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The Great and the Dangerous

Written by

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The GREAT AND DANGEROUS

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FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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THE DRIVE-BY



Our last call on the after-school shift was a 32374 in Stoke Newington. Alice Edritch never knew what hit her.

The shots were fired on a cold and rainy November afternoon as she left a newsagent's in Shacklewell, stuffing packets of Quavers and Twiglets into her bag. When she stepped outside, Alice was twelve years old. Now she'd be twelve forever. Even before she hit the ground, her ghost was tearing across town, becoming more lost and confused with every silent step.

Four hours later, the street corner was ablaze with colour – sprays of crimson and bright yellow flowers stacked high against the dim brick walls. A white chrysanthemum cross lay on the newsagent's step and tacked to the wall above it was a photograph of Alice, a thin-faced girl with straw-coloured hair and an easy, buck-toothed smile.

The newsagent's door was locked and bolted and iron shutters covered its windows. The lights were on

at a twenty-four-hour grocery store and the laundrette next door, but the rest of the street was deserted. The only sounds were those of the rickshaw's wheels trundling through puddles and potholes as our teammate Lu steered us along.

Watching from the passenger seat, Becky Sanborne gave a heartfelt sigh. 'That poor kid. She wasn't any older than us.'

As new recruits to the Ministry of Pandemonium's subdepartments of registration and salvage, we'd already faced many strange and terrible sights, and sometimes there were sights that made me want to turn away and weep. This was one of those times.

'So this is a 32374?' Becky said. 'Can't say I know all the numbers yet but I suppose that's what it means – gunshots.'

'Yes, a drive-by,' I said. It was the second I'd personally seen. 'Probably gang-related. The girl was an innocent bystander, hit by accident.'

'That's dreadful.'

'All the numbers are dreadful.'

Before our shift began, the 32374 had arrived on a list with five other names and numbers in the receipts office at Pandemonium House, our secret headquarters off Camden Passage. The lists may as

well have been written in stone. The telegraph that churned them out had no opinions. It simply told us how it would be, and we were powerless to save those it named – the soon-departed – from what was coming. Our mission was to guide them afterwards, before anything worse could happen.

Because worse things *could* happen. We all knew that. The enemy wanted those lost souls too.

Lu hauled the rickshaw north, her heels sending up a misty trail from the wet road. A dedicated, stern-eyed girl in her late teens, she was responsible for transport on our team, but transport wasn't her only area of expertise. In combat she was fearless, and I'd once seen her decapitate a reptilian demon with a flick of her wrist. In the heat of battle you'd want Luna San Lao – we only ever called her Lu – on your side.

She turned off the high street onto a narrow courtyard, pulling up outside the main entrance to Abney Park Cemetery, where Alice had last been sighted by an off-duty Ministry field agent. Becky rolled off the seat and ran to the gates, peering into the dark.

'She's here,' she said through a shiver. 'I just know she is.'

Starting inside, we snapped on our Ministry-issue flashlights. Becky flinched when hers found a hooded figure crouching by the path, but it was only an arch-shaped headstone. Mine fell on a stone angel which stood on a towering plinth. The angel's face was peaceful, its lips on the edge of a smile. For some reason the smile made me nervous, so I flipped the beam away to where the path began to fork. The shadows of trees and monuments crawled along both overgrown routes.

'Which way, right or left?' I said.

'Right,' the girls both said at once, and we set off in search of Alice Edritch.

The afternoon rain had turned the fallen winter leaves to mush on the path. Sliding and squelching along, we whipped our flashlights around at every slight sound, a rustle of tree branches, a scuttling of bugs over mossy green headstones. As the path wound deeper inside the cemetery, the high street noise faded and I began to notice another sound almost hidden by the breeze, a whisper of voices chanting in a weird, reverse-sounding language, like a backwards-playing tape.

'What're they're saying?' I said.

Lu wasn't sure. 'It's enemy speak. I don't know the

lingo but I'd guess they're warning us to stay away.'

Becky seemed to have picked up something else. 'Hear that? Careful now. Alice is close, but she isn't alone.'

Another path took us past a black marble cenotaph and a man-sized stone eagle with outspread wings. The trees were less thickly tangled here and the path gradually curved towards a clearing where the whispers were closer. Closer still was another sound, the one Becky had been tracing from the start: a muted sobbing.

Past the trees the outline of an old chapel loomed in front of us, its spire piercing the sky like a blade. The place was in ruins, had been for years. All its entrances were barred and padlocked, and the building's gutted innards blossomed out of the dark when we turned all three flashlights on it.

On the floor just inside the bars a hooded dwarf statue stood with its back towards us. Further inside, another figure cowered in a pool of shadows among the rubble, its knees drawn to its chin. The figure was moving but it wasn't alive.

'Alice?' I said.

The girl turned her head to the light, lifting a hand to shield her eyes. Her pale face was as darkly

smudged as her school uniform, a bloodstained blue blazer and grey pleated skirt.

'What did you call me?'

'Alice,' I repeated.

'And who're you?'

'I'm Ben, and these are my friends. We heard you were in trouble and came to help.'

'You're not the first,' Alice said. 'The ones before you said they'd take care of me. But I didn't like the look of them and I didn't trust them.'

'You did right,' Becky said. 'They're liars, and the last thing they want is to take care of you.'

Alice's ghost mulled this over, saying nothing.

'Do you remember what happened?' I said.

'Some of it, but it's fuzzy. It was on my way home from school, I think.'

'That's right. You went into a shop. . .'

'Yeah, and . . . and someone ducked inside past me as I came out. I didn't see his face, but he seemed scared and in a rush. I thought I heard a car backfiring, and then it was like I'd been punched, here and here.' Her fingers hovered near but didn't touch the dark wounds about her neck and chest. 'I went cold. I'm still cold. And the next thing I knew I was running, but how did I get from there to here?' She looked

around. 'I don't know this place at all.'

The breeze stiffened, the whispers inside it becoming busier, louder. We had to act quickly. The enemy were never far away at these times.

'Listen, Alice,' I said, offering my hand. 'We can't take back what happened to you, we can't undo it. But we can take you somewhere safe. Will you step out and come with us?'

She sat there listening to the breeze, sucking her thumb, unsure what to do, but then her face cleared and she scrambled to her feet and came forward, lifting her fingers to mine.

'OK,' she said. 'Yes, I will.'

A kind of electric charge passed between us when we touched. Sparks of silvery light fizzed about our fingers and wrists, and Alice stared fascinated at the magic show, taking another step to the bars. As she did, a great wrenching and crashing sound came from the trees as if something huge had toppled or torn itself up from the earth, and the earth rumbled and shook underfoot.

'We're out of time,' Lu said. 'Quick, before it gets here!'

But whatever *it* was, it was already here.

It came into view above the chapel in the same

instant Alice slid outside, a raging, smoky, black cloud that seeped from the heights of the trees. It had no clear shape, or rather, its shape was changing all the time, whirling and unfolding in all directions. At its centre were two foggy red points of light that glowed like Chinese lanterns. By the time it reached the spire, blotting it out against the sky, we were running, retracing the path through the trees, Becky leading and Lu urging us along from behind.

'Faster,' Lu called. 'No, faster!'

As we ran I had to keep checking Alice was still there – her grip on my hand was so faint – and her eyes were tearful and wide with fear. The cloud was already at our backs, a cold wave careering through overhanging branches, showering us with dead wood and droplets of rain. An earthy, decaying scent filled the air.

Becky stumbled ahead, gesturing wildly at something she'd sighted. 'There. . .' she cried. 'There, and there!'

There was an explosion of soil and leaves close by. My flashlight swept past something like tendrils or long fingers shooting out of the earth. Further on, another larger shape was surfacing near an ivy-choked cross, head and shoulders scattering