

Diabolique Magazine presents

THE EXHUMATION COLLECTION

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Vortex

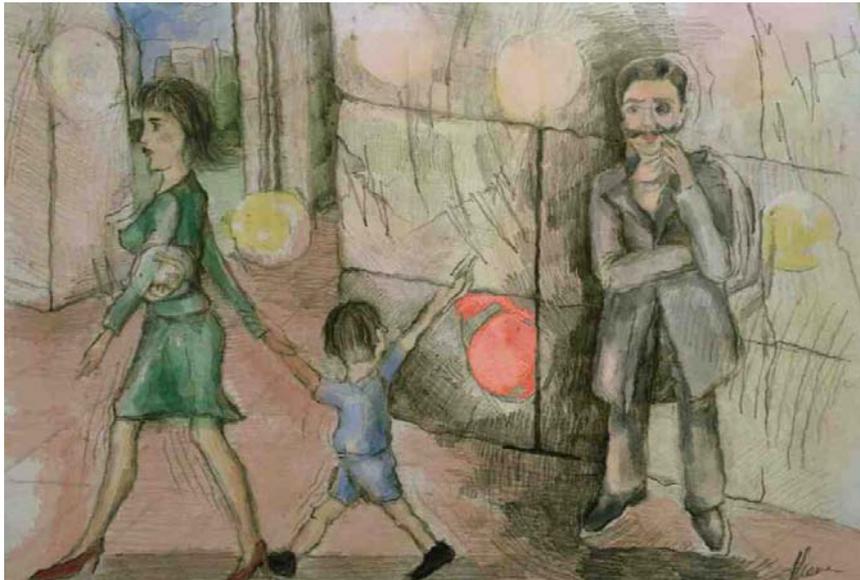
By Steven Mace

Illustrated by Alena Mananskaya

Charlie Townsend could clearly see the unusual man with the elaborate moustache and the wild, multi-coloured hair, although his mother couldn't. He stared at the apparition across the street with childish astonishment and curiosity. He was as entranced by the strange man's unusual features, as he was intrigued by the peculiar man's clothing: a luminous suit of shifting, vivid colours.

"Mummy!" he said, pointing his finger toward the remarkable figure that had materialised out of thin air in the middle of a busy high street. "Look at the man!"

Elaine Townsend glanced in the general direction of where her seven year old child was excitedly indicating with his small delicate finger. She saw nothing but cobble stones and empty space in that vicinity. Some of the shoppers who were passing by were looking across at her and smiling, while others were frowning irritably. She immediately felt a little embarrassed by the over-dramatic scene that her little boy was creating, as he played up in this unusual manner. "There's nothing there, Charlie!" she said sharply to her son. "Come along!"

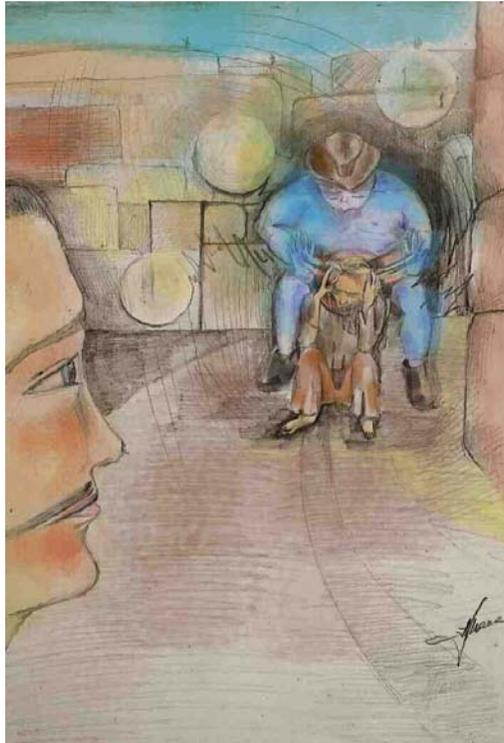


“But mummy, can’t you see him? He’s got really strange hair and really weird clothes and he’s smiling at us...!”

Elaine forcibly dragged Charlie (who had stopped walking alongside his mother so that he could stare intently at the peculiar man) along by his wrist. “Come on, Charlie! There’s nobody there. Now, come on - stop making silly things up.”

Peregrine Lascombe adjusted his monocle, and then proceeded to stroke the elegantly twisted curl of his moustache before chuckling to himself. He watched the woman stride down the pavement, dragging her reluctant son along with her. The little boy was still glancing back at him with wide, curious eyes. Lascombe could see through their outer flesh, and into their internal organs and even beyond that external physical layer, and thus into their skeletal frames. The woman was pregnant again. He could see the outline of a budding foetus within her womb. The boy who was walking with her, a hyper-sensitive child, had actually seen him, while most of the humans present here on this world, going about their mundane daily business, would not be able to distinguish him while he was cloaked in this current fashion. Occasionally such things occurred, and always with children, or the mentally irrational amongst human populations. If a sane adult could see him, then that was a more worrying development, although it was unheard of as far as Lascombe was aware. Even as he stood on the pavement, passers-by walked close to him where he stood, and also through him, stepping through his immaterial presence. Of course, he was not quite present right now in that place, at least not in his essential material form. This was a manifestation of Lascombe, rather than his real body which was currently in limbo within a casket kept in the Vortex.

Lascombe had suddenly detected a disturbance in the metaphysical atmosphere, a mind-wave aftershock. He had already guessed the cause of such supernatural noise in the ether, and after a Mind-sweep he meta-ported himself to the vicinity. He found Victor Phalange in a dingy alleyway, interfering with the brain processes of one of the humans. This was a particularly degenerate example of an Earthbound human, a homeless male with dirty clothes and ill-functioning inner organs, particularly the liver and bladder. The homeless person was presently sitting vacantly upon the ground: a man with a flushed face, and long grey hair and beard.



Phalange was crouched unseen behind the man, his hands discharging electrical energy and hovering half-clenched around the man's skull as he secretly activated neurons and transmitters within the poor human's brain. There was a half-smile on Phalange's face as he concentrated on disturbing the human's neural pathways and nervous system, and his golden eyes were closed fast shut as he worked patiently at his task.

"Oh, Victor", Peregrine sighed. "Do behave and do try to desist from disturbing the wildlife."

Victor was one of the more challenging members of his reality management team. Peregrine was expert at orchestrating the wild and differing talents of his squad of Dimensional Manipulators, hence the reason that the Matriarchy had chosen him for his role, but Victor always required special handling. He had the tattooed physique of a body-builder combined with kinetic and metaphysical skills and the playful mind of an artist or comedian—an unusual and dangerous combination. He could not resist providing that extra unnecessary flourish for a Meld or a Fabrication, either for aesthetic purpose or his own personal amusement. There had been the incident in Chicago, Illinois during the 1940s era on this planet when Victor Phalange had endowed a deformed boy with white feathered wings, and then another notorious moment on Hadea in the Jeth province when Victor had given a Varnic Cult priestess access to the future-scrolls of the Magi. Victor had also left an open portal to the Second Level in the Midian deserts, which the Matriarchy had ordered to be closed once they had learned of its whereabouts. Lascombe had suggested that Phalange be disciplined, but he doubted that his colleague had faced any serious sanctions afterward. Phalange was one of the Matriarchy's favourites, despite his occasionally destructive and idiosyncratic nature.

"I'm doing something kind for this poor man", Phalange said defensively. "I'm making his life more bearable. I'm *opening his eyes to inner process and delight*, without his usual aid of illicit chemical substances."

"Unnecessary, Victor", Peregrine said, rebuking him. "They are nothing but motes in the eye of the storm. Ignore them. We have more important things to do."

At that moment Lascombe was interrupted by a voice in his head. It was a telepathic message from Nero Basso, who was monitoring their presence in that particular First Level zone: *Peregrine, there's a Third Level disturbance in that sector. I haven't managed to pinpoint it yet, but it's something dark and dangerous...causing ripples of chaotic flux that might start to manifest themselves in your reality very soon.*

Lascombe's throat had gone dry. He swallowed and sent a telepathic message back to the source of that ominous warning. *Is it...another Deathshadow, do you think?*

There was a momentary hiatus, before Basso spoke within Lascombe's mind again. *Peregrine, I didn't want to alarm you but that assumption is looking extremely likely at this point.*

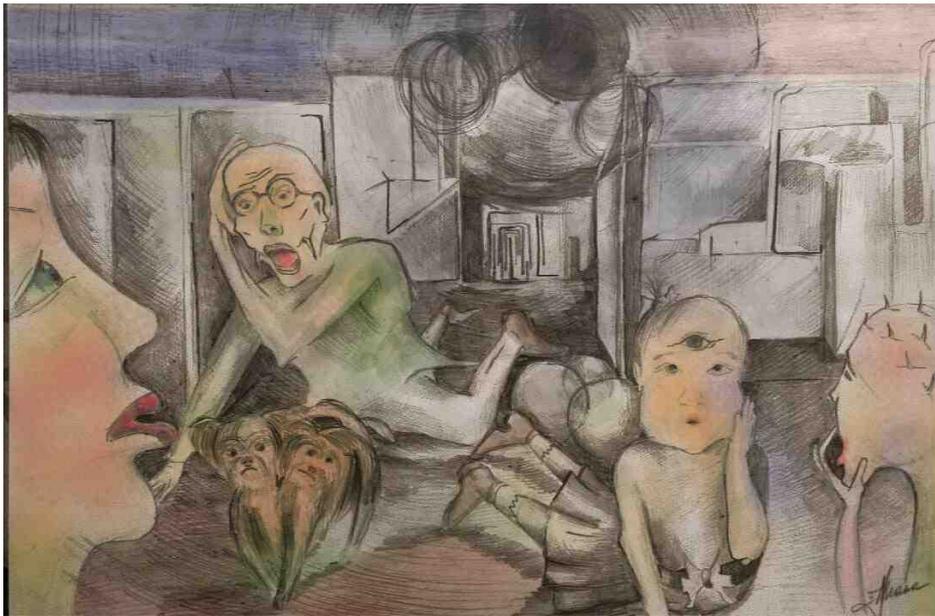
"Victor", Lascombe said sharply. Phalange still had his hands clasped around the skull of the disorientated and hallucinating human while each of his hands discharged blue-white energies from his palms. "Stop that. We have little time. We still have to seal the rupture. And...there may well be a Deathshadow on its way."

Abruptly, Victor Phalange ceased his activity within the human's brain. The vagrant slumped unconscious to the concrete floor of the alley. Previously crouching behind the human, Phalange now rose to his feet and his full height of six feet five inches. He was a tall, powerful person even when he was just a projection as he was now. "A Deathshadow?" Phalange repeated, in an astonished tone. "But..."

Lascombe glanced up at the sky. He had sensed something before he looked: a sudden shift in the atmosphere, or a subtle change in the quality of light. Now he saw the reason why. Something was beginning to blot out the sun; an irregular, and uneven dark shape. Currently,

it was covering perhaps a tenth of that yellow-white circle, but it was growing. “Ah”, Lascombe said softly. “It has begun. Now we shall start to see anomalies.”

And, indeed, the anomalies came. The hordes of bewildered shoppers in the middle of the high street had paused and gazed up at the sky, shielding their eyes from the glare of the sun. Even as unwelcome darkness encroached upon the previously bright and sunlit day, the faces of the humans began to change. An elderly man with glasses abruptly sprouted ivory tusks from his hollow cheeks, sharp protuberant curved horns of fresh bone that ripped through the tender flesh, even as he cried out in shock and horror at his own sudden and terrifying transformation. A pin-like mass of narrow spines appeared upon the forehead and shaven skull of an adolescent boy. A small girl grew a third eye in the centre of her forehead, an eye that blinked repeatedly in confirmation of its obscene birth from her unblemished skin. There were countless other mutations and disfigurements that swiftly took place amongst the bustling crowds of human beings, who began to scream with horror and bewilderment at the frightening changes that had happened in their own appearances and the faces of others. Even animals were affected. A Yorkshire terrier on the lead of its owner had developed an extra head and two more wagging tails in addition to the original. They flicked about together in a nightmarish triad of unconscious animal delight.



“Victor, we need to shut this down”, the manifestation of Peregrine Lascombe told his companion. “Quickly, man.” Seconds later, Lascombe materialised once again in the midst of the high street. He nervously adjusted his monocle as he instinctively but unnecessarily swerved to avoid the streams of terrified disfigured humans that were running past him, oblivious to his presence. His movements were merely a natural reaction to people running straight toward him, as he had no substantial form. Although he felt a quiver as the people ran through him, disturbing his materialised figure, there was no physical collision. Moments afterward, Victor Phalange also appeared beside him. Phalange’s piercing golden eyes scanned their surroundings quickly, taking in the physical changes of the frightened people scuttling to and fro about them.

“Nero, take us up to Level Three”, Lascombe ordered, sending his message to the Auteur.

Done, Basso sent back.

Abruptly Lascombe and Phalange's surroundings changed. The scared people running through them and about their location became as immaterial and insubstantial as the two Dimensional Manipulators were. The human beings, the residents of this physical world, were now simply mere ghosts, cloudy and fragile phantasms that Lascombe and Phalange were only dimly aware of. The heat and light from the sun had also vanished. There was no warmth and no breeze here, just a neutral cold that could chill the bones. The physical landmarks of the world they had recently vacated- the towering buildings of the office blocks and the shopping centre; the parked cars; the concrete walls; the lamp posts- were now just pale outlines, white traces upon a shadowy blue-black background. This was not the true physical world, but a rudimentary sketch of it, a vague blue print.

However, the creature that had appeared upon the horizon like a hideous black storm cloud and was now heading straight toward them at rapid speed was no apparition. It was a vast being, a monster of epic proportions. Its torso resembled that of a whale, even though it flew through the elements of air and blank space like that particular earthbound mammal swam through water. Grouped around its neck, flanks and wings were the wailing mouths and faces of lost, screaming souls: poor unfortunates that had been devoured and assimilated by this awful demonic abortion, this monstrous and frightening hell-beast. At the front of the creature there was one small cranium which possessed features reminiscent of a fly: two bulbous goggle-like eyes and a small mouth with vicious pointed glistening teeth like sharp needles. Beneath this a greater second head bulged out, and within it was just a great maw: divided triangles of flesh that opened inwards and outwards like a pulsing Venus Fly-trap. Beyond them, it was possible to see into the belly, the heart of the creature and only see a deep, black empty void- an abyss of nothingness. To be swallowed by the monstrosity was to become one with its darkness.



This was a terrible being known and feared by all operatives of the Arcadian Vortex, a monstrosity that had already accounted for three of their number. It was a Deathshadow, a fabled creature from the Beyond. Now, of course, it had been confirmed as something far more than fable or myth, it was now a very real entity within the known Cosmos. This, however, was the first time that Lascombe and Phalange had seen one with their own eyes,

whether in their true physical form or any of their materialised appearances in different realms they had visited.

The Deathshadow was moving with astonishing speed straight toward them, so quickly that it would soon be upon them, possibly within moments. They had been *sensed* and their location pinpointed by the creature. Lascombe glanced quickly at Phalange, who was standing beside him, and was struck by his colleague's calm and unflustered appearance. Victor Phalange's materialised form perfectly echoed his true physical one: he wore sandals and denim dungarees and was naked from the waist up, openly displaying his muscular upper body: a torso which was tattooed with elaborate and intricate designs of an arcane nature. A black Stetson hat always covered his bald head, while his bright blue skin tended to constantly gleam with a texture that reminded Lascombe of oils or copious sweat. Phalange's uniformly golden eyes had been open wide since he had glimpsed the Deathshadow on the horizon at almost exactly the same time as Lascombe, but now they were narrowing with every passing moment as the monster approached. Lascombe sensed a grim determination rather than fear in the heart of his colleague and he was suddenly very glad that he had Phalange by his side.



A skilled Melder and Fabricator, Victor Phalange had already anticipated Lascombe's automatic instruction and was creating a force-field to protect them, a telekinetic blockade that would buy them both some more time to consider how to destroy the Deathshadow. Already Phalange was channelling his energies, as he prepared himself for the mental effort of forming and holding the defensive shield. Electrical static danced across the surface of his skin. Sweat dripped down the surface of his brow. Abruptly he released a flow of powerful charge from the tips of his fingertips and the expanse of his palms. Energy like bolts of lightning exuded from his hands and gathered in a wall of white hot electrical fire that gathered in front of himself and Lascombe, and slowly grew in size and organised structure. It was already forming a dome like a flickering spider's web over the top of them both by the time that the Deathshadow reached it.

There was one initial dreadful moment as the Deathshadow first struck the dome of the force field. The electrical web shuddered with the force of impact and Lascombe thought it might break through as the field was disturbed. But Phalange's shield strengthened, and the

creature was violently repelled. It rebounded from the surface of the dome and spun away into space. Lascombe then detected a howling telepathic scream of agony and frustration emanating from the monster. From being this close to the demonic entity, Lascombe could see that the Deathshadow possessed limbs near the forefront of its vast undercarriage: stunted appendages with razor-sharp claws on the end of them, which reminded Lascombe of a sea-crab he had seen as a boy before his transfiguration into the Vortex.



“Victor, how long can you hold it for?” Lascombe shouted to Phalange.

Long enough, came the telepathic reply.

Can you give me a window? Lascombe sent back to him. Phalange duly obliged. A small, haphazard and uneven aperture appeared in the energy field. It was not large enough for the Deathshadow to breach but it was space abundant enough for Lascombe’s purposes. As the Deathshadow hurtled toward them for a second time, in another attempt to end the siege and break through their defences, Lascombe released his own discharge of energy from the palm of his right hand. However, whereas Phalange had his own remarkable abilities, Lascombe possessed quite different talents. Lascombe, for his sins, was not only a telepath but also a Deconstructor.

This time the mental shrieks of the Deathshadow were far more intense than before. The sound was quite horrific, deafening both Lascombe and Phalange. Lascombe’s deconstructive energy discharge was burning the monster from its insides out. As it howled in agony, it retreated backward before finally swooping away. Its wounds were great and it had no desire to repeat its assault. Ceasing his attack, Lascombe watched it glide away until it reached an area which would be part of the shopping centre in the First Level realm. It somehow disappeared into an odd, glowing crack of orange-yellow light within empty space that Lascombe could glimpse through the transparent walls of the physical building. The sliver of light was much smaller than the size of the great entity that was the Deathshadow, and it had been seemingly impossible for it to pass through it- but it was as if it had been sucked into the odd glimmering cleft in space. It was a dim glowing light that he had not noticed before, when he and Phalange had been transported up to this level of reality. Obviously, they had been too distracted by the sudden appearance of the Deathshadow itself. Lascombe realised that he was looking at the unwelcome rupture in reality which he and his

team had been attempting to locate before the Deathshadow made its presence felt, and he sighed with relief. He realised that his materialised ear-drums were still ringing with the sound of the wounded entity's screams, and he hoped that feeling and sound would soon dissipate. He glanced toward Victor Phalange and shrugged. "A mere skirmish", he said dryly to his colleague.

"Disappointing", Phalange remarked back. "I hoped that it might put up more of a fight."

"Do tell me you're joking, Victor", Lascombe replied. "That would have been an extremely unwelcome scenario. At least one good thing has come from this- the Deathshadow has located the rupture for us. I'm finding this place irksome. Let's seal the rift and get back to Arcadia as soon as we can. I have plans for a rather fine roast dinner."

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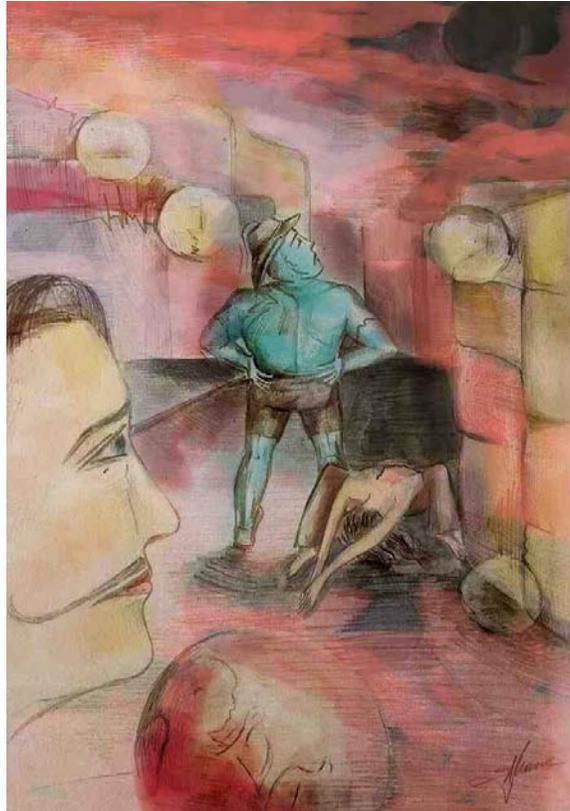
Lascombe and Phalange completed their operation quickly, after instructing Nero Basso to move their materialised forms back to the First Level of reality from the Third Level where they had been able to confront the Deathshadow. While Lascombe swiftly and secretly corrected the anomalies that had been caused within the bodies of the humans by the malignant presence of the monstrous creature, Phalange had entered the shopping centre to find the rupture that Lascombe had visually detected while they had been in the Third. He remained in the First Level, so as not to alert the Deathshadow to his presence should it decide to return to that realm. As soon as he had detected a powerful psychic disturbance within a clothes shop inside the shopping centre he knew that probably indicated the presence of a reality rupture. Therefore he requested that Basso transport him to the Third. Once here, Phalange found himself standing near a glowing hole in the fabric of reality, an orange-yellow glare that spilled shimmering light and energy from it like blood and pus from an open sore or wound. He quickly began to seal the rift with an efficient Meld, hoping that no further unpleasant and uninvited visitors would enter from the unknown dimension or void that lay beyond, while he worked. He had no desire to meet with any more nasty surprises while he was materialised in this zone. Happily for Phalange, he worked without incident and the tear in reality was safely sealed. There would be minimal damage to this world, apart from the possible psychological damage to some of the inhabitants from the anomalies, which most might dismiss as vivid hallucinations anyway. There could still be some alien presences which had escaped through the rift and provide fuel for rumours and ominous reports of ghostly hauntings or UFO sightings for years to come, but nothing that he or Lascombe needed to worry about for now, unless matters escalated further.

His job completed, he reported back to Lascombe, who was waiting for him in the midst of the busy thoroughfare of the high street. Lascombe was extremely hard to miss amid the dull mundane details of this realm, as today he had chosen to wear his suit of myriad, shimmering colours. Occasionally it appeared to be pink, and then indigo, and then red, then an intense scarlet and then purple, and then blue, and then yet more colours of the rainbow, altering endlessly and inexplicably. Lascombe completed his look with a bow tie and a white silk shirt. His face was long and narrow, and he usually wore a monocle in his left eye. A gentleman's curled moustache, greased with wax, adorned his upper lip. His eyes were different colours: his right eye green, his left eye blue. His hair was as multi-coloured as his suit, but non-shifting unlike the fabric of those clothes. Lascombe's thick, luxurious hair curled wildly away from his scalp, growing upwards from his skull like a bush or shrub.

There was great activity taking place all around Peregrine Lascombe while he stood nonchalantly on the pavement, waiting patiently for Phalange to return. An ambulance was parked nearby, and paramedics were attending to shocked, hysterical people. A police car

was parked by the side of the road. Bemused and disbelieving officers were taking statements from frightened, bewildered bystanders. All of the people, of course, were oblivious to the presence of Lascombe and Phalange, apart from one small, curious boy. Lascombe pointed out the boy's presence to his colleague, and Victor Phalange promptly waved at him.

Holding his tearful mother's hand, Charlie Townsend watched the two bizarre-looking men dissolve into nothingness until it was as if they had never existed at all. He waved back at the strange blue-coloured man with tattoos in the cowboy hat and no shirt, who looked a bit like a weightlifter, until the man had disappeared along with his friend. His mother noticed him waving and asked who he was waving to.



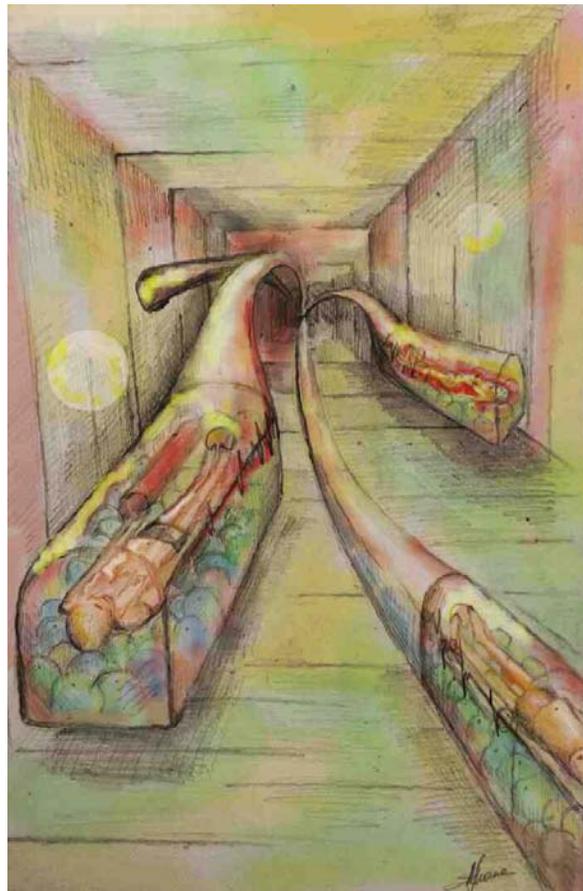
“I could see the strange man from earlier”, Charlie told her. “He had a friend with him, who was blue. He waved at me. I was waving back to him...”

But his mother had had enough of mysterious visions and bizarre incomprehensible stories for the day, and she sternly told him to be quiet. She was not just mildly embarrassed by her son's behaviour; she was also unsettled by his insistence that he saw men that were invisible to her while inexplicable chaos had taken place around them. She had perhaps been excessive in her reprimand toward her son. For later that night she would dream of weird sights and distant unknown places, worlds that seemed unreal and impossible, and strange powerful monsters with warped energies and ambitions that might have slipped out of some hideous subterranean realm. Everything she had dreamed or vaguely glimpsed in a nightmare would be forgotten once Elaine Townsend awoke from her slumbers, violently sitting up in her bed and finding herself drenched in an icy cold sweat.

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Somewhere on a distant world that was an entire dimension away, Peregrine Lascombe opened his eyes. He was aware that he had returned to his physical form within the confines of his casket on the Vortex in Arcadia. He blinked once, twice and ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. His mouth was dry, but that was a common physical phenomenon during the process of Materialisation in another realm. The body's energies were sapped, even while it remained still and dormant, an empty shell preserved within a casket on the Vortex.

Lascombe pressed a button which was situated close to his long, cadaverous bony hand with long spider-like pianist's fingers within the casket. The gold lid hissed open, slowly sliding across with hardly a sound, to allow the occupant of the casket to emerge. And so the Deconstructor sat up within his golden capsule to see the usual familiar surroundings of the place that was his working base and indeed his new home since his transfiguration. The physical environment of the Vortex was a contradictory blend of the organic and the technical. Vast pulsing pink pillars of flesh loomed upward to a ceiling that was painted with fantastic murals of scenes from many worlds and different universes, depicted with various, swirling brush-strokes. These were the visions of some far-seeing and indeed, perhaps insane artist. The images displayed humanoid beings, serpentine creatures and living organisms of many eyes and limbs which were almost beyond description. A metallic skeletal frame criss-crossed the vast ceiling and extended down the fleshy pillars, locking the organic construction in place. It was as if the Vortex was some great vibrant hive, or a hollowed out, converted internal space of some gigantic living beast. Connected to the metallic spine of the inner hall was a metal control panel displaying flashing lights and myriad multi-coloured buttons. Behind it stood the being who was the monitor of Operative Projections, the Auteur: Nero Basso.



Basso was not a tall man. He was only five feet five or five feet six in height. He possessed short crew-cut hair that was a bright yellow in colour, and possibly dyed although Lascombe was not too sure. He thought he remembered Basso with brown hair once. That might have been some time ago, although time and indeed reality itself were relative here. Like most operatives of the Vortex, Basso dressed idiosyncratically: he wore a patchwork multi-coloured waistcoat over his naked torso, a pair of baggy white trousers and fraying brown sandals. He looked at Lascombe intently with rather sad-looking hazel eyes. Lascombe often wondered if Basso, for some peculiar reason, missed his shallow mortal existence.

“Welcome back”, Basso said. His voice was instantly forgettable and boring: dull, low and mundane with no variety in texture. It was almost mechanical, rarely showing any emotion at all. Indeed, he spoke nearly every word in the same tone, with little emphasis on any of the necessary syllables to lend his voice more usual animation. “That was well-handled. Things looked as if they might get complicated for a moment there.”

“It’s always complicated”, Lascombe sighed. There was another loud hiss as Victor Phalange’s casket opened and the operative himself emerged. Phalange’s bald blue scalp gleamed in the flickering florescent green light of the Vortex’s light panels, before he plucked his favourite Stetson cowboy hat (never far from his person and always a feature of his Projections, even) from where it had been kept before Materialisation, and placed it upon his head. Phalange nodded toward Lascombe- a brief recognition of a mutual partnership and a job well done- before abruptly leaving. Without another word to Basso or Lascombe, he disappeared into one of the narrow corridors that led away from the unit where their bodies had been stored, and strode into the Maze- the vast network of tunnels that formed much of the structure of the interior of the Arcadian Vortex.

“Strange man”, Basso remarked briefly, and unnecessarily.

“I have never looked forward so much to a delicious roast dinner”, Lascombe said. “You know, Nero, I believe that Victor has the right idea. I could do with some rest and relaxation myself.” As he moved to walk away, Basso stopped him in his tracks.

“Peregrine, I’m sorry but the Matriarchy wish to speak with you”, he said. “It’s a matter of urgency. They are waiting for you in the conference hall now. You need to see them before you sign out.”

“The Matriarchs want to see me immediately?” Lascombe frowned and re-adjusted his monocle. “That is... most irregular. Normally a situation report or briefing can wait. I’ve never received an urgent summons before...is it because of the Deathshadow situation?”

“I assume so, Peregrine.”

“Very well.” Lascombe brushed down his jacket and trousers. Even in the airtight space of the golden casket, annoying specks of dust and random fibres seemed to find their way on to his clothing. “I shall indulge the ladies and provide them with the benefit of my company and wisdom. Thank you, Nero.”

“Don’t mention it.”

While wandering down one of the gloomy metallic and echoing corridors of the Vortex, Lascombe almost collided with someone in a rush, a person who darted straight across his path from a dark side-tunnel. As she paused and looked back toward him, Lascombe found himself confronted by the cold green eyes of the female Vortex operative Alicia Wittgenstein. She was dressed from head to toe in a provocative gleaming skin-tight bodysuit that looked like leather, or perhaps vinyl or some other latex substitute. Her long dark brown hair was tied back in a ponytail.

“In a hurry?” Lascombe asked her. “Watch your step.”

Alicia’s eyes flashed and she tilted her delicate chin in a proud fashion. “One might say that under present circumstances. I heard that you and Phalange encountered another Deathshadow.”

“News travels fast.”

“This is the Vortex, Peregrine”, Alicia reminded him. “Here news travels almost *instantaneously*. Like thought.” Her words reminded Lascombe that she was a powerful telepath. Almost at the same time he felt her probe attempting to penetrate his mental defences, to uncover his memories and discover what had taken place during his and Victor’s operation to seal the rift. He immediately shut down the protective mental walls around his mind to lock her out. It was not that he considered her a threat, but that he did not want her poking around in there, invading his privacy and plundering his memories for the sake of her own agenda. She knew that he was aware she was secretly trying to read him, and she laughed at him, carelessly amused in a dismissive fashion. Then she was gone, disappearing down another tunnel. Her casual laughter echoed down the empty corridor toward him, dissipating as she moved further away.

Lascombe paused for a moment to reflect upon that strange meeting, before remembering that he should be on his way to meet with the Matriarchs. Also, he could barely wait any longer for the moment that the roast dinner that he planned to cook in his living quarters. He was already anticipating that delicious meal passing his lips. He would cook chicken, he had decided, with all the trimmings. He had always preferred that meat, even in his former life. It was a plain taste, but he found chicken softer and less gristly than pork or lamb. His stomach was already beginning to growl, impatient for his impending meal.

He passed through an archway and into a great vast hall. Matriarchs One, Two and Three were sat upon large silver chairs like thrones, directly before him. Their sudden appearance before him was quite startling somehow, and he paused while he scrutinised them intently. They were cryptic beings, his omnipotent Mistresses.



Matriarch One was a humanoid woman seemingly of middle age. Her hair was black with streaks of grey, and scraped back from her forehead into a tight bun. Her skin was pale and sallow, and her hands from where they emerged from her sleeves were like claws, riddled with arthritis. A black leather eye patch covered her left eye, while her right eye was a pale grey in colour, but intense. When it fixed upon Lascombe, like it did now, he felt like she saw right through him with her icy glare. She wore a long grey robe and sandals.

Matriarch Two also appeared human. She was relatively young in appearance and attractive, with long golden hair and pale blue eyes. Whereas Matriarch One was cadaverous and scarecrow-like, Matriarch Two was slim and pleasing to the eye. She wore a long white robe and sandals. Upon Lascombe's appearance before them, she smiled warmly toward him. He found her the least intimidating of the Matriarchs, but he suspected that she kept a fierce temper well-hidden and possessed a strong will.

Matriarch Three was also a human woman. Whereas Matriarch One might be a woman aged in her fifties, and Matriarch Two in her late twenties or early thirties, Matriarch Three was the youngest of the trio. She looked like a teenage girl of eighteen or nineteen, but with startling long, snow-white hair. She wore a black robe, and had a round, almost cherubic face and soft brown eyes that were almost permanently glazed, as if looking upon some distant view unseen by all others. Whenever Lascombe had encountered her previously, she was always intoxicated. She was addicted to a substance called Kolaxin, a powerful drug from a far-off world called Dagyia, but a drug that was, nevertheless, easily obtained by the Vortex. Even now she had a mountainous pile of the drug in powder form on a tray next to her, set on a plinth, which she would snort from at regular intervals, using one of her long fingernails to spoon it into a quivering impatient nostril. She was painfully thin like her Sisters, although this might be partly due to her heavy use of drugs. Matriarch Three's nose had long since eroded from her regular intake of Kolaxin, and she had a metallic septum fitted to disguise the horrifying visual aspect of her self-destructive disfigurement. The effects of the drug varied according to dose, the mood of the user and the particular time at which it was taken. It often gave Matriarch Three powerful visions, that she and her Sisters claimed were integral to the ethos and work of the Arcadian Vortex, giving her a greater understanding of reality and grand conception of all universes. The drug sometimes had a stimulant effect, and sometimes acted as a sedative. At times Matriarch Three would be highly talkative and hyperactive, and on other occasions she would be slumped in a deep catatonic stupor. Kolaxin did not have a consistent effect. From the way that Matriarch Three twitched and fidgeted upon her silver throne, and was generally unable to keep still, Lascombe correctly assumed that Kolaxin had acted as a stimulant on this particular day.

Lascombe's thoughts were interrupted by the belated tribute of the Matriarch's announcer, a talking skin-bird from an avian egg-world in the Werner-Gelle Galaxy. The bird was featherless and almost four feet tall, but perched upon its metal rod, a high vantage point fixed into the pulsing fleshy wall, it reminded Lascombe of the feathered birds that populated the Earth of his youth. That long lost Earth was just one of many multi-dimension Earths, of course. His Earth had been swallowed by the sun millennia ago.

The skin-bird cleared its throat and opened its beak to deliver a suitable announcement in loud, rasping tones. These were all mere formalities, of course. "Madames, I present to you the lord and master of the arcane and weaver of Metaphysics, a qualified Deconstructor, his excellency Peregrine Lascombe."

"We know who he is, birdy", Matriarch One intoned sourly.

Matriarch Three tittered wildly, before covering her mouth as if embarrassed by her own outburst. She placated herself with another dose of Kolaxin, noisily snorting another pinch of the drug. "Yes we know who he is!" Matriarch Three suddenly announced shrilly. "Arrogant, pretentious, obsequious, venomous, demonstrative, flaunting, pompous, vainglorious Lascombe!"

"Ignore her, Peregrine", Matriarch Two said benignly. "She's high, as usual. Completely off her face. Aren't you sister?" She looked across at Matriarch Three, who giggled like a small naughty child, before attempting to take a relaxed posture upon her throne, albeit one interrupted by violent random twitches.

"I was planning to ignore her, Madame", Lascombe said, with a bow.

“Enough of these trivialities”, Matriarch One interrupted. “Lascombe, you must be wondering why we have sent for you, so soon after your return.”

“I assumed that it must have been something to do with the encounter Victor and I had with a Deathshadow, Madame”, Lascombe replied.

“Partly”, Matriarch One said. “Of course we are concerned by...the *proliferation* of these terrible creatures. And we think that the increase in reality-rifts on different worlds is due to their presence. There is also another matter.”

“Another matter”, the drugged Matriarch Three repeated solemnly, from where she idly lazed upon her throne. Her face twitched again.

“Two other matters, in fact”, Matriarch Two now interjected.

“Indeed”, Matriarch One said. “Sister, you may explain.”

“Peregrine, there is something else that is causing us great alarm”, Matriarch Two said. “We think...” The Matriarch hesitated, and for a brief moment Lascombe saw her blush. The sight both astonished and deeply alarmed him. He had never seen one of his Mistresses openly embarrassed before. “We think we might have a rogue operative on our hands.”

Lascombe paused while he considered the gravity of her words. The next aspect of the matter that he carefully considered was the identity of this operative. “Who would that be, Madame?”

“Anthony Nexus”, Matriarch Two told him. “Do you know him well, Peregrine?”

Anthony Nexus. Lascombe knew him. Nexus was an immensely powerful Voguer, Illusionist, Fabricator and Melder. He was second perhaps only to Phalange in terms of skill. This was deeply alarming news for the Arcadian Vortex. Lascombe could not even begin to imagine the damage that might be wrought by such a saboteur, with inside knowledge of the Agency and the Vortex in addition to his considerable gifts. “What has Nexus done?” Lascombe asked.

“It’s not so much what he’s done but what he hasn’t done”, Matriarch One said sharply. “He makes your friend Phalange look like an obedient schoolboy by comparison!”

“Well, he did let a Cogae loose in several locations- at a circus, a wedding reception and then in a media news conference on one world”, Matriarch Two said. “One of the Earths, I believe. The Cogae caused untold damage, obviously. We are still clearing up the mess, days later.”

“What of his physical form? Surely he would be brain-dead in stasis here in the Vortex?” Lascombe asked. He still could not comprehend fully what had happened and why the Matriarchy had lost control of an extraordinarily valuable operative like Nexus.

Matriarchs One and Two glanced at each other. Matriarch Three, who seemed remarkably aware and cogent by her usual standards today, giggled mischievously and wriggled upon her throne.

Matriarch Two cleared her throat. “We’ve...um...lost his body.”

“Lost his body?” Lascombe still could not understand how this situation had arisen. He had always considered it impossible that a Vortex agent could go AWOL or become incommunicado in every possible sense. “What do you mean you...get it back!”

“*Get it back!*” Matriarch Three screamed abruptly in a shrill voice, repeating Lascombe’s disbelieving question and startling him. “Get it back! Get it back!”

“We haven’t been able to, Peregrine”, Matriarch Two explained quietly. “Anthony has . . . eluded us, so far. We’ll find him eventually, of course. But for now, he is one step ahead of us. More alarmingly, we suspect that he has had help. Inside help, I may add.”

“What do you mean?” Lascombe asked.

“We mean that there is a traitor in our midst, Lascombe!” Matriarch One snapped. Atop its perch, the skin-bird croaked softly to itself, as if in agreement with her. “There may be another rogue operative, in addition to Nexus.”

Lascombe silently pondered the Matriarch's words. He personally found this information deeply troubling and disturbing. The ordered world that he had come to understand, and had forced himself to believe in following his transfiguration now seemed in danger of collapse. The strands of the Arcadian Vortex web appeared to be slowly unravelling and it was an unsettling thought. If anything did frighten him, then it was the universal Void and the loss of conscious thought. That terrible possibility would mean the collapse of any kind of order in the universe...chaos would reign freely and the universe would regress to the time of the pre-Godhead.

"So I take it that you want me to locate Anthony and then find the traitor, this insider within Arcadia that you think helped him to escape?" he finally said to his Mistresses.

"The traitor, yes. Keep your Mind inquiring and your eyes open within the pulsating halls of the Arcadian Vortex", Matriarch One replied. "As for Nexus, no. We have other methods to deal with him. In the meantime, we have a more pressing matter."

"More pressing than a rogue operative and possible traitor?" Lascombe raised a bemused eyebrow.

"It relates to the operation that you and Phalange completed earlier", Matriarch Two told Lascombe now, fixing him with her warm blue-eyed gaze, in deep contrast to the penetrating single glare of her sister, Matriarch One. "You both did an excellent job, repelling the Deathshadow and sealing the rift. However, there is one problem, a worrying issue that could potentially become a crisis."

"And what is that?"

"The Deathshadow left a Remnant. Our Sister has seen it." Matriarch Two placed her hand gently on Matriarch Three's trembling arm. "Sister, it is time."

Matriarch Three now appeared to be in some kind of deep state of drugged ecstasy and hallucination, tripping from the unpredictable effects of Kolaxin as far as Lascombe could tell. Her eyes were rolled back in her head to show the whites of her eyeballs, and her eyelids flickered furiously. Her lips were fixed in a vacant smile. "A ghost silently walks the earth", she murmured softly. "A ghost with crimson eyes and stinking breath of corpses...He that would consume and corrupt...shape-shift and occupy...a parasite within...she talks with its alien voice and it will not rest...!"



“What is she talking about?” Lascombe asked, shrugging his shoulders and nervously adjusting his monocle.

“The Remnant, stupid”, Matriarch One said, answering him harshly. “It was discarded by the Deathshadow during its brief visitation. It watched and waited there, remaining unseen by you and Phalange, before possessing the body of a human woman. It lay dormant within her, but is now beginning to awaken and consume her soul.”

“To make matters worse”, Matriarch Two said, “The woman is pregnant. The Remnant will be reborn inside the body of the young child, and that child will become an Antichrist and bring a cataclysmic Apocalypse upon that world.”

“Ah”, Lascombe said. “Not desirable.”

“Indeed not!” Matriarch One said. “So we suggest that you get back there and sort it out.”

“Of course”, Lascombe said, turning to leave. “I’ll find Victor.”

“No!” Matriarch One interjected, halting him in his tracks. “We have...other work for Phalange. Take Halo Van Troost with you. He is a trained Expeller, and ideal in this case.”

“Halo?” Lascombe’s heart sank. Van Troost was a sanctimonious bore with no sense of humour or profound sense of irony. Halo had a tendency to make Lascombe grind his teeth with deep irritation at his regular elucidations of evangelical dogma and pronounced sense of duty in the ‘sacred’ name of the Vortex. Lascombe knew that he had to prepare himself for the fact that he was going to deeply miss the presence of Phalange on this occasion, despite Victor’s occasional infuriating lapses.

“Yes”, Matriarch One answered him. “Do you disagree with our decision, Lascombe?”

“No. It is a wise decision, as ever Madame”, Lascombe replied dryly.

“Good luck, Peregrine”, Matriarch Two said, as he left the conference chamber. Behind him, he heard Matriarch Three suddenly begin to loudly chant and wail in her shrill voice. “The dark shadow of death from beyond ... oh, its eyes! *It has terrible eyes!*” he heard her say, before her Sisters hushed her. Lascombe shivered as he stepped into the gloom of the corridor, despite the fact that the temperature in the tunnels was no colder than it had been earlier. A feeling like icicles melting at the top of his spine had begun to overwhelm him, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Goose pimples sprang up across the surface of his skin. That roast dinner would have to wait a little longer, although that was no longer an important subject for him. Lascombe was suddenly aware of the highly discernible fact that he did not feel that hungry any more.

*

The house was silent, aside from the rhythmic hum of the fridge freezer, which came on at intermittent occasions. In other circumstances that low mechanical sound might have been soothing, but now it was simply ominous. None of the lights were on, and everything was shrouded in darkness. Nothing seemed, or at least appeared, to stir within the detached building’s four walls. A bowl of half-eaten cat food in the kitchen did not even attract the minute buzz of a fly. The cat herself had long since fled the house.

Charlie Townsend hid beneath his bed covers, shivering. He was wide awake. His eyes flicked nervously from side to side. His television set, atop the chest of draws in the corner of his room, had clicked itself off several minutes before, although he knew that it might come on again by itself at any time.

It had started nearly a week ago. ‘It’ was the weirdness. The terrifying weirdness. It had been going on ever since the incident when he had been out shopping with his Mum, and he had seen the strange man in the shiny multi-coloured changing suit and his blue friend

with the cowboy hat, and then other people had started seeing things. It had even been on the news. The presenter had been talking about ‘mass hallucinations’ and ‘mass hysteria’, words and concepts that Charlie didn’t entirely understand.

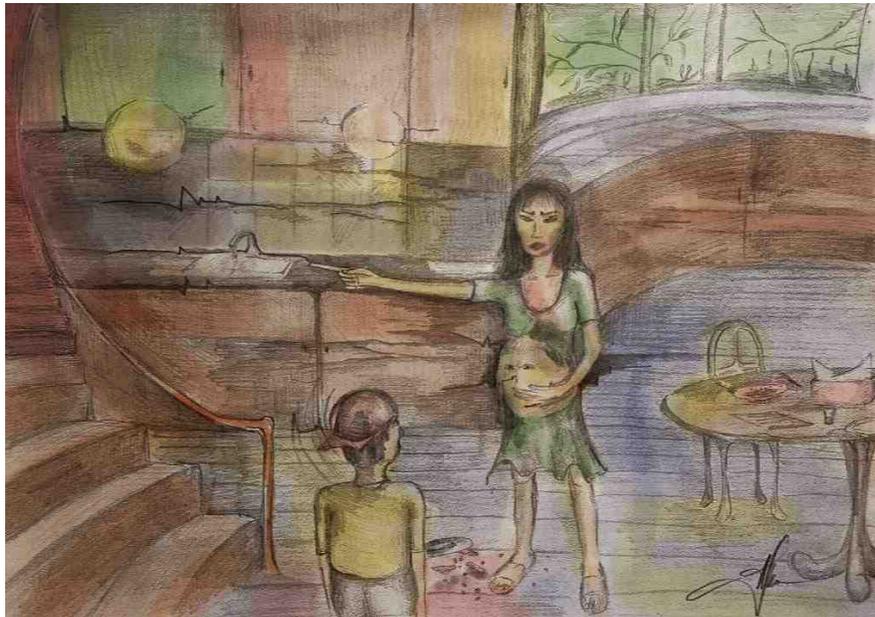
Everything had seemed to get back to normal, and then suddenly his mother had changed into a witch.

She had been making his tea and was in the process of bringing his plate to the table when something strange had happened. He had seen his mum’s face *change*, a subtle alteration that suggested that something, or someone else, lurked beneath the surface: a secret face behind her normal, real face. A new consciousness had risen to the surface to take a look around at its new reality. And Charlie had been frightened, because he knew that it had *seen* him.

His mother had dropped the plate of food, and the contents had scattered across the floor: Charlie’s favourite meal of fish fingers, potatoes and peas.

“Mum?” Charlie had nervously asked her. “Are you alright?”

Elaine Townsend had clutched at her head, before nervously rubbing the ever more prominent bulge of her pregnancy. She frowned. Charlie stared hard at his Mum’s face before deciding that he thought it was her there again, and that it was her real expression. “Headache...” his mum said. “Don’t feel so well...it might be a migraine... the baby. Charlie, go to your room.”



“But Mum, what about my food...”

“*Charlie, go to your room!*” his mother had yelled at him then. Also, it was as if he heard two voices screaming in the depths of her throat, his mother’s high-pitched tone and a deeper, more *alien* voice. Terrified, Charlie had run from the kitchen table and up the stairs to his bedroom, taking two steps at a time and almost stumbling on the landing. He slammed the door shut and locked it behind him. He ran to the comfort of his bed, surrounded by his toys, his television, his game console and his football posters.

Charlie had then sat on his bed, shivering while he had listened to the sounds that emanated from below. It had sounded like his mother was screaming, crying, and then growling like an animal with a deep, foreign voice at different intervals. The cycle would repeat itself. Eventually everything had gone quiet. Somehow, after all the noise he’d heard from downstairs, the silence had been equally as terrifying. He had shivered, and then he’d

prayed that everything would be alright, that his mum would call up to him and tell him everything was okay.

Charlie had sat in his bed, tears trickling down his cheeks. Suddenly there had been a sound like footsteps on the landing, in the corridor outside his door. Someone was moving out there. The footsteps had moved slowly down the corridor until he had known that, from their proximity, the steps had stopped outside his door. Wide-eyed, Charlie had held his breath and had listened.

“Charlie”, a voice had said. “Charlie, it’s your mother. I want to speak to you please.” It had been his mum’s voice...and yet it had not been her voice. Charlie could not quite explain it, but her voice had a deep guttural tone that was completely unlike her...and an alien accent that he had noticed earlier, as if she was foreign and not used to speaking English. It was as if somebody else was using his mother’s voice and body to speak. Something deep inside him, some sixth sense, had told him not to open the door. It was his mother...but it was not her.

“Charlie, open this door!” the voice had said. “Open this door, right now!” Charlie had then heard a sound like nails scraping against the wooden surface of the door...his mother had been scratching at the door with clawed hands, like she was an animal or something. He had known that he had been absolutely right not to open the door then. She would never normally do something like that, no sane person would. Something was horribly wrong with her.

Eventually the scratching had stopped. There had been a brief period of silence, and then Charlie had heard a weird and ghastly sound like a low, sinister chuckle. He then had been able to hear the sound of the footsteps moving away, back down the corridor toward the stairs. He had listened wide-eyed, terrified and wondering what he could do next and how he might escape.

For the next hour, Charlie had barely even dared to blink or draw breath. He had sat, rigid and frozen, in his bed.

Soon after that, his television had come on by itself for the first time. For a few moments, there had been only white static, until a face had suddenly appeared on the screen. Charlie had seen its evil-looking eyes staring straight at him. Charlie cried out in terror when he saw it, and he had hid beneath his bed covers so that he did not have to look at it. It had been like seeing the face of the devil.

The voice had spoken to him for some time, in deep, rasping tones distorted by the limited television speakers. It had talked to him about his father, a man who Charlie had never known, and about the little brother that Charlie was going to have when his mother gave birth. It talked to him about a lot of things that Charlie did not understand, and those things made Charlie scared. Also, perhaps by accident, it slipped into talking in a language that Charlie did not understand. It definitely was not English. Charlie did not know much about foreign languages, but the voice had spoken to him in a way and with a particular sound that he had not ever heard before.

After what seemed like an age the evil presence had appeared to give up, and his television had switched itself off again.

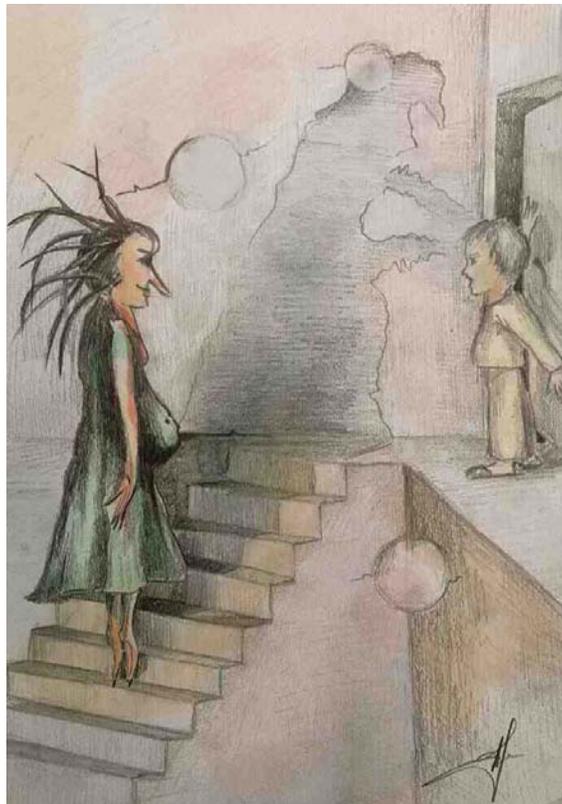
A little while later, Charlie had realised that he needed to go to the toilet. He had been scared to leave his room, but he had known that he didn’t have a choice. His bladder had been full. He had stepped cautiously across the carpet of his bedroom, tip-toeing softly across the floor before he had managed to reach the door. Slowly, he had drawn the lock open before he’d gently opened the door, until it was slightly ajar.

He had peered outside. The landing had been in darkness. His mother, or whatever she had become, had switched the lights off. But Charlie knew the upstairs landing well, even in the dark. He had realised that he could just about make out the outline of the stairway and

the doors to his mum's bedroom and the bathroom which was opposite. He had listened carefully. All had been silent, and it had appeared safe to go to the toilet. He had planned to make a quick dash in there, urinate and then run back in his room.

He had padded across the upstairs hall and into the bathroom. He hadn't switched the lights on, but he had closed the bathroom door behind him as quietly as he possibly could. Groping in the dark, he had found the toilet and lifted the lid to urinate in the bowl. The last few drops had splashed into the water, and the noise had seemed impossibly loud in the ominous silence enveloping the house. He had pulled up his trousers without bothering to wipe himself or flush the toilet and then he had opened the bathroom door again.

As Charlie had stepped across the hallway again he had heard a low, terrifying groan. He had looked to his left and saw his mother- or the witch-like creature she had transformed into- coming up the stairs and turning at the top of the landing to face him. Before he had panicked and ran back into his bedroom, he had seen with utter fright that she was not stepping on the surface of the floor like a normal person but floating an inch or two above it. Her eyes had glowed horribly like scarlet lanterns within her skull.



Charlie had slammed his bedroom door shut and quickly locked it again, his fingers fumbling desperately with the lock. For or one awful moment he had thought that it was jammed before it slid into place. As he had jumped into his bed again and put the covers over him, he had heard that infernal scratching at his door once more, and his mother's distorted insidious voice, whispering to him.

After a while she/it had eventually gone away, and his television had flicked on by itself again. He had heard the demon-creature that had appeared on the screen earlier, speaking again in its awful deep, scary voice. Charlie had jammed his fingers into his ears and had hummed a low tune under his breath to drown it out. Just hearing the sound of that voice made him feel cold and afraid.



It had been that way for a few days. Charlie had not dared leave his bedroom. Sometimes he slept and sometimes he had laid in bed awake, listening for any weird sounds or something trying to get into his room. Once he had filled an empty plastic two litre bottle that had been in his bedroom with water from the bathroom tap when it was quiet during the day, but that was all he dared do and even that was just out of the desperation of thirst. He'd crept out of his room and filled the bottle, listening carefully and constantly looking over his shoulder with wide, terrified eyes, expecting to see the demon-thing that had once been his mother at any moment. Fortunately, nothing had appeared on that occasion, and he'd run back into his bedroom, unchallenged, and able to drink the water. He'd had nothing to eat though, and he was hungry. His television switched itself on and off and he heard the voice of the demon monster coming from it. It even kept coming on when he pulled out the plug from the wall socket. Occasionally he heard noises from downstairs: low groans, hysterical wails and crazy, frightening laughter. It was his mother, but didn't sound like her. When he needed to relieve himself he used a vase (an ornament his mother had placed in there) and he also used a plant pot. His television switched itself on and off when whatever had taken control of his Mum wanted to talk directly to him, but Charlie ignored it. He didn't know what to do. He didn't have a phone, and he didn't know how he could get help. His bedroom window looked out on their back garden, and not on to the street. He could not shout out to get anyone's attention. How could they help him anyway? He had considered climbing out of the window, but there was a sheer drop outside straight on to the concrete slabs of the patio.

The seven year old boy was close to despair until that moment, sitting in the dark underneath his bed covers, when he heard the sound of a voice calling to him. It was a normal voice, unlike the voice of the monster that had spoken to him through his mother and via his television. It was the voice of a man, repeatedly saying his name: "*Charlie!*"

The voice seemed to be coming from outside, from the garden beneath his bedroom window. Charlie got out of bed and padded across the carpeted floor to look out of the window at the garden below. He was wearing his pyjamas, which he'd changed into days before. He had drawn the curtains in case the demon monster had appeared outside and tried to look in, and now he opened them.

There was a man standing in his back garden, lit up by the outside light. Charlie had never seen him before. He had a friendly, round smiling face that somehow Charlie instinctively knew that he could trust. He wore a bowler hat, and a black suit with a collar that looked like a priest's collar, although for some reason Charlie doubted that the man was genuinely a priest. The man was also carrying a closed umbrella, which he was leaning upon as he stood looking up at Charlie's bedroom window.

The man had seen Charlie when he opened the curtains, and the man now waved at him. "Hello Charlie!" he called up cheerfully.

Charlie had pressed his nose up against the glass of the window while he closely scrutinised the stranger in his garden, and he had caused a cloud of steam to appear upon the surface of the glass. Finally, he was convinced that the appearance of this man was not a trick, produced by whatever the evil presence was that was haunting his home and possessing his mother. So that he might hear the strange man better and speak to him, Charlie swung the window open, and cold air flooded his bedroom. Now he could also hear the normal sounds of the outside world clearly: traffic in the distance, and a dog barking somewhere. The sounds felt normal, and very comforting. "Hello", Charlie said. "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

"My name is Halo", the man said. "I've come to help you. I know that something strange is going on in your house and something has happened to your mummy, and I'm here to sort it out."

"Halo is a strange name", Charlie said, but he could feel tears welling up in his eyes, and a sense of relief that help appeared to have arrived to solve his predicament, however mysterious a form it appeared to have taken. Help had arrived in the shape of this man, a stranger that he did not know. Normally his mother told him not to talk to strangers, but she had become something more frightening.

"Charlie, can you do something for me?" the man named Halo said. "Don't leave your room. You might hear some things happening in your house, but whatever you hear, just stay in your room. I promise everything will be over soon."

Charlie had wanted to ask more questions, but this man Halo was now walking to the back door of his house. For a moment he stood still, wondering what to do and how to react, but excitement and curiosity had begun to overwhelm his feelings of fear and terror, causing him to shake off his paralysis. His mind made up, he ignored the stranger's instructions and opened his bedroom door.

The landing was cloaked in darkness, as it had been before. The house was quiet, also as before. Charlie crept across the landing, glancing each way as he did so. He was ready to run should his witch-mother abruptly appear. He reached the top of the stairs without incident, and began to clamber down the steps.

There was a light on somewhere downstairs. Charlie padded softly down the steps of the stairway without incident until he was in the downstairs hallway. The light was coming from the living room. He could hear strange noises emanating from there. Curious to see what was going on despite himself, Charlie quietly stepped into the room.

By the light of the lamp next to the sofa, Charlie could see his mother crouched over the prone body of someone, her claw-like hands tracing strange patterns in the air above the body of whoever the person was. His mother had her back to him and he could only see the back of her head with her unwashed lank and stringy hair hanging down past her shoulders. Charlie looked at the body lying still on the carpet that his mother was kneeling over and he saw that he now recognised him. It was Mr. Chambers, a nice man and neighbour from next door who occasionally dropped by to check on them. Mr. Chambers was lying on his back and he was not moving. His mouth hung open with drool trickling from the side of it, and his eyes stared up toward the ceiling in a blank, unseeing stare.

Charlie gasped and his mother heard him. She whipped around to look at him and Charlie saw a distorted version of her face: her skin was pale and sweaty and her eyes burned scarlet-red. Her brown hair stuck to her forehead in messy clumps and as her mouth twisted into an evil rictus grin, he saw that she possessed fanged teeth like a vampire. He screamed and turned to run.

As he looked over his shoulder, he saw his witch-mother, or whatever kind of *thing* she had become, rising high into the air behind him, hovering in empty space with her hair streaming back from her skull like black mist. She floated and soared toward him with her hands like outstretched claws. She defied gravity as she swooped down upon him.

*

Lascombe had been aware of the boy since he had chosen to leave his bedroom and come blundering downstairs. Although the boy had disobeyed Van Troost's instructions, it did not affect Lascombe's plans. In fact it had been his original intention to use the boy as a decoy, although Van Troost had predictably been unwilling to co-operate with that plan. In any case, that was what had happened- the boy had not listened to Van Troost's attempt to keep him in his room. The Remnant had been helpfully distracted by the boy's presence, while Lascombe set the trap in motion.

He had slipped into the third level of reality so he was unseen by the boy, who had previously seen him in the second level when Lascombe had assumed he was invisible to all normal humans. However, the Remnant might have sensed him on any of the levels, if the boy had not entered the room. Now, inhabiting the pregnant body of the poor woman who was the child's mother, it swooped upon the boy. It intended to devour him just as it had begun to devour the soul of the unfortunate next door neighbour who had knocked on the front door of the house.

The Remnant, however, was thwarted in its ambition. In the third level, Lascombe exuded Deconstructive energy from his palms and fired a blast like a bolt of lightning straight at the creature. Suddenly aware of him now, the creature twisted its head around to stare at him in mid-air. His energy bolt struck the Remnant in mid-air as it was swooping down on the boy. It landed on the carpeted floor of the living room, momentarily stunned. Lascombe had saved the boy from the attack, but he did not dare strike again, for fear of harming the Remnant's human host and her unborn child. It was at this moment in time that he needed the Expeller, Halo Van Troost, and he sensed his colleague's approach, right on cue.

Take me back to the First, Lascombe communicated to Nero Basso, and his request was duly obliged. The sparse outlines and monotones of the Third Level of reality were replaced by the rich colours, elaborate detail and thick oxygen atmosphere of the First. As Lascombe materialised, he became visible to the trembling boy. The child stared in astonishment at him from where he sat on the far side of the room, where he had ended up in his attempt to escape from the hideous creature that had attempted to attack him. The Remnant lay writhing on the carpet between them.

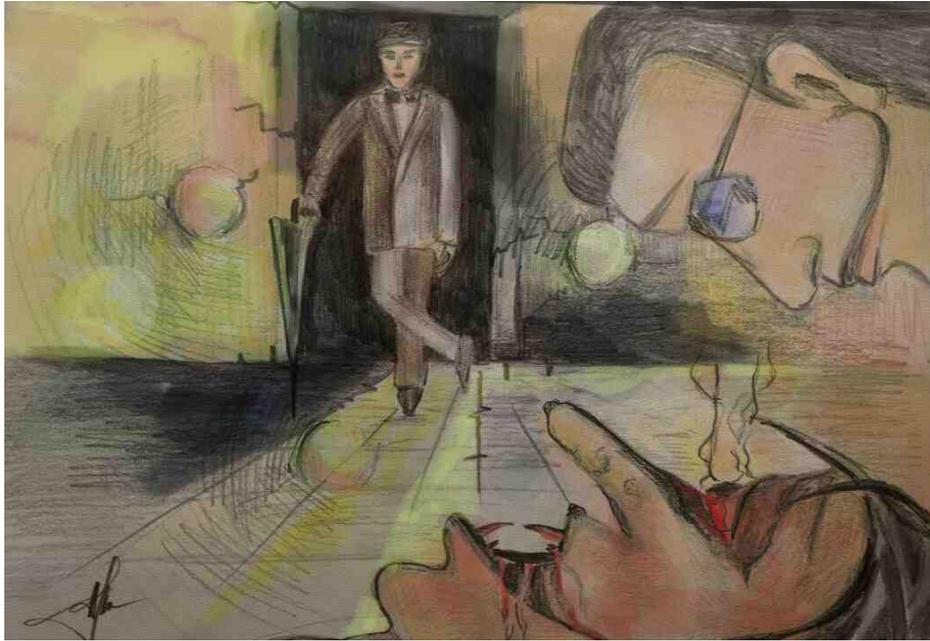
"I know you", the boy said to Lascombe.

Lascombe fiddled with his monocle before glancing behind him to the doorway that led into the kitchen. Halo Van Troost had emerged from the darkness and was standing there, looking from Lascombe and back to the scene on the carpet before him. "Hello Charlie", Van Troost said. "I thought I told you to stay in your room."

The boy named Charlie shivered. "I was scared", he said. "But I wanted to see what was going to happen. I wanted you to help my Mum."

"You're a brave lad", Van Troost told him warmly.

“Halo”, Lascombe interrupted, speaking sharply. He was looking at the Remnant, which had stopped twitching and had turned the woman’s head on the carpet in order to stare at them with its frightening scarlet-red eyes. “There’s no time for conversation, you need to expel this thing. Right now.”



Van Troost took off his bowler hat to reveal a mop of sandy-coloured hair, and leaned his umbrella against the living room wall. He took off his jacket and rolled his sleeves up. “Charlie”, he said. “I don’t think you should see this.” All this took moments, while the Remnant sat up in the middle of the living room, and began to growl like an animal. Van Troost approached it, giving Charlie a severe warning glance that said: *Don’t look. Get away.* Charlie backed out of the room, still feeling curious about what would happen despite his fear. Part of him knew that the strange men would sort everything out and solve it all. He remembered the man with the crazy hair and the strange shimmering suit from that day in the high street, when everything had started to get weird. He’d had a man who was blue with him that time, and Charlie found himself wondering where he was. Charlie stood in the dark front hallway of his house and stared through the frosted glass of the front door at the orange glare of the street lamps. When the howling began, and the flickering flashes of light like bolts of lightning began, it was too much for him. He had to see. He walked back and peered around the door, into the room.

The man with the wild hair, the suit and the monocle was also a spectator. He stood still on the far side of the room with his arms folded and across his chest, watching the scene that Charlie was also witnessing. The man named Halo had gripped the shoulders of his mother/the thing with his hands and he was shuddering and shaking as if energy or electricity was flowing through him. His mother/the thing, however, was even wilder in its movements and actions. She/It shook uncontrollably, shaking her/its head from side to side. His mother’s facial features were horribly distorted by whatever was inside her. Her mouth was an open maw, stretched into a terrible deafening screech. Her eyes glowed red, with a dark border around them which was beginning to envelop and spread across her cheeks like jagged, black cracks. Her skull was the most frightening visual aspect however, for her head was deforming into some strange triangular shape, as if something was manipulating the bone and re-shaping her skull. Charlie watched with terror, wide-eyed and unable to take his gaze away from what

he was witnessing, despite the horrific nature of it. All the while, as Halo kept his grasp firmly on his mother, flashes of white energy like sparks emanated from them both, forming an almost physical residue around them like ectoplasm.

Then, there was a sudden flash that seemed to envelop the whole room, and left Charlie momentarily blinded. Seconds later, Charlie blinked and saw that the man Halo held his mother in his arms. She wasn't a weird demon thing anymore, she was his mum again. She looked exhausted and barely conscious, she was dripping with sweat and there were large dark circles around her eyes, but it was her. Charlie could see the slight bump in her stomach which he knew would eventually be his new little brother or sister and he felt relieved. He hoped that his unborn sibling would be alright, and somehow he knew they would be. Tears began to drip from his eyes and he ran to his mother where Halo held her. "Mum!" he sobbed. "You're back!"

He hadn't noticed the small, red triangular and somehow animated slice of flesh that was crawling away across the carpet like some giant leech or worm-like parasite. Lascombe saw it, though. He picked it up before it could creep away and held it in his glowing palm. "A small slice of the Deathshadow", he mused. "Such a pathetic little thing. Who would have thought you could have caused this much trouble?" Slowly he crushed the Remnant in his hand, burning it away with his Deconstructive fire. It shrivelled up and dispersed into fragile specks of ash that drifted to the floor by Lascombe's feet.

Elaine Townsend seemed conscious, but disorientated and confused. She was not yet in control of her faculties or able to wonder about what had happened to her. Understanding might never come, just a conscious recognition that something had changed for the worse, but had been made better again. She could not see the two men in her living room. Charlie was now sitting beside her. He was weeping and hugging his mother. Van Troost stood up and let them be, picking up his jacket and putting it on again. "What did you do with the neighbour?" he asked Lascombe, without looking directly at him.

"I disposed of him", Lascombe said shortly. He was a Deconstructor, and for Van Troost it was obviously explanation enough.

"So he will have mysteriously disappeared", Van Troost said, putting on his bowler hat and plucking his umbrella from where he had propped it against the wall. "Won't that lead to awkward questions?"

"Not as awkward as the truth would be", Lascombe replied, and Van Troost had to reluctantly agree. "Speaking of awkwardness", Lascombe continued, "It's time that we were no longer here."

Van Troost looked anxiously toward the boy and his mother. "Shouldn't we see how this plays out?"

"Why? What do you mean?" Lascombe glanced toward Elaine Townsend and Charlie. "The process worked, correct? The Remnant was expelled. Are you saying there could be consequences for the unborn child inside the woman?"

Van Troost shrugged. "I don't know. I wouldn't have thought so. The Remnant was fully expelled from the host and from the baby. The human biology and nervous system should return to normal. However...I was thinking more of the psychological trauma." Van Troost lowered his voice. "This will have had a huge mental effect on the woman and her son. He'll probably have nightmares for years, she'll be the same. She was inhabited by a Remnant, a demon, after all..."

"Ah, I see." Lascombe nodded and re-adjusted his monocle, as was his usual habit. "Halo, we come to places like here and we do a job. We complete a task, then it's a case of mission accomplished. End of story. It's not our job to clean up in the aftermath or offer counselling. We're not social workers."

“You’re a cold one, Peregrine”, Van Troost said quietly. “It’s true what they say about you.”

“What’s that?”

“No heart.”

Just before he sent a message to Nero Basso and seconds before he opened his eyes within a golden casket on the Arcadian Vortex, Lascombe spoke again: “Halo, what I’m really looking forward to now, is not a moralistic debate with you, but a nice delicious roast dinner...”

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As he embraced his mother, Charlie saw something out of the corner of his eye. He looked up to see the forms of the two men standing in his living room begin to shimmer. Within seconds, they had both disintegrated into nothingness. It was now as if they had never been there at all. Charlie was grateful for what they had done, but he hoped that they would never come back. If he ever saw them again, it would be because something was wrong.

“Charlie...” his mother Elaine murmured. “I’ve got a terrible headache. What...what day is it? I feel like I’ve been sleeping for days. My mouth is so dry...and I’m so tired...but I was sleeping, and I had such a terrible nightmare...”

“It’s alright mum”, Charlie told her. “Everything’s alright now. It’s all sorted out.”
Thanks to the two magicians, he thought secretly.

“Charlie, was there someone in the house?” his mother asked suddenly, and sharply. She was looking around her, as if she was awaking from a dream, or a nightmare. “I thought...I could have sworn there was someone here. Was it an intruder, Charlie? I felt...someone here. Was there someone? Should we call the police?”

“I don’t think so”, Charlie said. “If they were, they’ve gone now. I’m hungry. Let’s have tea.”