

The butter simmered gently in the pan as Jared halved an apple and emptied its seeds from the core. He gathered them to one corner of the chopping board and eagerly bit into one quarter. He winced – heavily, yet happily – at the sharpness, his taste buds sodden by heavy coffee and bouts of nicotine. His tongue a hue of mustard.

‘Wat doin’?’

The ghost girl, Tenebrae, hovered in the doorway as the kettle wheezed. Wisps of steam slithering beneath the underside of the kitchen cupboards. The vapour flirted with her – steam and smoke, transient by-products of gathered heat.

‘Making a lock.’

‘Wha?’

That’s all she was now. A walking flame, her life now cut short and yet the burning torch of life still flickered. Speech fractured into self-derived trauma. Language was there, but the intent was nullified, as if speech and desire were a universe apart. Memories were her core structure, experiences moulded by love and heartache, laughter and chocolate. All these things mattered: a warm shower, a mug of tea, beans on toast, no matter how trivial, each was a totem claimed by spirit. She was now a burning effigy of life, and now others would come to bathe in the light, some would cross the dark divide in an act of pilgrimage. To gather around her warmth, and eat.

‘You are a beacon, Tene`. Others will come. You are the warm fire in the long night.’

‘Bads innit?’

‘Very.’

Poor sod. If murder wasn’t bad enough. That’s why she loitered. A burning ember in the still night, furious, unforgiving until she had her answers. There had been others, but not to this degree. Some who had unfinished business, others who were just so stubborn in life they thought they would carry it on after into death.

She was a patchwork aberration. No longer a creature of flesh and appetite, a lauded spirit of emotion; clothes fused to spiritual skin – an idea of succulent possibility. She stood in his kitchen as she had died. Wet, bedraggled, a hole in the back of her head which gave way to jellied blood and dead leaves.

‘I is scared.’

Jared grabbed the pestle and mortar from the cupboard and nodded. ‘Good.’

Her tongue hid itself beneath her top lip. ‘Whay?’

‘It will make my job easier.’

He stirred the butter once more and started to grind down the apple seeds. A deep unnatural crack, knuckles in flex.

‘happle seeds? Butar?’

Jared smiled. ‘It’s all bollocks really. Old Testament kinda shit.’

Her tongue found itself under her lip again.

‘The seeds are a symbol of Eden. The apple, Lucifer gave to Eve. To grind down the pips into dust is a statement to the divide. *Not again.*’

‘Bol-locks innit?’

‘Possibly. But it seems those who dwell in the divide adhere to its commandments.’

‘Butar?’

Jared kept grinding and gave her a sly look. ‘It’s a surprise.’

‘Waat’s comin’?’

Jared stopped, playfully bashing in the pips with one hand. ‘There is no name for them. The first night is the worst. You – my dear – are the north star. A chance for those in the cold depths of unnatural places to warm their hands and feast on your sweet and savoury memories. They have forgotten about such things. What would be your response if you saw a leg of lamb on a table and hadn’t eaten for a month.’

‘Wha – are tay?’

Jared nodded, slowly, stirring the golden butter. ‘The ones I and others couldn’t help.’

‘Ne-ad to get ye sel-f a proper job, innit. Tes-co or summik.’

Jared smiled. ‘Quite possibly.’

He turned the hob off and put the pan to the side.

‘How doit?’

‘Do what?’

‘Halp?’

Jared moved over to the kettle and poured himself his seventh cup of the day. ‘I lost someone. Someone close. I was young, really *young.*’

Tenebrae looked to the floor. ‘Eeh, na. I was jost askin’ how you do all tis? Like Hog-wart anshit?’

‘Oh. *Oh*, yeah, sorry. I though you meant . . .’

She smiled. ‘Nah, *nah*, but tanks.’

Jared took a swig of his coffee, quickly. ‘Look, er, why don’t you just chill for a bit. Music. But some music on.’

‘Does tat?’

‘Course, do what you want.’

She smiled again. ‘Nah, mean, CAN DO TAT? Caspar anshit.’

Jared laughed again. ‘Well, you’re here, aren’t you? Why don’t you give it a go?’

The butter was smooth, silky. Jared finished off crushing the pips and downed the last dregs of coffee. Music started to filter in from his bedroom and he smiled. He had his work cut out tonight. His apartment was essentially a lighthouse in the darkened abyss. Tenebrae was furious and those in the dark places felt it.

Jared scattered the dust from the apple pips into the golden butter and mixed it. The sound of music emanated from the room adjacent and he curiously leaned into the sound.

Paul Simon’s Graceland played out and he smiled, bringing forth memories of Sunday lunches and apple crumble.

‘Du-der,’ Tenebrae called out. ‘Gat only one chunnel innit.’

Jared leaned into the doorway. ‘Yeah, sorry. It’s a bit old, give it a few moments.’

She appeared in the hallway, perplexed as to his anachronistic approach to technology. ‘Du-der, wha hell? Got a sauce pan?’

Paul Simon’s Graceland phased out to static and then returned. But this time it sounded like old vinyl, scratched, distorted.

*“I’m going to Graceland, Graceland
In Memphis Tennessee”*

Watery echoes.

‘You ne-ed anew radio.’

‘Flint.’

‘Wat?’

‘Where’s Flint?’

Tenebrae rolled her eyes and held her hands out.

‘The cat?’

‘Dun-no you ad a cat? Spin-ster.’

‘I need him.’

Jared walked down to the hall and pulled open the airing cupboard. The dark ball of fur opened one solidary eye and sighed. ‘C’mon you old ledge. Time to go to work.’ The old puss yawned the aroma of old meat and winked at his master, crawling from a white towel now covered in black fur.

‘Oh wonderful, thank you.’

The cat stretched and started to walk toward the kitchen. ‘Not so fast mister.’ Jared grabbed his front paws and placed them in the butter, much to the annoyance of Flint. He reciprocated his feelings with a faint rasp and a furious wag of his tail. Tenebrae watched on, fascinated.

Jared held his old friend up between his front legs and wiped the cat’s paws across the doorway. Flint took a side glance to Tenebrae as Jared washed the door with warm butter and apple seed dust. He stepped back and placed Flint on the floor. The cat walked off, not at all perplexed, as if such a practice was commonplace, akin to a morning groom and a lick of the rear.

‘Not-even . . .’

‘Did you change the station?’

‘Huh?’

The radio signal wavered in and out, Paul Simon's Graceland distorted – running water through a tube of tin - as another song bled for precedence. Garbled static subsided to the audible screech of a staccato scream and then nothing.

'Need a n-ew radio.'

'It's perfectly fine . . . unfortunately.'

*"Oranges and lemons,
Say the bells of St. Clements"*

'Dat?'

*"You owe me five farthings,
Say the bells of St. Martin's"*

'Old . . . very old.' Jared grabbed his jaw, smoothing down his thick stubble. 'Shit.'

He ran through to the living room where he proceeded to pull the curtain aside, taking his right hand and placing it within the butter only to smear an ancient sigel across the black sheen. He drew an unperfect circle and placed what could only be a wiggly line through it. The symbol of the apple and the snake, fused as one.

There were no lights out there. Just a black slate of darkness looking back in. The divide had been crossed.

Tenebrae walked up to him. 'Ware, ar we?'

'We haven't gone anywhere. Don't fret.'

“When will you pay me?

Say the bells of Old Bailey”

‘Bat, the city?’

‘It’s still there. Just . . . the world has just blinked, Tene`. Don’t fall for the lure.’

“When I grow rich,

Say the bells of Shoreditch.”

‘Is dat?’

‘Songs, rhymes, the last vestiges of human feeling.’

‘Wat?’

Jared sighed, wiping his buttered hand across his thigh. ‘Music. It claims so much of our lives. It can make us cry, or make us reach for the stars. It weaves itself into our soul and lays claim to dream and feelings we didn’t even know we had. Imagine *that* transcending death. Carrying that rhythm into the thereafter, the only warm light you have left . . .’ Jared held his arms across his belly. ‘. . . you hold it *tight*, never letting go until, eventually all you are is a song yourself, an aberration of creativity and hunger.’

Jared coughed lightly, almost scoffing at the idea. ‘Perhaps, perhaps that’s why they play your favourite song at a funeral. Something to hold on to as you quiver in the cold.’

‘I got no song.’

Jared studied her. The first instance of no distorted speech. ‘Everyone has a song, Tene`. They will be lying if they haven’t. A soul with no song is a very dead soul indeed. I’ve yet to meet one as black as that.’

“When will that be?

Say the bells of Stepney”

Tenebrae and Jared shared a glance. She was about to speak when he held up his hand by way of silence. Jared stepped forward. *‘I do not know, Says the great bell of Bow.’*

“Here comes a candle to light you

to bed,”

‘Tene`, whatever happens, don’t panic.’

“And here comes a chopper to chop off your head!”

Wood buckled and bowed, Jared’s door bending inwardly. Flint came pounding down the hallway with his buttered pads, shedding his scent throughout the apartment and hissed

violently, the hairs on the back of the tom's back standing upright, steadfast in his post, adamant in his candour.

'You won't get passed him, whoever you are. He's one of the old guard. Nefertiti's own. My friend in life and beyond.'

Flint's tincture of butter and apple seed created an invisible barrier. The cat hissed with the rasp of Anubis, the god of the dead, denying these rogue spirits entry. Flint, the latest in an extensive line of the guardians of the nether. Reared centuries ago to forbade the dead from crossing into the living.

The radio signal breached into a piercing scream, giving way to a sound not unlike surf rolling onto a beach. Jared walked into the arch of the doorway and studied the radio on his chest of drawers. The room bathed in static.

The radio. His tool. His constant thorn. Passed down from Whisperer to Whisperer. Its chequered past bathed in blood and dark magic. The stories that surrounded it were open to speculation. Some said at the time of the third Reich Hitler tried to attain as much supernatural paraphernalia to help in the war effort. The radio was one. At its centre was supposed to be the still beating heart of a necromancer, hard wired into a circuit board of electronics and alchemy – a chimera of technology and sorcery. Jared had never checked, though curiosity had often piqued. To prise open the radio was said to sever the heart from connectivity. But then, they would say that, wouldn't they?

"Chip chop chip chop

The last man is dead . . . Jared"

Jared felt cold needles pricking his spine and he stepped back from the radio, the light from the apartment flickered, something burrowed in the walls, something malevolent and playful. He looked back and saw Tene` touching the black window. ‘Tene`, no. *Tene`.*’

The window cracked, black foul water seeping through the breach, a dozen dead faces pressed up against the glass seeking entry by the influx, pallid and bleached faces that wanted to taste and feed.

Flint cantered to the window and bared his teeth, eyes of jade bearing malice. The bearer of Anubis’s disgust. Jared took the remainder of the butter and lavished the window with golden glue, steam rose from the cracks as spiritual chemistry stemmed the schism.

‘She is protected,’ shouted Jared.

The faces beyond the window stared at him from the murk. Robbed spirits that wanted to feel Tene`s warmth.

‘You will leave this place. Back, back to the void. Back to your songs. I’m sorry.’

They drifted into nothingness, down and down into obsidian oblivion.

‘Is taht what awaits me?’

Jared wiped the sweat from his face. ‘What did you see?’

‘Black. Jost black. A thusand bodies just drifting. A mullion. Lost in an ocean of black.’

Jared scratched his neck and looked about, the city shone in the dark once again and he looked back to the ghost girl. ‘It’s just bollocks, really. They want you to give in. False hope. It’s just . . . just bollocks. Don’t dwell on it.’

‘Will . . . will they be bark?’

‘Every night. Until you conclude the business that has kept you here.’

‘Den?’

Jared leaned against the door frame with his saucepan and sighed. ‘Then . . . well, you better find a song to hold on to.’