound from the darkness, followed by the sound of vegetation being trampled and as soon as he heard this Graham turned off his torch and began to run.

"After him!" Michael exclaimed as the sounds of something large moving through the woods came closer and he and Prudence both broke into a run as well.

Moving quickly in the darkness was not easy but the fleeing Graham was making enough noise that even when he disappeared into the darkness his location could be determined from the noise he made while the sounds of movement from behind Michael and Prudence continued.

All of a sudden Graham vanished from sight and also stopped making any noise and both Michael and Prudence ground to a halt.

"Okay so now what?" Prudence asked as they both looked around.

"Whatever that is behind us it's coming this way. We need to find Graham so look around for anywhere he could be hiding." Michael told her and they split apart as they began to hunt for the man who had led them here.

Prudence was just about to tell Michael that she could find no signs of Graham when all of a sudden he leapt out from behind a tree and grabbed her, clamping one hand over her mouth to stop her from crying out while the other grabbed her chest for a moment before he wrapped his arm around her. She tried to scream but Graham's hand was too tight over her mouth and with his other arm around her she could not swing her torch at him. Instead she tried kicking him but was unable to land any blows on him.

"Stop struggling and maybe I'll help you." Graham whispered into her ear, "The guardian will have him though."

Prudence was suddenly able to get an arm free and she clawed at the hand Graham had over her mouth, causing him to pull it away as he gasped.

"Michael!" Prudence screamed at the top of her voice and Michael turned toward her and charged through the undergrowth.

7.

Graham promptly began to back away, turning so that he held Prudence between himself and the direction Michael was coming from before all of a sudden Michael seemed to vanish. Graham stopped moving and looked around trying to see where he had gone. Meanwhile Michael was making his way cautiously around Graham, using the distraction that Prudence's struggles and continued calls for help and demands to be released to cover his approach until he was close enough to strike.

Michael struck Graham from behind, leaping out of the darkness and swinging his heavy torch in a low arc so that it connected with the back of his knee with enough force to knock his leg out from under him and he screamed in pain as he collapsed, letting go of Prudence in the process and she was quick to dive out of his way.

"Now tell me what it is that's coming after us." Michael said sternly as he crouched down and grabbed Graham by his collar but Graham just laughed at him.

"The guardian will kill you both! You can't stop the summoning!" he snapped, then he took a deep breath and yelled "Ia! Ia! Shub-Niggurath!"

"Prudence are you okay to run?" Michael asked and Prudence nodded.

"I'm fine. Thanks." she replied.

"Okay then let's go." Michael said and he reached out to take her hand so that they did not get separated in the darkness.

"I think that just confirmed what John was saying about these cultists worshipping that god Shub-Niggurath." Prudence said as they ran.

"Which probably means that the thing coming after us is one of those young he told us about." Michael said, "Quick, over here." and he pulled Prudence towards a steep slope in the ground. The pair slid down this and then lay flat while Michael crawled back to the top and peered over it.

"Graham's turned his torch back on. I can see him." he said softly.

"Why? Is he trying to find us?" Prudence asked as she crawled up the slope beside Michael and looked over the top as well where she saw Graham still lying on the ground but now holding his torch again and shining it around him as the sounds of movement from in the darkness continued.

Prudence was watching where the torch beam was shining and all of a sudden the beam illuminated a creature that could have stepped out of a nightmare. Supported by three stout legs that ended in large hooves, the beast stood around twenty feet tall. Its bulbous body was black and was covered in numerous mouths filled with long, sharp fangs. The texture of its flesh was similar to that of tree bark, giving it the appearance of a tree that had somehow been able to uproot itself and was now walking around the woods on its roots. However, where a tree's branches would protrude from the top of its trunk this dark young had a mass of writhing tentacles and Prudence gasped in horror as she stared at it, unable to take her eyes off it.

"Prudence are you okay?" Michael asked, placing a hand on her shoulder and shaking her.

"What?" she responded as she regained her senses just as the beast reached where Graham was lying on the ground, his torch shining up at it as it loomed over him.

"I think he's talking to it." Michael said.

"Talking to it?" Prudence repeated, confused and Michael nodded.

"That's what it looks like to me." he said before he noticed Prudence rummaging in her pocket, "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Getting proof." Prudence answered as she took out her phone and turned it back on. Then when the phone's start up sequence had finished she switched on the camera in video mode and then she pointed it towards the creature and began to record.

"I think this explains how the cows could be killed without the fence being damaged." Michael said as he continued to watch the dark young creature, "I bet that thing just reached over with one of those tentacles and grabbed them."

The darkness of the woods limited what Prudence's phone was able to pick up, the usual crystal clarity of the camera being lost when switched to night vision mode but in the absence of any other means of capturing images of the dark young she continued to record anyway

"So what's the plan?" Prudence said softly as she looking at the monstrous creature through her phone.

"Plan? What makes you think I have a plan?" Michael responded as he watched the dark young continue to stand over Graham, its tentacles waving back and forth above it. He was unable to make out any eyes on the creature but he got the impression that it was able to see what was going on around it somehow and that the darkness of the woods may not offer as much protection as he would have liked.

"Didn't the army teach you to escape an enemy chasing you?" Prudence said.

"The escape and evasion courses the army teaches tend to assume that the enemy is guided by nothing

more than dogs. Demons from another dimension aren't covered." Michael said.

"What about improvisation? Do you think we can make some sort of weapon to use against that thing?"

Prudence added.

"Frankly I'm not sure what sort of improvised weapon would do us any good. Anything we could make is likely going to require us getting close enough to it that it would be able to attack us with its tentacles first."

Michael said before all of a sudden Prudence's phone began to play music, to the tune of 'Dear Prudence' by The Beatles and both Michael and Prudence stared at the device in horror.

"It's John." Prudence said as she fumbled with the phone to turn it off as quickly as she could but when

Michael looked back towards the dark young he saw that it was now moving directly towards them.

"Call him back. It's time to go." Michael told her and he quickly began to descend the slope once more.

"Michael wait for me." Prudence said as she slid down the slope after him.

Behind them the dark young smashed its way through the woods, crushing the undergrowth beneath its hooves as it went and from the increasing loudness of this sound it was clear that it was gaining on the two investigators.

"Where are we going?" Prudence called out.

"Back to the car. First though, over that wall." Michael replied as an old stone wall came into view ahead of them. Michael was the first to reach the wall and he quickly clambered over it before turning to help Prudence. As he did so he saw the terrifying shape of the dark young charging towards them, "Don't look back." he said as he grabbed hold of Prudence's hand and pulled her onwards along the road that lay on the other side of the wall.

Behind them any hope that the wall might offer some obstacle to the dark young in its pursuit of the pair proved futile as the creature bounded over it, one of its thick legs clipping the top of the wall and smashing a number of the stones loose. Despite the size and otherworldly nature of the dark young this still seemed to cause it some pain as all of a sudden all of its mouths let out a chorus of roaring sounds that sent a shiver down the spines of Michael and Prudence as they continued to flee. Now out into open ground though, the dark young was able to pick up speed and it continued to close the gap between it and the two investigators only now even more rapidly than before.

"We're nearly there." Michael said when he saw the familiar angled shape of his Range Rover ahead of them. Reaching into his pocket he took out his car keys and pointed them towards the vehicle to open the locks remotely but when he pressed the button he found that the Range Rover was still too far away for the key to work, "Come on, come on, come on." he said as he continued to try.

"It's gaining on us!" Prudence cried out as she glanced over her shoulder.

"I said not to look back." Michael responded right as the indicators on the Range Rover suddenly flashed to let him know that the locks had just been released, "Get in." he added.

"I will." Prudence said as she and Michael ran to opposite sides of the vehicle and pulled open the doors.

As quickly as he could Michael inserted the key into the ignition and started the engine without bothering with his seatbelt. Then he put the Range Rover into reverse.

"Hold on." he said as he pressed his foot down firmly on the gas pedal so that the Range Rover lurched into motion and headed backwards down the road. Not wanting to take even the slightest chance of a collision that would bring the Range Rover to a halt and doom himself and Prudence to whatever fate might be dealt out to them by the dark young, Michael turned on the vehicle's lights. He knew that this would reveal their own position to anyone, or indeed anything, that was hunting for them but with the dark young so close that it could see them with or without the lights there seemed to be no point in keeping them out. However, as soon as he turned on the lights the dark young was caught in the beam of the headlights and Prudence gasped when she saw how close it was to them.

"Go faster!" she exclaimed while Michael was looking behind the vehicle.

"Almost at the junction." he replied before he suddenly turned the steering wheel sharply to take the Range Rover around the corner in the road and Prudence found herself thrown against the inside of the passenger side door. Michael then put the Range Rover into drive and pressed down on the gas pedal again, sending the vehicle racing forwards just as the dark young swung one of its larger tentacles towards them only to miss the Range Rover by a few inches.

Now travelling forwards, Michael was able to accelerate rapidly and he quickly began to outrun the dark young that continued to pursue them down the road for several hundred yards.

"Keep going, we're losing it." Prudence said, watching the dark young fall further behind.

The dark young slowed down and stopped as its intended victims sped off and then it turned on the spot before heading back to the cover provided by the woods, returning to where the man who had lured Michael and Prudence there was using a tree to steady himself as he tried to stand. The blow from Michael's torch had been extremely painful and Graham was still unable to put any weight on the leg without it hurting again. Hearing the sound of the dark young approaching he looked around to watch the approach of the creature he

worshipped and he smiled. However, as soon as he came within reach the dark young reached out with one of its tentacles and wrapped it around him, lifting him up off the ground.

"No! Not me!" he screamed as he realised what was about to happen to him, "I brought you the others. I-" The dark young ignored this pleading though as it lifted him up above itself before dropping the terrified man down into one of its larger mouths where it swallowed him whole.

"Prudence, are you okay?" Michael asked as he continued to drive away from the woods and back towards Wellslaw and she nodded.

"Yes, I'm fine." she replied, still out of breath from having run so far and fast, "Do you think there are more things like that back there?"

"What was it that John called that god the cultists worship? The black goat of the woods with a thousand young?" Michael said and Prudence winced.

"A thousand? One is more than enough of those things for me." she said, "Mind you if that is the child then what do you suppose the mother is like?"

"I'm not sure that I want to find out. Which raises the unpleasant possibility that the summoning that guy mentioned could involve bringing their god itself here." Michael said.

"You think Graham was telling the truth about them planning to summon something? That wasn't just intended to get under our skins?" Prudence responded.

"Frankly I'm not even all that sure that his name is really Graham. I don't suppose you got a photo of him on your phone did you?" Michael said but Prudence shook her head.

"Not unless you count the footage of him with that thing that he set on us." she said and she took out her phone again to play back the video she had shot, interested to find out exactly what she had been able to capture.

"How does it look?" Michael said when he noticed this.

"Kind of blurry." Prudence told him.

"That's understandable." Michael commented.

"You can still tell what it is though. Sort of." Prudence added.

"Perhaps we should let John and Harriet take a look at it. They may have something to say about it." Michael suggested.

"That's a point, I'd better call John and see what he wanted." Prudence said and she stopped the video playback so that she could call him.

"Hello?" John's voice said.

"John it's Prudence." she replied.

"Ah Prudence, I'm so glad to hear from you. When you didn't pick up earlier I tried calling Harriet's home but she said you and Michael had both left to meet with a member of the cult. I was worried that something might have happened to you." John said.

"It almost did. We very nearly came face to face with one of those dark young." Prudence told him, "Or at least we would have done if it had a face"

"Really? You actually saw one? Did you manage to get any pictures of it?" John asked excitedly.

"In amongst almost being ripped apart like cattle, yes I was in the middle of videoing it right when you called and my phone went off." Prudence told him.

"Great, when can I see it?" John said, ignoring Prudence's comment about the timing of his call, "I also need my notebook back."

"John wants to know when we can get his book back to him and show him the video I shot." Prudence told Michael.

"Where is he?" Michael asked.

"Whereabouts are you?" Prudence added.

"I'm back at home now. There were no bones broken and I don't have a concussion so the hospital discharged me." John answered.

"He's at home." Prudence told Michael and he nodded.

"We're heading in that direction now. Tell him we'll be there in fifteen minutes or so." he said.

"John we'll be with you in about a quarter of an hour." Prudence said.

"Excellent. I'll see you then." John responded before he hung up and Prudence returned her phone to her pocket. Then she sighed.

"What's wrong?" Michael asked.

"We almost get devoured by a demon and John gets excited about it." Prudence replied, "Still, at least we escaped."

"For now, yes." Michael said and Prudence frowned.

"So you think that thing will try to come after us? It can't possibly walk into Wellslaw without being noticed. Even in the middle of the night." she said.

"Maybe not, but remember it has human worshippers. They can go anywhere and they obviously know who we are somehow." Michael reminded her.

"Your notebook and your car keys." Prudence said as she handed them back to John when he opened his front door to her and Michael.

"Thank you. Do come in, I've been reading up on the information that the Necronomicon has to offer on Shub-Niggurath." John replied as Michael and Prudence walked into his house, "Come on, I'll show you what I've found."

John then led the two investigators to his study where the Necronomicon was still open on his desk. This time the computer was also switched on.

"Been shopping online?" Prudence commented.

"I'm looking for more books like the Necronomicon." John told her as he sat down, "From what I can tell the Necronomicon is among the most comprehensive books of its kind but even it only scratches the surface of the universe's secrets so I'm trying to find some of the others."

"What about that bookshop the Necronomicon came from?" Michael asked, remembering the shipping information that had been in the box when he and Prudence had come across the book John now had.

"Yes I've tried contacting them but they haven't been responding to any of my messages. There are a few mentions of other volumes on the internet but unfortunately no definitive sources for any of them. Sadly very few were actually printed and none of them have ISBN numbers." John said before he looked down at the book in front of him to read from it, "Although the Necronomicon doesn't explain the details of how it's done it does say that both Shub-Niggurath and her young can be summoned using suitable sacrifices." he explained.

"Is that what we were supposed to be, a sacrifice?" Prudence asked.

"Graham mentioned a summoning that he said we wouldn't be able to stop." Michael added.

"That depends on what they want to summon. If the cult wants to summon more of the dark young then a human sacrifice is probably enough but for Shub-Niggurath the Necronomicon indicates that a much larger sacrifice is needed." John said and Prudence frowned.

"So a large animal like a cow or a horse then?" she said but John shook his head.

"No that's not quite what I mean. I think that summoning Shub-Niggurath needs multiple creatures to be sacrificed. Without the correct text though I can't say how many or how it would be done." he told her.

"I suppose the cult would have access to the right texts though." Prudence said.

"They were able to summon that dark young after all." Michael added.

"Yes but perhaps they had to summon the dark young so that it could teach them the ritual." John pointed out.

"The Necronomicon says that they can do that?" Prudence said.

"Not specifically, no. But what child can't contact its parent?" John answered.

"So what would summoning this Shub-Niggurath do?" Michael said and John frowned for a moment as he thought.

"Summoning a godlike being to Earth? If what I've read so far is accurate then very few of these beings can be considered even remotely benign and the consequences of summoning something so powerful can only lead to destruction on a massive scale." he said.

"So why summon one?" Prudence said.

"I can't help you there." John responded, "Perhaps there are benefits to those willing to serve these creatures."

"Worship or die? Sounds like a new inquisition." Michael commented, "So how do we stop this summoning?"

"I suspect that that in theory could be quite easy. The summonings that are described in the Necronomicon must be carried out very precisely. Any deviation would cause the ritual to fail."

"And what happens then?" Prudence asked.

"Nothing unless the ritual involves something potentially dangerous outside of its use in the summoning. Fire for example." John said.

"So no portals to hell dimensions filled with pagan gods?" Michael commented.

"No, I don't think so." John replied.

"So why haven't they summoned this Shub-Niggurath yet then?" Prudence said and John smiled.

"Ah, now there I can offer a suggestion." he said, "A lot of summoning rituals need to be carried out at specific times or places."

"When the stars are right." Michael said, glancing at Prudence.

"Where did you hear that phrase?" John asked.

"Harriet found a mention of a cult in her library that used it." Prudence told him.

"Obviously I need to take a look at that particular text. It may be relevant, not to what we are discussing here but generally for my research." he said before he continued, "Anyway, I suspect that the cult may be waiting

for a particular time or they may need to prepare a place to carry out the ritual. Given what information I have about Shub-Niggurath I suspect that the ritual would have to be carried out within a wooded area.”

“Would that stone in the field do?” Prudence said and John shook his head.

“I don’t think so, no.” he said.

“You said people talk about this stuff online. Could you find out from any of them?” Michael suggested, “We don’t need the exact details of the ritual, just enough to give us a chance of stopping it.”

“I suppose so. Though I expect that I won’t get very far by saying that we want to stop the summoning. I think that most, if not all of the people discussing these things on line are worshippers of one or more of the beings the Necronomicon describes.” John replied.

“What if we can’t find a way of disrupting this ritual?” Prudence said and Michael considered this for a moment before a smile appeared on his face. This then prompted a smile from Prudence as well, “You have a plan.” she added and Michael nodded.

“Yes, I have a plan. If this ritual really does require sacrifice then one way of stopping it will be to cut off the supply of animals to be sacrificed.” he said.

“What supply?” John asked, “As far as I know they can sacrifice pretty much anything. Of course the larger the animals involved the easier it would be.”

“Yes and what could be better than a herd of cows owned by the farmer who lives right by the wood they’ll be carrying out the ritual in?” Michael replied.

“They’re going to take Kevin Connor’s herd.” Prudence said and Michael nodded.

“That would be my guess.” he said, “First thing tomorrow I think we should pay him a visit and see if there’s some way he can move them.”

8.

Two cars and a van drove towards the farmhouse and stopped outside the gate before their drivers turned out the lights and the occupants all got out. There were four people inside each of the vehicles and all of them wore dark clothing, gloves and masks to cover their faces. Moving to the rear of the cars they opened them up to take out the weapons and other tools they had brought along with them. Just over half of the group armed themselves with knives but two instead took out bats while two others took out a pair of large sledgehammers and the final one an equally large axe. One of those armed with a knife also picked up a battered holdall while another pair slid a ladder from the back of the van before the group began to make their way towards the farmhouse without saying a word to one another.

As they approached the building they saw that there were lights on inside and people could be seen moving around. One of the group signalled to the member with the holdall and pointed to where the telephone line could be seen connecting to the side of the farmhouse and he in turn beckoned for the two carrying the ladder to follow him. The ladder was placed carefully against the farmhouse to avoid making any noise that would give away their presence to the building's occupants and while this was being done the man with the holdall set it down and opened it up. Inside there were two items, the first was a set of wire cutters while the other was a small black box that had multiple antennas sticking out of one end. A label on the side of this identified the device as a multi-frequency jammer, able to block GPS and more significantly all mobile phone signals. This device was illegal but easily obtained off the internet and the group were not concerned about the legality of the device. What they had come here to do tonight was a crime far more serious than operating the jamming device and in any case as far as they were concerned all laws would soon cease to have any meaning anyway.

Once turned on the device was set down on the ground and it began its silent work of blocking any mobile phone communication within the immediate area. Then the man picked up the wire cutters and began to ascend the ladders until the telephone landline came within reach, at which point he simply reached out and cut through the wire. This left the farmhouse totally cut off from the outside world but the masked group still moved cautiously as they made their way around it in two groups to get to the front and back doors. They knew that the occupants had access to firearms and they did not want them to have the chance to get these weapons ready for use.

One man in each group had a sledgehammer and they stood right in front of the front and back doors as two others looked at their watches that had been synchronised, waiting for a specific time to be reached. As soon as this happened both of the men armed with sledgehammers swung them at the doors to the farmhouse, smashing the locks off and causing the doors to swing open suddenly and the cultists charged inside.

The back door opened directly into the kitchen where Kevin's wife was making a drink and she screamed as the door was broken open and the first of the masked men charged inside.

"Kevin!" she yelled before the man armed with a bat ran towards her and swung the weapon. The blow knocked the defenceless woman to the floor but the man did not end his assault there and he continued to deliver blow after blow to her as she was lying on the floor. At the same time the rest of his group ran through the kitchen to search the rest of the house.

Kevin himself had been sat in the lounge watching television when he heard the crashing from the front and the back of the house and his wife's scream. Quickly he leapt to his feet and ran to the lounge door but as he pulled it open he found himself confronted by a masked man armed with a knife and before he could react the man plunged this knife into Kevin's stomach before withdrawing it again. Kevin promptly collapsed, clutching at the wound to his stomach that had blood pumping from it. Looking up he saw the knife wielding man and two others enter the lounge and quickly look around to see whether anyone else was in the room before they all turned their attention back to Kevin and all three of the men began to stab him repeatedly. Hearing the sounds of violence from downstairs and the sound of people coming up the stairs towards him, Kevin's son ran into his parent's bedroom and opened the drawer where the keys to the gun cabinet were kept, then he ran across the room to the steel cabinet bolted to the wall and opened it, taking out one of the shotguns from inside. With the ammunition having to be kept separately from the guns the young man had to open another safe in order to get the gun ready for use and he had only just managed this when the first cultist burst into the room. Kevin's son was able to insert a single round into the weapon and close the breech before the man reached him but by this point his masked attacker was too close for the long barrelled weapon to be used against him. Kevin's son still tried to bring the weapon to bear though and the masked man grabbed hold of the barrel to try and keep it pointed upwards. In the struggle the gun went off, blasting a large hole in the ceiling above while the loud booming sound in the confined space of the bedroom disorientated both men. This made the masked cultist back away from Kevin's son and this gave him the opportunity to try and reload the shotgun. However, the discharge of the gun attracted the attention of all the

other cultists in the house and two more of them came rushing into the bedroom while Kevin's son was still trying to reload. These two men pounced on him, pinning him down with the shotgun beneath him where it could not be used against them while a third man ran into the room and brought his bat down on the back of the head of Kevin's son.

This left only Kevin's teenage daughter in the house and she jabbed at the screen of her phone, desperately trying to get the device to work so that she could summon the police but all she could get from it was that there was no network signal available. She had had the foresight to lock her bedroom door when the crashing and the screaming began and while she continued to try and get her phone to work she heard the handle rattling as someone tried to get in. This was followed by a cracking sound and she turned in horror to see an axe blade come through the door. This was repeated several times until the door split and three of the cultists forced their way into the room.

"Please no I'll-" Kevin's daughter pleaded as the masked men approached her but before she could finishing trying to bargain for her life one of them slashed his knife across her throat.

"He's still not picking up." Prudence said as she tried to ring Kevin while Michael drove them both towards the farm the next morning, "Do you think he's having a lie in?"

"He's a farmer, he'll have been up for hours already. More likely he simply left his phone at home while he's out in the fields." Michael replied.

"So if he isn't going to be at home then why are we still heading there?" Prudence asked.

"Hopefully there'll be someone who is that can tell us where to find him." Michael answered.

Driving towards the farmhouse the first thing that Michael and Prudence noticed was that both of Kevin's vehicles were still parked outside it.

"His cars are still there." Prudence commented, "Wouldn't he have taken one if he was going somewhere?"

"I would have thought so." Michael responded, "Though he could still be close by I suppose." then he brought the Range Rover to a halt some way short of the gate leading to the farmhouse and added, "But that definitely doesn't look normal." he added and he pointed to the side of the building.

"What? What's wrong?" Prudence said as she tried to see what Michael had noticed.

"The telephone line's broken." he told her.

"I'm guessing that you don't think that was an accident?" Prudence said and Michael shook his head.

"I think we should check this out." he said as he drove the Range Rover forwards again until they reached the gate and he brought it to a halt again.

As a precaution the two investigators fetched their stab vests and large torches from the back of the Range Rover before they made their way towards the farmhouse.

"The front door's open." Prudence said softly and Michael nodded.

"Yes I noticed. Let's check the phone line first though." he said before leading her to where the landline had connected to the house.

From the ground only a short length of the cable was visible hanging down the wall and Michael looked around for the other broken end.

"Here." Prudence said when she noticed the loose cable lying on the ground and they both walked over and crouched down beside it before Michael reached down to pick it up, "Careful, that could be live." Prudence tried to warn him.

"It's a phone line, not electricity." Michael replied, "It only carries about fifty volts and hardly any current."

"Okay so electrical engineering wasn't part of my journalism degree." Prudence commented. Then she smiled and added, "Just how to stage a communist revolution by inventing stories."

Michael glared at Prudence for a moment before he held the end of the cable up close to her so that she could see it clearly.

"This didn't just snap. It was cut." he said.

"Someone really wanted to stop them using their telephone." Prudence said but then she frowned, "But Kevin has a mobile. I bet the rest of his family have them as well."

"Someone could have used a jammer." Michael said, "Out here there's no-one else to notice a dead spot in the GSM network."

"You can do that?" Prudence said.

"Oh yes, you can block any wireless signal with a more powerful one on the same frequency. It's illegal but the equipment is available. Now I think we should find out why someone didn't want the Conors using their telephones." Michael said and they both got up and headed for the front door.

As they got closer the damage to the door caused by the sledgehammer became obvious and Michael held Prudence back.

"We should be careful, whoever did this could still be around." he whispered to her.

"The cult?" Prudence suggested and Michael nodded again.

"That would be my guess, yes." he said and then he walked up to the door and gently pushed it fully open so that he could see inside the house, "Looks quiet enough but I'd say that this door was hit by a hammer or

possibly a battering ram.” he said before he stepped inside and began to move cautiously along the hallway until he got to the door to the lounge where he came to a sudden halt.

“What is it?” Prudence said when she saw him string through the doorway.

“Blood. A lot of it.” Michael replied and Prudence rushed to see for herself.

The blood in the lounge was concentrated in a pool on the floor but there were also stains on the wall where it had sprayed from Kevin’s wounds. Of Kevin’s body though, there was no sign and neither Michael nor Prudence could tell whose blood they were looking at.

“Do you think everyone’s dead?” Prudence said.

“I think so.” Michael replied, nodding, “We should check the rest of the house.”

“What about the police?” Prudence asked, “Surely we have to call them.”

“Of course we do but I want to see everything that’s here before they get the chance to order us outside.”

Michael answered and he took out his mobile phone so that he could photograph the blood.

“So where next?” Prudence said.

“We’ll search the downstairs first and then go upstairs. But remember, look but don’t touch anything. The last thing we need are our fingerprints on a crime scene.” Michael replied and Prudence smiled.

“I have some gloves in my handbag.” she said, opening the small bag she had slung across her and she took out a pair of lightweight gloves that she put on.

“That’s good but still be careful about what you touch. Evidence can get on you as easily as we can leave evidence of our presence here.” Michael said as they turned to continue following the hallway towards the kitchen, looking though the other doorways they passed but seeing no evidence of violence.

“Looks like they broke in the back door as well.” Prudence said when she saw the damage to the door.

“Makes sense.” Michael commented, “It blocks any escape.” then when he noticed the blood on the floor at the other side of the room he pointed to it and added, “And it looks like someone was in here when they came in.”

“So at least two people were murdered here.” Prudence said.

“It looks that way, yes. Come on, let’s check upstairs.” Michael replied.

The upper floor of the farmhouse held just bedrooms and a bathroom and once again Michael and Prudence found blood on the floor of the first bedroom they checked when they saw the destruction that had been inflicted on the door.

“I think this was broken down with an axe.” Michael commented, looking at the fragments of the door on the floor at their feet.

“This must have been Kevin’s daughter’s room.” Prudence added as she noticed the decoration and photographs of teenage girls smiling together.

“I think she was trying to call for help when she was killed.” Michael said as he pointed to the mobile phone on the floor.

“The jammer?” Prudence replied.

“It would have easily blocked the signal. She couldn’t even have dialled nine-nine-nine. I suppose that proves the jamming started before the attack, otherwise there would have been an interrupted call. The emergency services tend to follow those up to find out why.” Michael said before they backed out of the room onto the landing.

Prudence then looked into the next bedroom and the first thing she noticed was the damage to the ceiling.

“There’s something different in here.” she said as she went into the room.

“Other than blood?” Michael said.

“There’s blood as well but someone’s put a hole in the ceiling recently. There’s plaster all over the bed.”

Prudence replied and Michael followed her into the room.

“That’s from a shotgun.” he said when he saw the damaged ceiling.

“Have you done that with yours?” Prudence asked.

“No but I’ve seem shotguns fired inside by the SAS doing a live fire exercise.” Michael replied and he looked around, noticing the open gun and ammunition cabinets, “What’s even more worrying is that it looks like the cult took whatever guns Kevin had.” he said, walking over to the gun cabinet itself where he saw that the internal rack was designed to take four long guns, “Prudence come here a moment.” he said and she walked over to join him by the cabinet.

“What is it?” she asked and Michael pointed to a shelf at the top of the cabinet.

“Do you see that document in the plastic wallet?” he said and Prudence nodded.

“Yes, what is it?” she said.

“I think it’s Kevin’s firearms certificate. Since you’ve got gloves on would you mind just taking it out and opening it up?” Michel told her and she reached out to remove the document from the cabinet.

Sure enough the document inside the clear plastic wallet was a firearms certificate and Kevin’s photograph was visible through the plastic even before Prudence removed it.

“What am I looking for?” Prudence said as she tried to make sense of the information she was looking at.

“Turn to the page that lists what guns he owned. This cabinet looks like it was used to hold four and I want to

know what's missing." Michael said.

"Four?" Prudence exclaimed, "What did he need four guns for?"

"Open the certificate and I'll probably be able to tell you." Michael said and Prudence opened the document to the page that listed the firearms Kevin was licenced to hold. As Michael had expected there were four guns listed by type and serial number.

"Okay so what are these?" Prudence asked.

"Two double barrelled shotguns, probably for pest control. Also for dealing with dogs if necessary." Michael told her, "Then we have a point two-two rifle with a silencer which I'm guessing is for pest control again but at longer ranges. You don't generally fit a silencer to a target rifle."

"What would you shoot with that?" Prudence said.

"Foxes probably. Although maybe Kevin's family liked fresh rabbit for tea." Michael said, "This last one is different though. That's a full bore rifle."

"A what?" Prudence said.

"It fires a significantly bigger bullet than the two-two. Three-oh-three is an old calibre though, not really used for hunting. Kevin must have been a member of a club where he could shoot it." Michael said.

"So one of his family was able to reach the cabinet and got a gun out when the cult attacked the house."

Prudence said.

"If Kevin was following the letter of the law then it would have been him. No-one other than the licence holder is supposed to be able to access the guns. That includes knowing where the keys are." Michael told her.

"So this is where Kevin died." Prudence added, looking back at the blood stained floor.

"Possibly. As I say that's if he was following the letter of the law. I wouldn't be surprised if someone in his family knew where he kept his keys, even if he didn't specifically tell them. I can tell that he kept the ammunition locked away at the very least." Michael said.

"How?"

"The keys are still in the door of the ammunition safe." Michael said and he pointed across the room to the second safe that, like the gun safe, now stood empty, "Anyway I think we've seen enough. Put the licence back and let's call the police. Four murders and four missing firearms should get even Wellslaw police out here."

9.

"What the hell's going on here?" Mark asked when he got out of his car, one of four vehicles that had arrived initially in response to the call made to report what had happened at the farmhouse. Mark was the only detective among the police officers and as he approached the two private investigators the uniformed officers headed for the farmhouse.

"Hello Mark." Michael replied with a smile while he and Prudence rested against the front of his Range Rover, "Does Wellslaw police even have any other detectives?"

"My superiors seem to think that I should deal with anything you send our way." Mark replied, "Now why don't you tell me what you two are doing here?"

"We came to visit Kevin." Prudence answered.

"Why?" Mark said.

"To ask him to move his cattle away from the area." Michael told him.

"A religious cult is going to sacrifice them to summon their god." Prudence added and Mark sighed.

"Look your fairy stories are bad enough at the best of times but if people are dead then I'd really appreciate it if you could stick to reality Miss Brent." he said.

"You want reality? Then check this out." Prudence responded as she took out her phone and called up the video she had shot in the woods the previous night before holding it out so that Mark could see the screen.

"Another of your phony videos isn't going to convince me that there are monsters under the bed." he said.

"Well will four dead people and an entire safe full of guns missing convince you that there is a group of people in the area who are very dangerous and need to be stopped? Or is Wellslaw police more concerned about what we might be saying on the internet? Because after this I'm going to have a fair few choice words to say about you." Michael said.

"Just get on with your explanation." Mark responded.

"As I told you we arrived to meet with Kevin Conor to warn him that someone planned to steal his cattle in the hope that we could convince him to move them away from here." Michael said, "Then when we arrived we saw that someone had cut the telephone line and the front door was broken open. We went inside to check and that's when we found the pools of dried blood and the empty gun safe."

"So you searched the house even though you knew it was a crime scene?" Mark said.

"We needed to be sure that there was no-one inside that needed our help. How else were we supposed to do that?" Prudence said and Mark frowned, knowing that her point was valid.

"So tell me what you know about these so-called cultists." he said.

"They worship a pagan god called Shub-Niggurath." Prudence said.

"I don't care about that. I want names and addresses. Who are they and where can I find them?" Mark said sternly.

"We don't know that yet." Michael replied, "The only name we've been given is Graham and we don't even know if that is real."

"So who is this Graham?" Mark asked.

"He's the man we spoke to last night in the woods next to where John Midland was attacked yesterday."

Prudence answered, "You can just about make him out in that video."

"All I saw in that video was a big green blob." Mark said, "So what happened to this Graham then?"

"We don't know. We were too busy running for our lives from the monster in the video to worry about him." Prudence said.

"You might want to check the local hospitals for an admission with a knee injury though." Michael added, "I may have done some serious damage when I hit him with my torch and before you ask, yes it was justified. He was attacking Prudence at the time."

It was then that one of the uniformed officers came out of the house and walked over to Mark.

"What have you found?" the detective asked.

"The place is a mess detective sergeant." the uniformed officer answered, "Both the front and back doors were forced and one of the bedroom doors was smashed to pieces. There's blood upstairs and downstairs and it looks like someone fired off a shotgun in one of the bedrooms. We found an empty case."

"We missed that." Prudence commented to Michael.

"What about the gun safe?" Mark said.

"Empty. No ammunition in the other safe either. Whatever weapons were stored in that house, they're gone now." the uniformed officer told him.

"Damn it!" Mark hissed, "Okay call it in. We're going to need scene of crimes here to go over every square inch of this place and tell the superintendent that we may need an armed response unit on stand by."

"Magister." the woman's voice said when the magister answered his phone.

"Yes sistren?" he said, recognising the voice as belonging to the cult member who worked with the local police.

"Magister, the deaths of the family at the farm have been discovered. The police are beginning their investigation." The woman told him.

"This is faster than expected." the magister said, "How did they discover what happened so quickly?"

"The two private investigators who have been poking around arrived at the farm this morning and called the police. I thought Graham was supposed to have dealt with them." the woman said.

"Yes, unfortunately Graham failed in his task and has suffered the consequences of his failure. What will happen to the herd?" the magister asked.

"The herd are in the sheds Conor was keeping them in overnight to try and protect them. The police aren't farmers so they're leaving them there for now but I've been told to find someone who can take care of them." the woman answered and the magister smiled.

"Very good. I'm sure that we can find someone who can give the police suitable advice and support.. Leave that with me and I'll be in touch as soon as I can." he replied.

Michael and Prudence sat in the Range Rover watching as more police vehicles arrived to carry out a detailed search of the farmhouse for evidence.

"I think we should call John." Michael said.

"I'm on it. Do you think he'll be awake yet?" Prudence responded as she took her phone from her handbag and called up John's number.

"if not then he soon will be. Put your phone on speaker." Michael said and Prudence nodded, switching on her phone's speaker mode just as John answered the call.

"Hello?" he said.

"John it's Prudence. Michael is here with me. We aren't waking you are we?" Prudence said.

"Oh no. If I sound tired it's because I didn't go to bed last night. I've been working on that little problem of ours." John told her.

"Really? You were up all night?" Prudence commented.

"Yes. I managed to find someone on the internet able to tell me about the summoning ritual for Shub-Niggurath. Apparently this isn't the first time something like this has been done." John answered.

"This has happened before? When?" Prudence asked.

"Yes. Have you ever heard of the Tunguska blast?" John said and Prudence frowned.

"No, what's that?" she said.

"It was a massive explosion that took place in Russia in nineteen-oh-eight and flattened an area of forest about ten miles across." John said.

"A blast that big would destroy Wellslaw and everything around it. We'd be talking about thousands of deaths at a minimum, even Manchester could be affected." Michael said.

"Yes that's why I was prepared to stay up all night to get the information we might need to stop the summoning from happening." John replied.

"So what else did you find out apart from us potentially all being killed an explosion that has the same force as a nuclear bomb?" Michael said.

"As I already thought, the ritual has to be carried out in a forest and it has to be done when there is no moon. First a sacred altar has to be prepared at a suitable location and this needs to be consecrated by the blood of animals or people." John said.

"How much blood?" Michael asked and Prudence winced at the thought.

"There isn't an exact figure but totally draining about twenty adults ought to be enough. Of course cows are larger so you might only need half that many but the more blood the better it seems. Then once the consecration is done a powerful sorcerer must recite the correct ritual summoning chant to open a portal to Shub-Niggurath so that she can come to our world from wherever it is that she usually dwells." John explained.

"Which is where?" Prudence said.

"I don't know. Some powerful beings are said to live in remote hidden spots here on Earth while others live in outer space or even in alternate dimensions that we can't even perceive. The location of Shub-Niggurath isn't given in any of the sources available to me." John said.

"Do you know what needs chanting?" Prudence asked.

"No, sorry. It seems that the words used to perform the summoning can also be used to banish Shub-Niggurath back to wherever she comes from so that would have been another weapon to use even if it could only be used after the summoning took place." John said.

"Not the sort of thing we're after then." Michael said.

"It seems that the exact summoning ritual isn't something that even most of the cults that worship Shub-Niggurath know." John continued, "I think I was right when I said that the dark young creature could have

been summoned for that purpose.”

“So if we can kill that thing then the summoning will be stopped? So how do we do that?” Prudence said.

“I don’t know. I don’t even know if one can be killed.” John admitted.

“Maybe Harriet can come up with something.” Michael said.

“Yes but other than that all I can suggest is that you need to find where the cultists have created their altar and destroy it. Or at least prevent it from being consecrated.” John told him, “Whatever you do you need to hurry though. There’s no moon tonight so the cult will be able to carry out their ritual then.”

“Oh great. How did I know he was going to say that?” Prudence said.

“Thanks John. We’ll get back in touch if we need anything more.” Michael said and the Prudence hung up the phone and sighed.

“So we’ve got today to either save the world or get as far from here as we can.” she said before she saw Mark walking towards the Range Rover, “Oh great, more bad news I expect.” she added as Michael opened his window.

“So what have your amazing powers of detection told you Mark?” he asked the detective.

“That this is an active crime scene so anyone who isn’t a real detective or a real reporter doesn’t need to be here.” Mark responded, “Now how about the pair of you head off and try catching the Loch Ness Monster?”

“Because Loch Ness is more than three hundred miles away.” Michael pointed out and Mark frowned.

“You know what I mean. Get out of here before I decide to arrest the pair of you for something. Don’t go too far away though, right now I don’t have any real suspects but I’ve seen you two around here far too much for it all to be a coincidence.”

“Whatever you say Detective Sergeant Jackson.” Michael replied as he turned the key in the Range Rover’s ignition.

10.

"So what do we do now?" Prudence asked as Michael drove them away from the Conor farm.

"We need to find where the cultists are going to perform this ritual. That has to be the priority. No altar, no ritual." Michael replied and Prudence nodded.

"So back to the woods?" she said.

"Yes. Unfortunately we'll have to go in with only our torches. Kevin can't give me permission to carry my shotgun and after yesterday I don't think that the cultists have put their altar on his land anyway. If they had then we'd have already seen it." Michael said.

"What about finding out how to kill that thing we saw last night?" Prudence added.

"As John said, Harriet is probably our only hope of that but we don't have the time to go and see her. Send her a text to explain what we need and what we're doing. She can call us if she finds anything." Michael said, "Only this time set your phone to vibrate. I don't want to die because of The Beatles." he added.

"Remember you were the one who set that as my ring tone in the first place Michael." Prudence reminded him as she began to type out the text message to Harriet. Then a short time later she added, "There, sent. So how do we search an entire wood in a day?"

"We consider the amount of damage that dark young creature seems to do to the undergrowth. I'd say it was likely that it's staying close to the altar to protect it. If we can track its trail then it will lead us right to where we need to be." Michael said.

"As well as right to where the thing that wanted to kill us last night is." Prudence pointed out.

"Yes, hopefully by the time we get there Harriet will have told us how to deal with it." Michael replied just as he took the turning that led to the field where the cows had been killed and once again he parked right outside the gate, "Let's go. We should try starting with where we saw the thing last night." he said.

With their stab vests on and carrying their heavy torches Michael and Prudence entered the woods by the carved stone once again and began to follow the path that Graham had led them along the previous night.

"It all looks different in daylight." Prudence said, "Though I doubt I could recognise anything in the dark either."

"Here." Michel said, pointing to a nearby spot of bare earth that had obviously been disturbed recently and as well as tracks left by humans there were several imprints of large hooved feet, "This is where Graham attacked you." then he looked around, "Which means that the slope where we hid is over there somewhere." he added and he pointed again.

"So that thing must have come from that way." Prudence replied, turning to look in the other direction and she noticed damage to the vegetation where the dark young had passed by.

"Then I guess that's the way we go." Michael said.

As they headed deeper into the woods Michael and Prudence found that the paths between the trees became narrower. However, this also meant that the trail left by the dark young as it moved through the woods was easier to follow with more vegetation being crushed or broken as it passed by.

"What's wrong?" Michael asked when Prudence suddenly stopped walking and took out her mobile phone.

"Oh just checking to see if Harriet has messaged me with an easy way to kill one of these things." she replied.

"Has she?" Michael added.

"No, there's nothing from her yet." Prudence answered, returning the phone to her pocket before there was a sharp 'crack' and Michael spun to search for the source.

"Down!" he hissed and both he and Prudence crouched as they searched for the source of the noise.

"See anything?" Prudence whispered.

"Nothing but whatever that was it had to be bigger than a fox or badger." Michael said, "I think we should get off this trail."

Prudence nodded in agreement and they quickly moved off the trail left by the dark young into the woods beside it, taking cover behind a tree as they continued to search for the source of the sound. They did not have to wait long though as a pair of familiar figures appeared, the two men they had last seen attacking John Midland the previous day. Both men were now armed, one of them with a double barrelled shotgun and the other with a bolt action rifle. Michael recognised both of these weapons immediately, the shotgun was identical to the one Kevin had been armed with when they first met while the rifle was a Second World War vintage British Lee-Enfield bolt action rifle of the sort listed on Kevin's firearms' certificate.

"I think we just found two of Kevin's missing guns." Michael said softly as he took out his own mobile phone and began to photograph the two cultists as they walked along the trail, "If Mark Jackson had just taken the attack on John more seriously then maybe Kevin and his family would still be alive."

"Do you think this means we're getting close?" Prudence commented, "I mean those two have to be guarding something, right?"

Michael paused taking pictures and smiled.

"Yes it does." he replied, "We'll give them a few minutes to get out of sight and then see what's the way they came from."

"So you don't have any special forces tricks to disarm them then?" Prudence said and Michael smiled.

"The special forces trick is to avoid them in the first place, just like we're doing right now." he responded.

Once the two armed cultists were gone Michael beckoned for Prudence to emerge from cover with him and they continued to follow the trail left by the dark young, alert now not only for the twenty foot monster but also for any further armed cultist patrols that they now knew could be armed.

After a short while the two investigators came to a downwards slope and when they looked over the edge they knew immediately that they had found what they were looking for. The slope was one side of a wide gully but instead of earth or vegetation at the bottom there was what looked at first glance like a massive flat stone, the surface of which had had numerous strange symbols etched into it.

"That can't be ordinary stone surely." Prudence said softly as she and Michael studied it from the top of the slope.

"No I don't think it is. I think it's concrete. Those markings would have been easy to make when it was wet. A few thick planks laid across would let someone walk over it without leaving any footprints." Michael said.

"A DIY altar." Prudence commented, "I didn't realise that it would have to be this big."

"Nor did I." Michael agreed and then he looked up and sighed, "If I'd known then I'd have tried to get us a drone. Look at that gap in the trees, this is visible from the air."

"So how come no-one's seen it yet?" Prudence said.

"Who would be looking?" Michael pointed out.

"Apart from us you mean? I get your point." Prudence responded, "So are we going to go down there and take a closer look?"

"John will be disappointed if we don't bring back photographs of it." Michael said and he looked across to the other side of the gully, "I don't see any sign of that dark young around right now, do you?" he asked and Prudence shook her head.

"No, not right now." she said, "What do we do if it appears?"

"What else? We run as fast as we can. Now let's go and be careful of this slope. Fall here and you'll land on concrete." Michael said before he began to carefully make his way down the side of the gully to the concrete below.

"Pouring concrete isn't really my area of expertise," Prudence said when they were both stood at the bottom of the gully and looking at the carvings by their feet, "but wouldn't it be difficult to get this much concrete this deep into the woods?"

"I would think so, yes." Michael replied, "Of course if you've got a few dozen people to carry the raw ingredients and a long period of time in which to work then it must be possible or we wouldn't be looking at this right now."

"So short of finding someone with some dynamite they can lend us, how do we destroy this?" Prudence asked.

"I'm not sure that we can, but this isn't finished yet so maybe we don't have to." Michael said.

"Not finished? It looks pretty finished to me." Prudence said.

"Yes but it needs consecrating with blood, remember?" Michael reminded her, "If you look at these marks that have been made in the concrete closely you'll see that they're all connected together."

"So the blood can flow all around it?" Prudence suggested and Michael nodded.

"That's sounds reasonable. My guess is that the cultists will bring their intended sacrifices here and kill them on top of the concrete so that every drop of blood that pours out will get caught. As long as we can keep those sacrifices away then the cultists can't summon their god." he said.

Michael and Prudence had not even reached the edge of the woods when they realised that something was wrong. Even before they saw them they heard the sound of the cows in the field and as they rushed forwards they saw that someone had returned a herd of cows to it even after Kevin had removed his to prevent them from being killed by the dark young.

"What happened? How could all these cows have got here?" Prudence said.

"I don't know." Michael said, "But he might be able to explain." and he looked across the field to the gate that his Range Rover was parked outside. Turning to look in the same direction, Prudence saw that there was now also a man in a high visibility jacket standing outside the gate, on the back of which the word 'POLICE' was written clearly.

"Why would the police put cows in this field? Kevin specifically took them out." Prudence said as she and Michael made their way towards the policeman just outside the gate, circling around the outside of the field rather than going straight through the herd to avoid panicking the cattle.

"Because it's the stupidest thing possible that could be done. Of course the police would do it." Michael said. As they neared the gate the policeman noticed them approaching and turned towards them and both Michael and Prudence recognised his face from the farm earlier.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Yes you could get rid of these cows as soon as possible. Kevin Connor removed them from this field for a purpose. Something was killing them." Michael told the policeman sternly.

"The cows have been returned to this field on expert advice sir. Now please move along." the policeman responded and Michael frowned.

"Come on Prudence, let's go." he said before he unlocked the Range Rover and got inside.

"Aren't you going to show him the photos of those men with Kevin's guns?" Prudence asked as she got into the Range Rover beside Michael as he was starting the engine.

"No, all that would happen then is that the police would put a cordon around the area while they try to search the woods. That means that sooner or later they'd run right into that dark young and who knows how many of them would be killed? We need to speak to John and Harriet and figure out a way of stopping that ceremony." he said before he started to drive off.

All of a sudden Prudence began to fumble in her pocket.

"My phone." she said, feeling the phone in her pocket vibrate silently, "It's Harriet." she added before answering the call, "Hello Harriet." she said.

"Prudence I've checked my library and I've found something that may be of interest to you." Harriet told her.

"Great, do you have a way to stop these dark young things?" Prudence said.

"Possibly but I can't be certain. I'm not even a hundred percent certain that what I've found is about these creatures but it sounds close to the description I've been given." Harriet replied.

"Hold on while I put you on speaker. Michael should hear this as well." said Prudence before adjusting her phone, "Okay go ahead." she added.

"Well I've found an account from just after the civil war. A military leader in Surrey thought he'd uncovered a coven of witches so he did what most Puritans would in his place and decided to kill them all. The document I found describes how he took a force of twenty men with muskets into the woods where the alleged witches were known to meet and that's where they encountered, hold on I'll read exactly what he wrote, 'A demon that looked like it had been twisted from a mighty oak with a dozen gaping maws.'" Harriet explained.

"That sounds like what we saw alright." Prudence commented before Harriet continued with her summary of the notes she had found.

"Then he goes on to say that he had his men attack the creature but their shots did nothing but 'Make the beast scream out in pain.'" she said.

"Well at least gunfire hurt it." Prudence commented.

"Yes, but I expect we'll need a lot more firepower than we can get to deal with one." Michael added.

"Well if the man who wrote this survived an encounter he must have found a way of dealing with it." Prudence pointed out.

"Yes he did." Harriet responded, "At first he ordered his men to withdraw but the creature followed them and killed several before they could get away. But then the author returned with a larger force of men armed with axes. A lot of them were killed as well but they were able to kill the creature, at which point the remains melted away. After that the document just describes how the leader had his men burn all the so-called witches who had summoned it. I don't know if any of that will help."

"Actually Harriet I think it might." Michael said with a smile.

"There's that look again. You have a plan." Prudence said.

"Part of a plan maybe and it's a long shot, but if the alternative is having some god turn up and destroy everything for ten miles then it's worth the risk. We still need a way to deal with that altar though. Sooner or later someone would try again if we don't." Michael responded.

"Okay thanks Harriet." Prudence said.

"You're welcome. Is there anything else I can do?" Harriet said.

"Nothing springs to mind but you might want to consider being more than ten miles away tonight just in case all this goes wrong." Prudence told her.

11.

John hesitated when he opened his front door, surprised to see only Prudence standing outside and no sign of either Michael or his car.

"Where's Michael?" he asked as he stepped back and let Prudence through the doorway.

"Gone for supplies. He's got an idea about how we can disrupt the ceremony but he wanted me to check with you to see if you'd found anything more." she told him.

"There's nothing definitive I'm afraid but it appears that any interruption of the summoning or damage to the altar will be enough to prevent the ritual from being completed." John said.

"What about that dark young creature? Harriet found a document in her occult library that suggested someone tried fighting one in the sixteen-hundreds. Guns didn't seem to do much but axes did eventually." Prudence said as John led her towards his study.

"That matches with what I've been able to dig up as well. The cults of Shub-Niggurath seem to value the dark young not only as a sign of their god's favour but also for their effectiveness in defending their temples from attack. More significant than their resistance to gunfire though seems to be their near if not total invulnerability to fire or explosions." John explained.

"How does that work?" Prudence said, confused.

"You need to remember that we are dealing with creatures that do not originate in our world, possibly not even this dimension and regardless of whether they are living here now or not their bodies are not made of the same material ours are." John explained.

"That still makes no sense to me." Prudence commented as they were entering the study.

"I'm afraid I'm probably not the best person to explain it to you anyway. I'm a professor of classics, remember? I think we really need a physicist to tell us what any of it means." John said. Then a hint of a smile appeared on his face before he added, "Assuming that they can see past the conventional laws of physics they are used to."

"Okay so we're not going to be able to take out that dark young easily. What about the altar?" Prudence said,

"Is there something easy we can do to put that beyond use?"

"Actually there I may be able to help you. Do you recall that I mentioned a rival set of beings mentioned in the Necronomicon?" John responded.

"Yes, but didn't you say that they probably wouldn't fight for us?" Prudence said.

"That's right but you asked me about the possibility of using their symbol to repel these creatures." John reminded her.

"Yes, like a crucifix. So can we?"

"No, it doesn't work that way. But any object on which the mark is properly made will become useless to them." John said and a smile appeared on Prudence's face.

"So we paint this on the altar and it becomes nothing but a giant lump of concrete ruining the countryside." she said.

"There's more to it than that I'm afraid. The symbol does not just exist as a shape, it stores power and that power has to come from somewhere." John said before he held up the Necronomicon on a page that showed the five pointed Elder Sign with blocks of text annotating it, "However, this explains the correct ritual for channelling that power into it."

"Can you teach it to me by tonight?" Prudence asked and John paused.

"I don't even know how to do it yet. I've only just started studying this section of the Necronomicon in detail. Hopefully it will be straight forwards enough for us both to learn though." he answered.

Prudence was rereading the set of notes she had taken while John went through the procedure for the proper creation of an Elder Sign when Michael arrived to collect her from John's home.

"Do you think you'll be able to follow those instructions?" John said while he showed her out, "I could always-"

"John you've already been attacked once this weekend. I'd never forgive myself if it happened again."

Prudence interrupted.

"Ready?" Michael asked from the Range Rover and Prudence nodded.

"As ready as I'm likely to be." she replied as she got in and she held up her notes, "This might help us to destroy the altar." then she looked into the back of the vehicle where there were two large holdalls, "What about you, did you get everything?"

"Yes fortunately garden centres, hardware stores and petrol stations are all open on Sundays. As long as we can avoid getting shot by the cultists this may give a chance to keep them from finishing their ritual." he told her.

Despite wanting to get to the cult's altar as quickly as possible Michael was forced to limit his speed as he drove towards Quarry Side and the Conor's farm. Not only were there speed cameras along the route but the road itself was narrow and winding. Like many of the roads in the area it predated motor transport and had been designed to see only limited traffic from horse drawn carts and carriages and despite their hurry to get to their destination, neither Michael nor Prudence wanted to be in an accident before they could save the world. However, by the time they reached the field by the woods the sun was already beginning to set and it was immediately obvious that someone had been here before them.

"The cows are gone." Prudence said as Michael drove the Range Rover towards the gate, "Do you think the police might have actually taken them to somewhere that the cult can't get to them?"

"I doubt it. Look." Michael responded and he pointed towards the gate where the policeman had been on guard earlier, now the man's high visibility jacket could be seen on the ground and as Michael drove them closer it became clear that the man was still inside it, lying motionless in the road.

Bringing the Range Rover to a halt, Michael and Prudence got out and quickly ran to check on the clearly incapacitated policeman.

"Is he alive?" Prudence asked, unable to tell whether the policeman was still breathing thanks to the rigidity of his armoured stab vest.

"Yes, I've got a pulse." Michael replied, pressing his fingers to the policeman's neck, "But from the blood I'd say that someone hit him hard enough that they weren't bothered about whether or not he woke up."

"So what do we do about him? Do we have time to help him?" Prudence said.

"Probably not. Hopefully this will be enough." Michael answered and he reached down to take hold of the policeman's radio before lifting it to his mouth and pressing the button to transmit, "PC seven-nine is down. Medical assistance required immediately." he said before putting the radio back, ignoring the response from the radio operator requesting further information.

"Is that it?" Prudence said.

"The police won't just leave one of their own out here." Michael said, rolling the unconscious policeman over onto his side to prevent him from choking before he stood back up again, "Now let's grab our stuff and go."

Returning to the Range Rover, Michael opened up the back of the car so that they could take out their belongings. To begin with both he and Prudence put on their stab vests and took out their torches before Michael pulled both the holdalls towards him, "This one is yours. It's lighter."

Prudence picked up the holdall and her eyes widened.

"You call this light?" she said.

"I said 'lighter'. You can try this one if you want." Michael replied.

"No thanks. If this is what you call lighter I'd hate to find out what's heavier." Prudence said, passing the strap of the holdall over her head so that it crossed her body to better balance the load she now had to carry.

Michael did the same with his holdall before slamming the back of the Range Rover shut.

"Come on, let's go." he said and together they entered the field and walked towards the carved stone at the far side. When they reached this it became apparent that the wire fence had been cut on the other side and from the way the ground had been disturbed it was clear that the herd from the field had been led into the woods.

"Let's hope having to guide those cows slows them down." Prudence said as they made their way through the break in the fence.

The trail left by an entire herd of cows being led through the woods was easy for the two investigators to follow even in the failing light and it was obvious where they were heading towards.

"Looks like they're going right for that altar of theirs." Prudence commented and Michel nodded.

"Why bother to hide their trail?" he said, "If they're successful then all of this will be destroyed anyway." then he suddenly held up his hand, "Wait." he added quietly and he and Prudence both stopped where they were.

"Is that cows I hear?" Prudence whispered and Michael smiled.

"That's what it sounds like to me but I think they're already almost at the altar. We'll see if we can get around them and cut them off." Michael said before he began to move again, this time looking for a way to get around the cultists to reach the altar before they did.

This proved to be quite straight forwards, despite having a head start on the investigators the cultists had to contend with guiding a herd of cattle through terrain they were not used to and this was a slow process. Not only that but the noise created by the cows allowed Michael and Prudence to move more quickly without worrying about any sound they made giving them away and before long they were able to see the clearing in which the altar had been constructed through the trees.

"Michael look!" Prudence hissed, pointing into the clearing, "It's that thing."

Michael peered through the trees and saw that Prudence was correct, the dark young was standing in the clearing on the altar and with it were several cultists, all of them wearing hooded robes that concealed their faces. What was more prominent though were the weapons they carried, two double barrellled shotguns, a Lee-Enfield rifle and a second, smaller rifle that had a suppressor and telescopic sight fitted to it.

"Okay then this is it." Michael said as he set his holdall down on the ground, "There's no way we can get onto that altar without them seeing us so we need to give them something more to worry about. Open your bag." Prudence nodded before she set her holdall down on the ground where Michael opened it. Inside there were several sealed plastic containers that sloshed with the sound of the liquid inside as Michael removed them and also a box that held six empty wine bottles.

"I don't suppose there's anything in any of those bottles is there?" Prudence asked with a smile.

"No. They wouldn't be any good to us if they were full." Michael answered and Prudence sighed.

"I don't know. I think I given what's standing right over there I could use a drink or two to steady my nerves." she replied. Then when Michael opened one of the plastic containers and began to pour the petrol that Prudence could smell into one of the bottles she added, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Of course. Petrol bombs are easy. Do you know what you're doing with destroying the altar?"

"The Elder Sign?" Prudence said as she took her notes from her pocket and glanced at them again before nodding, "I think so. I just need time."

"Well if this goes to plan then these petrol bombs should have those cows in such a panic that they'll stampede and I'd like to see anyone try to ritually slaughter stampeding cattle. The cultists will more than have their hands full with them to be able to worry about us." Michael continued as he poured more petrol onto rags that he then stuffed into the open bottles to provide the improvised incendiary devices with wicks.

"And what about that pet monster of theirs?" Prudence said and Michael glanced at the other holdall.

"I suppose we'll find out how well modern technology can turn one man into the equivalent of fifty with axes." he told her.

"Looks like we're about to find out. Look." Prudence said when she saw the first of the herd of cows being led from the woods onto the concrete altar.

"In the name of Shub-Niggurath and the one whose name must not be spoken I consecrate this altar with the blood of the living." one of the cultists called out as he produced an ordinary looking knife. Then as he used this to slit the throat of the cow that had been brought to him he added, "Ia! Ia! Shub-Niggurath!"

"Ia! Ia! Shub-Niggurath!" the other cultists repeated and the dark young echoed their words in a chorus of inhuman words from its multiple mouths.

"Here goes nothing." Michael said, picking up one of the petrol bombs and using a lighter to set fire to the petrol soaked rag hanging out of the top. Then he hurled the bomb as hard as he could through the trees. The burning bottle struck a tree close to where the bulk of the cows were gathered and smashed apart on impact. This created a sudden blast of flame as the flammable contents of the bottle ignited and the reaction of the cows was immediate. Terrified by the fire they all began to retreat from the flames while the cultists attempted to get them back under control.

"Over there! Stop them!" the magister yelled when he saw where the petrol bomb had been thrown from and moments later there was a sharp 'crack' as the Lee-Enfield was fired into the darkness. The bullet missed both Michael and Prudence but struck a tree close by them and Prudence flinched as she was showered with splinters created by the high velocity impact.

"Are you okay?" Michael asked and she nodded quickly.

"I'm fine. Keep going." she answered before Michael lit and threw a second petrol bomb. This one landed in the trail that had been left by the cattle as they had walked through the woods but was close enough that those cows closest to the sudden burst of flame tried to get away from it and the panic spread among the herd, causing them all to try to escape as quickly as possible.

What little control the cultists still had over the cows now broke down as the stampede Michael had been trying to create finally began and the cows surged forwards towards the altar. Although the cultists had planned to take the cattle here was they had planned on the process being done with just one of them at a time and when the entire herd rushed into the woods they were taken totally by surprise. Four of their number, those closest to the trees were knocked down by the cows and immediately trampled underfoot, their dying screams filling the air.

The armed cultists joined the effort to try and bring the stampeding cows back under control but fear of the flames behind them drove the cattle onwards and more robed figures were crushed underfoot by the cows. Seeing more of their number killed caused an outbreak of panic among the cultists as well now and one of those who were armed raised his shotgun and he fired at a cow charging towards him.

"No!" the magister yelled, "We need them."

"Run, get out of here!" another cultist shouted as they turned to leave only to be knocked over by another fleeing cultist in their effort to escape. The fallen cultist attempted to get back to their feet but before they could manage this they were caught up in the path of the stampeding cattle and they too were trampled.

"No come back!" the magister shouted as he saw all discipline among his followers break down and they began to scatter into the woods, "We can still finish this."

The magister's words had no effect on the cultists though and they continued to flee, leaving him alone on the altar with the dark young. Angered by the failure of the cult, the dark young reared up on two legs and roared, an act that spread even more panic among the cattle before the creature lashed out with a tentacle

and knocked the magister off his feet. Before he could be trampled though the dark young reach down with another tentacle and picked the magister up off the ground. Then it wrapped a second tentacle around him and ripped the screaming man in two.

"Now's our chance." Michael said, seeing that the cultists were either fleeing or dead and he picked up the second holdall. Carrying this, he and Prudence dashed into the concrete covered clearing and Prudence knelt down while she shone her torch on the notes she had made about creating the Elder Sign. Across the clearing the dark young saw the two investigators and it roared at them before beginning to advance on them.

"Hurry." Michael told Prudence as he opened the second holdall and from inside he took a large chainsaw. "I'm on it." Prudence said, unfolding the knife blade of her multi-tool before placing her hand on the concrete beneath them. Then she began to scrape the surface of the concrete with the tip of the knife blade, slowly forming the shape of the five pointed Elder Sign while invoking the names of the gods associated with it. Seeing this, the dark young realised immediately what Prudence was doing and it charged, roaring from all its mouths and it sped towards the two investigators.

There was another roar as Michael started up the chainsaw and he lifted it up above his head just as the dark young lashed out towards Prudence with one of its tentacles to try and prevent her from finishing the Elder Sign. The motor driven blade sliced through the tentacle and the dark young screeched while the severed part of the appendage fell towards the ground and simply vanished. The dark young now turned its attention of Michael and it attacked with two tentacles at once. In response to this Michael ducked while holding the chainsaw up above him, using it to parry both attacks and where the tentacles met the blade it sliced right through them once more.

"Prudence I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this up." Michael said but Prudence did not reply, not wanting to interrupt the ritual she had been taught to make the Elder Sign.

The dark young struck again. Closer to Michael now it was able to make use of more of its tentacles and it attacked from left, right and above at the same time. Once again Michael used the chainsaw to try and block these attacks but he was only able to slice through the largest of the tentacles before a smaller one suddenly struck him with enough force to send the tool flying from his grasp and knocking him to the ground right beside Prudence.

The dark young stepped closer again, looming over Michael and Prudence in readiness to strike a final pair of blows that would kill them both. However, before the creature could attack Prudence suddenly smiled. "Done it!" she exclaimed as she pulled her hand away from the concrete and the five pointed star with an eye in the centre suddenly pulsed with light for a brief moment. This was followed by a wave of pale light that spread out across the surface of the altar and when this light reached where the dark young stood the creature let out a loud screeching as it was suddenly consumed in blue flame and it vanished into thin air, leaving no trace behind that it had ever existed.

"Is that it?" Prudence said, looking around nervously.

"What do you mean 'is that it'?" Michael responded as he picked himself up, "That thing almost killed me."

"Yes and I saved you. In fact I may have saved the world." Prudence pointed out with a smile.

"Which you couldn't have done without me to protect you." Michael replied.

"Okay I'll credit you with the assist." Prudence said and Michael sighed.

"Let's just get out of here." he said, "I don't want to be around if any of those cultists that ran off come back. I don't think they'll be in a good mood after we killed their demon."

12.

Greg Mellor looked at the article Prudence had e-mailed to him and then looked across the desk to where she sat.

"This all seems a bit far fetched Prudence." he said, "Fanatical cults trying to summon demons in Wellslaw?" "That's what my research leads me to believe could exist. They may have been around for hundreds of years operating in secret." Prudence replied.

"Maybe but newspapers have got into trouble before by talking about satanic cults." Greg pointed out.

"This isn't a satanic cult, their religion isn't related to anything in the Bible at all." Prudence pointed out.

"It'll all be the same to the general public, especially if we create a panic. Which is something that we're likely to do if we include anything about them being linked to a series of murders. Can you really prove that the entire Conor family was killed by this cult?" Greg asked.

"They were killed right after speaking to us." Prudence answered.

"Well the police are saying that it was a burglary gone tragically wrong. A gang broke into their house to steal the firearms kept there." Greg said.

"And you believe that? When have you ever heard of something like that happening before Greg?" Prudence responded.

"Unless you can give me proof that the police are lying then I have to go by what they say Prudence. Look this isn't too bad as a column about the supernatural and with a bit of work I think I can use it, but I'm not going to accuse the police of covering up ritual murders." Greg said and Prudence smiled.

"Does that mean that you're giving me a column?" she said.

"We'll see how this article works out first. We'll include the request for tips about any other strange goings on in the area that people put down to the supernatural and then you can deal with all the kooks instead of me." Greg told her and he smiled back at her.

"You won't regret this Greg." Prudence said, hoping that she would not regret it either.