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Opening extract from

Assignment: Royal Rescue

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Friday 2308 hours: **Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands**

Vampire spy Fangs Enigma slid back the grill from the air-conditioning vent in the ceiling and lowered himself through the gap. The steel wires attached to his body harness pulled taut and, by thumbing the buttons on the remote control in his hand, he was able to descend towards the museum exhibits below.

He tapped one of his two sharp front teeth with his tongue, causing it to light up a bright iridescent blue. “This is Fangs,” he hissed. “I’m in.”

From the back of an unmarked van parked outside the museum, werewolf and fellow secret agent Puppy Brown fired up the video link that

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would allow her to see through the camera built into Fangs's sunglasses. "Visual confirmed," she said. "I can see the crown below you."

Fangs used his remote control to lower himself a little further and then stopped. He was hanging six metres above the glass display case. "Holding position achieved," he said. "Now we wait…"

Puppy sat back in her seat. "Are you certain it'll happen tonight, boss?"

Fangs nodded to no one in particular. "According to my contact in Eindhoven, the Jade Panther will attempt to take the crown in the next hour. If we can catch him in the act, we may be able to persuade him to tell us where he's stashed the rest of his haul."

"But if we lose the crown…"

"Have a little faith, Puppy." Fangs smirked. "*I'm* on the case. What could possibly go wrong?"

Before Puppy could list her concerns, her attention was caught by a red dot flashing on the

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map of the museum displayed on her laptop screen. "You've got company," she hissed.

"Right on time," said Fangs, as a door at the end of the room creaked open.

A figure, dressed in dark green, crept inside and swept the beam of a powerful torch across the exhibits. It was international jewel thief the Jade Panther! Monster Protection, 1st Unit, aka MP1, had been on his trail for over a year, although no agent had so much as set eyes on him until now.

The torchlight settled on the crown and, even though the Jade Panther's face was covered with a mask, Fangs was certain the thief smiled.

The Panther produced an aerosol can and sprayed the room with what appeared to be deodorant. A matrix of red lasers appeared and the jewel thief began to manoeuvre around them carefully. A moment later, he was crouching beside the glass case containing the priceless St Edward's crown and using some sort of electronic

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gadget to disable the contact alarms.

With practised ease, the Jade Panther lifted the case off the crown's plinth and placed it on the floor without a sound. Then he reached for the St Edward's crown.

"Now!" cried Fangs. He flicked the "Descend" switch on his remote and plummeted towards the surprised thief – only to judder to a halt two and a half metres above him.

A new voice exploded through the blue-tooth system. It was the gurgling rasp of Phlem, the head of MP1. "This is HQ to Fangs Enigma and Puppy Brown. I have deactivated your equipment remotely. Your mission is aborted. Return to Headquarters immediately."

Fangs stared at the Jade Panther in horror. "No!" he shrieked. "You can't do that. I was just about to arrest the most wanted jewel thief in Europe."

"Do not counteract my orders, Enigma!" roared Phlem.

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Fangs smashed his palm angrily against the buttons on his remote control, and a shower of sparks erupted from the motor in the air-conditioning vent above him.

Fangs spun round in a circle. The steel cables became twisted, and he dropped until he was just centimetres above the floor. He hung there like a string puppet, swinging helplessly from side to side, while the Jade Panther snatched the crown from its plinth.

"You won't get away with this, Jade Panther," Fangs snarled.

"Oh, but I will…" replied the jewel thief in a gruff voice as he tucked the St Edward's crown into his backpack. "Be seeing you." He leapt over the grid of laser beams and disappeared through the door at the end of the room.

Fangs swung helplessly in the tangle of cables, with one hand twisted behind his head and the other tied firmly to his face. Eventually, Puppy's voice broke the silence.

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“Are you OK, boss?”

“I’m fine,” the vampire replied. “Just feeling a little *highly strung*.”

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I gazed out through the tinted windows of the MP1 car as the driver turned off Trafalgar Square into a side road. Beside me, Fangs Enigma was sat in silent contemplation. We'd spent most of the early morning flight back to the UK wondering why Phlem would pull us off a case at such a vital moment. One thing was for certain – if MP1 was involved, it was likely to be something weird, creepy, or both.

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Our chauffeur stopped outside a garage door covered in graffiti and tapped a code into the keypad in the car's dashboard. The door opened. We drove into the small parking space beyond, and the hubbub of London disappeared as the metal entrance swung closed behind us. The wall at the back of the garage then slid away to reveal a ramp leading down into a tunnel that took us deep underground.

I glanced at my reflection in the window and smoothed down some of the fur on my cheeks. You probably know that werewolves only transform once a month, when there's a full moon in the sky. But that's not how it works with me. Something went wrong during my first transformation and I ended up permanently stuck as a wolf – apart from every full moon when I change back into a human.

There were already two or three werewolves living in my town – but unless you were with

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them at full moon, you never got to see them with their fur and claws. I'm the opposite. The full moon is the one night a month when I look normal. It didn't exactly make life easy.

My mum shaved me each morning before school, but by lunchtime I'd be covered in thick stubble. And my dad got weird looks from the cashiers every time he popped into the local supermarket to buy their entire stock of razors.

Thankfully, my parents' awkwardness at having a hairy daughter was short-lived as I was soon approached by MP1 – an organization that defends the world against all kinds of criminal *monster*minds. Months of secret-agent training and assignments later and here I was, gliding beneath the streets of London with my boss, Fangs Enigma – the world's greatest vampire spy (at least, that's the way he introduces himself to people).

"We're here," said Fangs, interrupting my thoughts.

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We'd stopped in an underground car park, where a trio of trumpeters greeted us with a fanfare, and a butler stepped up to open the car door.

"Welcome," he said, holding out a tray of drinks. "Milk with just a drop of blood for sir. And a freshly squeezed orange juice for madam. You are both expected in the blue drawing room."



The three of us ascended several floors in a lift and stepped out into a lavish corridor. Fangs sipped at his drink and examined the old-fashioned portraits in gold frames as we walked along. "You know, this looks a lot like..."

"...Buckingham Palace," I finished, glancing out at the courtyard through a nearby window. "I never thought I'd get to come here."

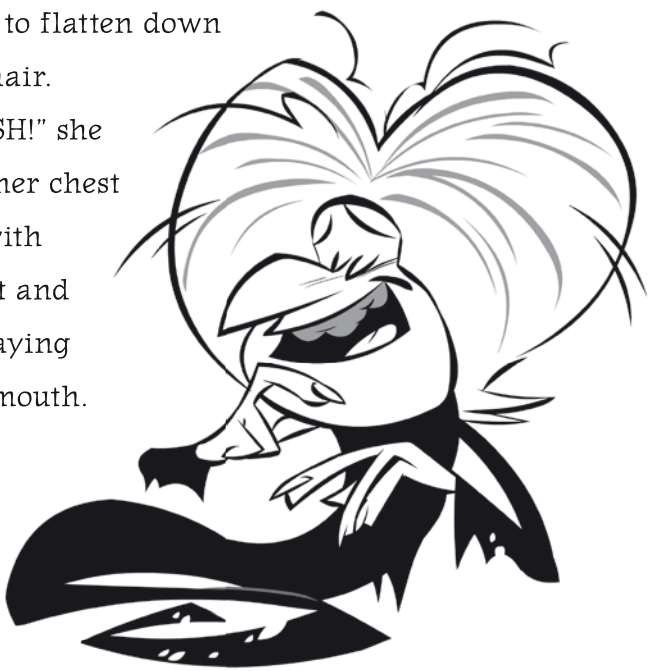
The butler paused long enough to allow us to peer out at the crowds taking pictures of the

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Queen's Grenadier Guards in their bright-red uniforms and black bearskin hats.

The blue drawing room turned out to be, well ... blue. And gold. There was a lot of gold. Waiting for us in the room was Miss Bile – secretary to the head of MPI. She was wearing far too much make-up for a banshee of her age. At the sight of my boss, she attempted to flatten down her wild hair.

"FANGSH!" she shrieked, her chest heaving with excitement and saliva spraying from her mouth. "It'sh sho good to shee you again."



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"The pleasure is all mine, Bile," soothed Fangs, kissing her delicately on the cheek.

The banshee's eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted to the floor.

"Typical," gurgled a voice. Phlem, a slime beast and the head of MPI, had slithered into the room. With him was a man in his fifties who I'd never seen before. "Agents Enigma and Brown, this is Henry Catson – private secretary to Her Majesty."

At one time, a human like Mr Catson would have run away screaming at the sight of a vampire, a werewolf, a banshee and a slime beast gathered together – but that would have been before the supernatural equality laws were passed. Nowadays, meeting a zombie or a fairy was nothing to be surprised about, and I was willing to bet there were even some supernatural creatures working here at the palace.

"Please take a seat," said Catson. "I expect you're wondering why you were invited here."

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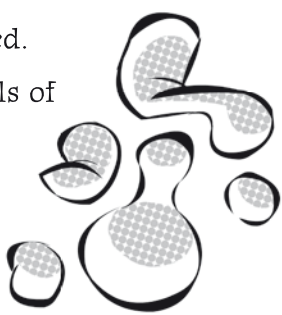
"We weren't invited," said Fangs. "We were ordered to drop everything and come running."

"Don't be so melodramatic, Enigma," spat Phlem. "This is important. I take it you have heard of Princess Tiara, the queen's granddaughter?"

Fangs absent-mindedly straightened a crease in his trousers. "Is she the loud one who hires night-clubs so she can party with her posh friends, or the clumsy one who fell against the cannon during a recent twenty-one gun salute and took out an old peoples' home?"

Catson squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. "She's the, er ... clumsy one."

"Has something happened?" I asked.



Phlem nodded, making the tendrils of slime that constantly hang from his mouth wobble. "I'm afraid so, Agent Brown. Princess Tiara was opening a hospital ward in Oxford yesterday when an attempt was made to kidnap her."

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Fangs, who had been about to take another sip of his drink, paused. "Attempt? You mean the kidnappers didn't succeed?"

"Thankfully not," said Henry Catson. "The princess is, you'll be pleased to hear, safe and well."

"That's good news," said Fangs, "but I still don't see what it has to do with us."

"You will when you review the CCTV footage," said Phlem.

"We'll head back to HQ and examine it immediately," I said, finishing my drink.

"No need for that, Agent Brown," Phlem said. "I have the footage here. The fewer people who know you're assigned to this case, the better."

"Assigned, sir?" said Fangs.

"Yes, Agent Enigma," said Phlem. "The princess is due to embark on a state visit to Austria tomorrow morning. You two will be her personal bodyguards."

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"But we already have an assignment," Fangs protested. "Capturing the Jade Panther and retrieving the eighteen-million pounds' worth of jewellery he has stolen."

"Then consider your assignment changed," Phlem said. "Cube is waiting next door to show you the CCTV footage."

Fangs did his best to hide his sneer. "Yes, sir."

The conversation clearly over, Fangs and I made for the door. "This is ridiculous," hissed my boss. "We should be out searching for a jewel thief, not watching movies."

He opened the door, and we froze. There was a Grenadier Guard charging down the corridor towards us, his bayonet raised and bearskin hat bobbing.

"Stay back!" Fangs cried. "I'll deal with this."

After snatching a painting from the wall, Fangs raced towards the advancing soldier. The vampire waited until they were just about to

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collide and then he swung the painting and hit the guard's bearskin hat. There was a metallic

CLANG!

and the soldier's head came off and clattered to the floor.

To my amazement, the rest of the guard kept on running. He forced Fangs back against the doorframe and then pressed his rifle to my boss's throat.

"You idiot, Agent Enigma!" roared a voice. Professor Hubert Cubit – the head of MPI's technical division – was dashing towards us. Cube, as he is known within the organization, was clutching what looked like a handset for a remote-controlled car. "I'd just finished programming that guard – and you've knocked out its receiver. It won't respond to any commands now."

"It attacked me," croaked Fangs. The guard's

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rifle was still pressed against his throat and it must have been difficult for Fangs to breathe.

Cube flicked a switch in the soldier's neck cavity. The guard went limp and crumpled to the ground. "He didn't attack you," Cube said. "He was running. I was using this corridor to test the mechanoid's speed."

"Mechanoid?" I asked, bending to examine the guard. He was hollow, and inside his neck, I could see wires, gears and motors. "You mean this is some kind of robot?"

"Not *some* kind, Agent Brown," replied Cube. "This is the most advanced cyborg of its type. It reacts solely to my commands and is indistinguishable from a real human being."

"Well, it wasn't reacting to your commands just then," Fangs said. "It was out of control, and I'm going to disable the other one before it does the same thing."

"Don't be ridiculous, Enigma. I was in control

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the entire– Wait a minute... What other one? I've only made this prototype so far."

It was too late. My boss was already racing towards an elderly female who had appeared at the end of the corridor. She was wearing a pale yellow dress, and a crown was nestled in her sleek, grey hair.

Fangs was running straight at the queen!



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