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Opening extract from

Target: Nobody

Written by

Tommy Donbavand

Published by

Walker Books Ltd

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Monday 2018 hours: **Dorchester Hotel, London, UK**

"And the award for the highest number of criminal *monster*minds arrested in the past year goes to … Agent Osiris Tut."

The audience in the ballroom of the Dorchester Hotel applauded as a mummy wrapped in crisp, white bandages made for the stage. Seated at a table near the front of the room, Special Agent Fangs Enigma took a deep drink of his blood-flavoured milkshake, his sharp vampire teeth rattling against the glass. "Well, that's another Spookie I haven't won. That one had my name all over it as well."

Fangs's date – a young woman called Skylar Ribble – gave him a consolatory cuddle. "Why

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would your mummy friend want that award if it's got your name written all over it?" she asked.

Sitting across from the pair was werewolf and spy Puppy Brown. She tried to hide her smile. "Osiris was always going to win that one, boss," she said. "He captured the entire Pink Pixie gang in one go last month – and there are over six hundred of them."

"Yeah, well, I could catch tiny pixies if I wanted to," grunted Fangs. "But I go after big villains instead. Big, mean villains who can do more than just nip you with their miniature teeth. And that selfless bravery has cost me an award."

"Well, I'm enjoying myself," said Puppy, taking a sip of her orange juice. "This is my first Spookie Awards ceremony since joining the agency." She and Fangs were both special agents at Monster Protection, 1st Unit, aka MP1. "It's great fun."

"I suppose it would be fun if you weren't expecting to win anything," said Fangs. "But I've got a reputation to think of."

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On the stage, a green slime beast was slithering up to the microphone. It was Phlem, the head of MP1. He surveyed the assembled spies, lab technicians and security personnel in front of him. "Now to present the next award," he glugged, "please welcome Professor Hubert Cubit."

The crowd clapped as a man with a perfectly square head took to the stage. "Er … hello?" he said into the mike. "Many of you already know me as Cube, the head of MP1's technical division and all-round genius. This evening, however, I shall be *squaring up* to another challenge, that of presenting the award for the best use of a gadget in the field."

"This is the one," said Fangs, crossing his fingers.

"But you don't like Cube's gadgets," said Puppy. "You're always moaning about the equipment he gives us."

"That doesn't mean I'm not brilliant at using them."

"And the winner of the Spookie is … Agent Puppy Brown," Cube announced.

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Fangs stared, open-mouthed, as the room erupted in applause. Puppy stood slowly and then made her way to the stage, where Cube handed her a golden statuette that was shaped like a ghost.

"What's this for?" she asked.

Cube smiled. "You cooked an omelette for Captain Shadow with the eggs I had injected with jellyfish DNA, causing him to glow in the dark. He was easy to locate and arrest after that."

Puppy stepped up to the microphone. "Thank you." She smiled. "But I was just doing my job – and getting to Captain Shadow would never have been possible without the help of my boss. So I'd like to dedicate this award to Fangs Enigma."

Fangs was on stage in a flash. He snatched the Spookie award from Puppy and then from his pocket he pulled a piece of paper with a prepared speech on it. "There are so many people I'd like to thank—"

Suddenly, there was an explosion, and the entire room was filled with black smoke. People

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collapsed to the ground with streaming eyes, coughing on the thick clouds. Puppy thought she saw shapes moving through the gloom – thin figures with stark, white limbs. Skeletons? She counted at least six of the creatures before they were lost in the smoke. Then she heard some unusual noises…

CRACK! CLICK! SNICK! SNAP!

In the darkness, Puppy fumbled to pull her phone from her utility belt.

"Lock the doors!" Phlem roared, trying to be heard over the noise of coughing, spluttering and screaming. "No one gets in or out."

Fangs searched about until he found Skylar. "Get under the table," he told her. "And keep my Spookie safe."

"*Your* Spookie?" spluttered Skylar. "B-But I th-thought…"

"Just look after it."

By the time Fangs had emerged from beneath the table, Puppy had hacked into the hotel's

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air-conditioning controls on her mobile and set everything running in reverse at full power. Gradually, the smoke began to disappear – and it wasn't the only thing to vanish…

"The skeletons have gone!" cried Puppy.

Phlem snatched the microphone from its stand with a slime-covered hand. "Is everyone all right?" he asked. "Check on the other MP1 personnel at your table. I want to know if anyone is hurt."

After a moment, Agent Tut joined Phlem on stage. "No injuries, sir," he reported.

"Good," said Phlem. "Agent Brown, get me the CCTV tapes for the entire hotel, inside and out."

"Yes, sir," replied Puppy.

"Agent Enigma, get out there and interview the hotel staff. Someone has to have seen who did this."

"I'm on it," said Fangs, taking a quick peek beneath the tablecloth to make sure both his date and treasured award were still there.

"Cube," Phlem said, "get back to the lab and

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prepare for a full-scale investigation. No one attacks MP1 and gets away with it."

There was no reply.

"Cube … CUBE!"

"I don't think he'll be able to hear you, sir," said Puppy, a note of panic in her voice. "Cube is missing!"

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TOP SECRET

MP1 Mission File #4

Target: Nobody

Report by: Agent Puppy Brown



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The MP1 laboratory was full of white-coated technicians working late and yet it seemed strangely quiet without Cube. In fact, I couldn't remember a time when his square head hadn't been hovering somewhere in the background in here.

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Early on in life, Professor Hubert Cubit realized that facts and information only ever come in square things. "Books, computers, filing cabinets – all square and all filled with knowledge," he once told me. "Tennis balls, potatoes and scoops of ice cream – all round and hardly any knowledge in them at all."

Determined that he would also be stuffed with information, the young Hubert built a tight-fitting wooden box to wear like a hat at all times, so changing the shape of his head as it grew, from a useless sphere to a fact-filled square. It is for this reason that he is now known within MP1 as "Cube". He is the organization's top brain box – literally. The rumour is that he



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still sleeps with his head in the frame to prevent it becoming spherical again. What I wouldn't give to see that square head right now.

The door to the lab whooshed open and Fangs entered. He was still clutching my Spookie award. "Thanks, boss," I said, reaching for it. "I'll find somewhere safe to put it."

"It's probably best if I keep hold of it for now," Fangs said. "It *is* a clue to Cube's disappearance, after all."

My hairy brow furrowed. "How is it a clue?" I asked.

"Well, Cube was giving it to me, er, I mean us, sorry, you, when the hotel was attacked. It may prove vital to solving this case."

"Forget about your trophy, Agent Enigma," bubbled a voice. We looked up to find Phlem slithering towards us. "It has nothing to do with the case, and everything else is on hold until we find Cube. We look after our own here at MP1."

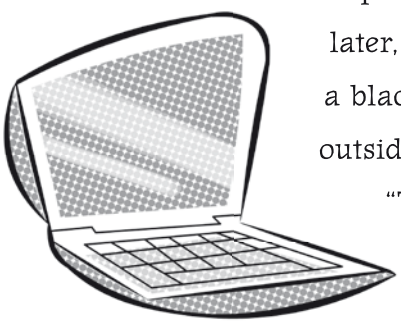
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"Of course, sir," I said.

Fangs tucked the award beneath his cape.

"Did you get the CCTV footage, Agent Brown?" Phlem asked.

"Right here, sir," I said, flipping open my laptop. A couple of key strokes later, and we were watching a black-and-white video of the outside of the Dorchester Hotel.



"This is the moment when the suspects arrived..."

A lorry with a sign reading "Carpet Cleaners" on the side pulled up at the back of the hotel and eight identical skeletons climbed out.

There was a time when people might have been surprised or even scared to see something like that, but none of the few passers-by gave the bony bodies so much as a second glance. Ever since the supernatural equality laws had been passed,

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skeletons, vampires, witches and more were all accepted as part of society. The days of spooky characters only coming out at Halloween were long gone.

Some things hadn't changed, however. Just like in the human world, the supernatural one has its fair share of villains, and that's why Monster Protection, 1st Unit, was created – to track down and catch the world's worst criminal *monster*minds. There are agencies like MP1 operating across the globe. And now the bad guys had taken a vital member of our own team!



Phlem was leaning in to peer at the screen. "I know them. It's the Bone Boys. Skeletal muscle for hire – if such a thing is possible."

"The action moves indoors now," I said, switching to a

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different camera feed. The skeletons had gathered outside the doors to the ballroom. Each of them was holding a smoke bomb. Then one appeared to give a command and the skeletal crew stormed the room.

I brought up the footage from inside the ballroom. There wasn't much to see, though, as the room quickly filled up with smoke, totally obscuring the view.

"The only other shot I've got of them is this," I said, tapping in another command.

A video showed four of the skeletons scurrying out of the hotel carrying a white cage between them. There was something inside it, but it was hard to make out exactly what.



Phlem clicked "Pause" with a gloopy finger, leaving a few tendrils of slime on my keyboard. "I think we can all guess what's inside that cage..."

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"We can, indeed," said Fangs. Then he added, "You mean Cube, don't you?"

"Yes, Agent Enigma," Phlem said. "I mean Cube."

"Where did they get the cage from?" I asked. "And where are the other four Bone Boys?"

"Take a closer look," said Phlem. "The other four skeletons *are* the cage. The Bone Boys have the ability to disassemble themselves to build just about anything they need: cages, weapons, vehicles. And because they're skeletons, they don't leave fingerprints behind."

I sighed. Working in the supernatural world was incredibly exciting, but it did have its challenges – skeletons didn't leave fingerprints, you couldn't photograph vampires, and werewolves only ever looked like their police mug shots once a month at full moon. Well, almost all werewolves.

I'm a bit different to my fellow lycanthropes. Something went wrong during my first transformation and I ended up permanently stuck

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as a hairy wolf. My school already had a couple of werewolves, but unless you were with them at full moon, you never saw them with their fur and claws. I'm the exact opposite. The full moon is the one night a month when I change back into a human. It hadn't exactly made my life easy.

My parents did their best to help. My dad even glued my stray hairs to his face and hands, so that I would look more like "one of the family" when we went on days out. It didn't work – the stuck-on fur made him look more like a homeless yeti than a werewolf. Life at home was hard, and I wasn't very happy at all.



That all changed when I was recruited by MP1 and teamed up with Fangs Enigma – the world's greatest vampire spy (at least, that's what he calls

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himself). Since then, life has been a whirlwind of weapons-training, computer-hacking and secret assignments.

Phlem's voice dragged me back to the case at hand. "What did you find out from interviewing the hotel staff?" he asked Fangs.

"Well," said Fangs, "they all agreed that I totally deserved to win the Spookie Spy of the Year Award."

"What did the hotel staff say about *the Bone Boys*, Enigma?" Phlem said.

Fangs shrugged. "Not a lot, really. They had the right paperwork to clean the carpets – not that they did that. The duty manager just let them inside and told them to get on with it."

"Then we're back to square one," said Phlem with a sigh. It sounded like someone scuba-diving in a vat of gravy.

"Square one," I repeated, absent-mindedly. "Cube's favourite place to be."

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Phlem clamped a slimy hand on my shoulder. "Chin up, Agent Brown. We'll stop at nothing to find Cube. He'll be back here before you know it."

"I don't see how," said Fangs. "We've got no leads, no witnesses. In short, no way of tracing Cube at all."

"That's where you're wrong, Agent Enigma," said Phlem. "We do have one way of tracing Cube, even if it is a little unconventional by normal standards." He tapped one of his front teeth with his rubbery tongue, lighting it up blue. MP1 agents communicate by a radio transmitter attached to their front teeth. It can send and receive messages instantly.

"Send him in," Phlem ordered.

The door to the lab slid open and another vampire entered.

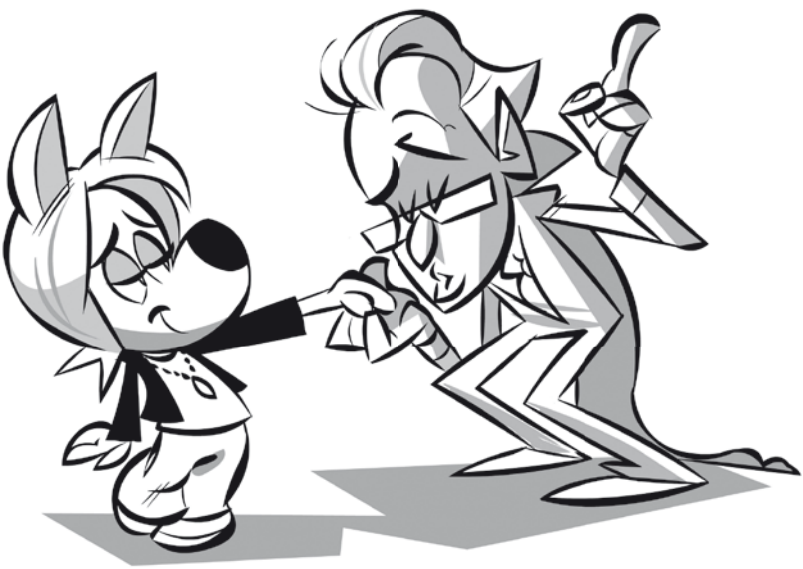
"Oh no..." groaned Fangs.

"Oh yes!" exclaimed the newcomer. "The Astounding Claret is on the case."

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The Astounding Claret was dressed in a gold-sequined suit, purple silk vampire cape and designer sunglasses. His slicked-back hair was silvery-grey and his fangs sparkled like diamonds.

The glittery figure danced across the floor to me. He took my paw in his hand and gently kissed it.



"Enchanted to meet you, my dear," he crooned, whipping off his rose-tinted glasses.

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Then I saw his eyes for the first time, and I almost jumped with surprise. I'd seen those eyes before! Slowly, I turned to stare at my boss. He didn't look happy.

"Puppy Brown," he sighed. "Meet Claret Enigma – my dad."



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