

●●○○ The Cloud 4G 9.48AM 51%

< Messages Reynard Fennick Details

I heard you're looking into Aisling's disappearance.

I know where she lived.

Need a hand?

What do you want?

Can't I be interested in snooping \*and\* the wellbeing of my people? Are you in or not? I don't want to give the address away willy-nilly.

Imagine if an unscrupulous character went on their own!

Very funny. Where is it?

Ash Tower. 9pm work for you?

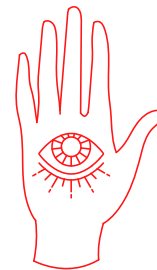
It's a date.



Text Message

Send

# THE MURDER IN LIVINGSTONE QUARTER



As you drive to Livingstone Quarter you can see the city change outside the window. Some houses here are just empty shells with broken windows. Brutalist tower blocks dominate the skyline. Their naked concrete shells are decorated, at least at the levels people can reach, with graffiti and murals. It's not crude vandalism. Even the simplest tags – the names – are a response to the lifeless architecture. An affirmation that the artist exists, that they matter.

Ash Tower has an especially impressive example. A huge illustration of a filigreed hand, a bright blue eye set in the palm, easily two metres in height. It's the hamsa, a ward against the evil eye. Except where the hamsa is usually a right hand the eye here peers out from a left. A mistake, or perhaps a subtle message from Aisling. Left-handed. Sinister.

The mural is surrounded by, and in places covered with, tags and obscene drawings. You're pretty sure you recognise Fennick's handwriting among them.

He's waiting, lounging against a wall, rolling a cigarette.

"Well, if it isn't Samantha Spade! Oh dear, you aren't wearing a hat or trenchcoat? I'm disappointed, but then again I suppose I didn't bring a cocktail dress and gams that won't quit, so we're both letting the genre down. Still, we've got a missing person case and a dangerous redhead. We're back on track already! And now they're asking for a light."

"I don't smoke, Fennick. Some of us have to worry about cancer."

He produces a monogrammed lighter from a pocket. The initials aren't his. His hands shake, ever so slightly, at the sight of the flame. "Just the two of us?"

"Three. Doe's here. I think."

You've never been entirely sure what to make of J Doe. Invisible, unwilling or unable to speak, they communicate almost entirely in post-it notes that appear at random. It's safest to assume they're always around.

You're not sure if they're a ghost, guardian spirit or just a shared delusion, but they're well-meaning. You've grown to accept them, and to shower in the dark. Just in case.

"You just had to bring a chaperone, eh?"

"More like a witness for when you immolate yourself."

"I'm touched you're so concerned for my well-being."

"Someone has to be. Can you not be a bigger pain in the ass than usual today?"

"My dear, I carefully calibrate my level of pain in your ass at all times for our mutual enjoyment."

"I think we have different definitions of enjoyment. You're about to say you know something we'd both enjoy, aren't you?"

"Oh, how you wound me—"

"Keep this up and I will."

"Promises, promises..." He gestures to the hamsa. "Aisling's mark. You'll find similar designs all over the place around here. Not indoors. Few Awakened are dumb enough to actually mark their front door, even if they want you to know their turf."

The two – perhaps three – of you head inside. “I snooped around a bit once, wondering if Aisling lived in one of the apartments or a cupboard or something. I was wrong; she lives...”

“In the basement.”

“Well. More the foundations, but yes,” Fennick says, slightly put out.

You descend to a basement mostly used for storage. There is ancient, crumbling furniture, the smell of dust and a touch of mould in the air.

“Aisling was old school; hidden passages, secret rooms, all the tropes. It’s around here, I’m certain of it. Probably she had it installed when they were building this place.”

You tap at walls, listening for a different sound, feeling for switches or uneven surfaces when a post-it appears.



You run your fingers across the highlighted spot, searching for irregularities, notches, anything...

Fennick has a different approach, taking a heavy chair leg and swinging hard at the wall. His first strike leaves a dent even as you curse him, but before long he’s made a hole in a thin partition. A charred, burnt smell emerges.

“Ladies first,” Fennick smiles. “And whatever you are, Doe.”

You clamber through into a small room. The people above have more space than this, but you doubt Aisling cared.

It’s not hard to see – and even easier to smell – what remains of Aisling. A charred body, in places little more than a skeleton, surrounded by ash, melted jewelry, scraps of scorched clothing and congealed human fat. Her pipe, miraculously unharmed, lies a few meters away.

You slap Fennick’s hand as he moves towards the pipe, no doubt intending to use it as a prop for an impression.

His face is momentarily sour before he flashes his customary shit-eating grin, leaning over the body.

“Don’t interfere with the crime scene, Reynard.”

The room is decorated with occult symbols and objects from a hundred cultures. Crucifixes hang next to I Ching hexagrams. Mandalas of dried gore and painted eyes stare back at you from the walls. They peer out from masks, paintings, more hamsas, wadjets, the pyramidal Eye of Providence... The entire purpose of this room is to make you feel watched.

“See that?” says Fennick, pointing to the curved runes. “I think that’s Enochian script. I thought that shit was made up.”

“As opposed to the solid scientific basis of the rest of this installation—”

He snorts.



It is a point worth considering, you concede in the privacy of your brain. Assuming J Doe isn’t also in there. Would Aisling have known? Would she have cared? Some of the occult ephemera here, you’re fairly sure, is nonsense.

Near the body the decorations are marred, destroyed or hidden behind soot and bloodstains. Jagged red-brown spikes seem to have embedded themselves in the walls. You poke at one with a gloved hand and it crumbles slightly. Dried blood, from the smell, a weapon composed entirely of scab. Fennick notices; his nose wrinkles. He would be sensitive to blood...



You look down.

“Tripwire by the bookcase,” you say, for Fennick’s sake. “Thank you, Doe.”

The bookshelves are scorched but intact, though most of the books they once held have not been so lucky. Few things burn like dry paper.

“The fire was short, but intense,” Fennick notes. “No accelerant.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve started enough fires – some even intentionally – to know the signs. You can smell it.”

“Should I add you to my list of suspects? You knew the way here, you’re a confessed arsonist.”

“I admit, it’s a bold move to invite someone to investigate your crime, and I’m nothing if not...”

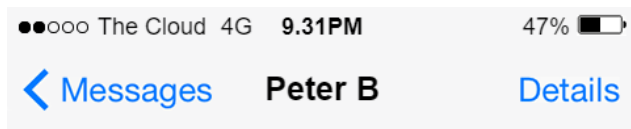
“You can’t come in uninvited, right? That’s why I’m here. You thought you’d need me. To let the right one in.”

“Every great detective needs an assistant to make them look smarter, my dear Watson. Fire died quickly,” he says, changing the subject. “Not enough oxygen. No sprinklers or fire alarms; secret chambers evidently don’t have to worry about fire codes.”

“Based on Aisling’s position on the floor, the unusual bloodstains on the wall and... “ you gesture to the spines on the walls “things, there was a struggle before she burned up.”

You pick through some pages in the room, hunting for clues, taking some from a desk and bagging them up. Your eyes fall upon a name; Aiden, his surname lost in the fire. The fragments of notes that remain mostly involve days and times. It seems Aisling was following him, tracking his movements...

“We need to move the body.”



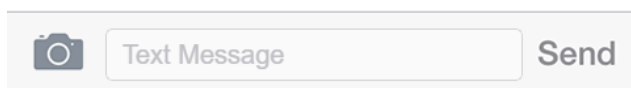
Peter, I might have something for you to take a look at later. Off the books. That ok?

Of course! I'm available tonight. Just let me know :)

Yeah, got something for you. Badly burned. You're sure you're free?

I'm available. Not one for the office I think! I'll send you my address.

Thanks. I owe you one.



“So we can disturb the scene of the crime now?” Fennick asks, a lighter and cigarette appearing in his hand.

You sigh. “Go nuts. After we move the body.”

“Move it where?”

“There’s a tarp in the back of my car and I’ve got heavy duty black bags.”

“And we’re supposed to just... carry it out of here? A bit suspicious, don’t you think?”

He’s not wrong. “If anyone asks, we’ll say it’s a dead animal. And we’ll wear overalls; nobody ever questions someone in overalls.”

“There are easier ways to get me out of my clothes,” he grumbles, but his heart isn’t in it.

“And you’ve just got overalls in your car?”

“It’s the best disguise there is,” you reply, whipping out your phone as you head upstairs.

“You return to the sight of Fennick pocketing a few of the more intact volumes from the bookshelves. He catches your eye, making no effort to hide what he was doing.

You throw a set to Fennick as you zip them up on top of your outfit. “Here you go. Prison chic. Appropriate for a thief.”

“I wouldn’t be seen dead in them,” he leers, but he’s already struggling into the legs. Almost like somebody gave him a smaller pair on purpose.

"You took some of Aisling's notes, right? Because you wanted to investigate. So suit up, cellmate."

"Being locked up with you sounds exhausting. Please... don't say anything about exhausting me, Reynard, it's too obvious. Heads or tails?" you ask, pointing to the body.

"Tails. What's your plan for the body? Weekend at Aisling's?"

"Autopsy. I've got a guy."

One or two people peer at you, curious, as you rush to the car but nobody says anything. The power of the overalls, a match even for Doe's invisibility. Or perhaps people here don't ask questions.

"Well, I've got places to be, good works that need doing and all that. Drop me a line if you learn anything interesting and I'll return the favour."

He disappears into the night with a cheery wave and you turn the ignition with a sigh. The radio changes stations a few times as you drive before Doe settles on talk radio.



Peter Black's house is quite ordinary save for the blackout curtains. You knock and after a few moments a round, pallid face appears. He's a large man – tall and slightly overweight – but he slouches and hunches habitually, his body language apologising for taking up space.

"Zoe! So good to see you," he says. You don't look him in the eye – you know he struggles with eye contact.

"Thank you for fitting me in on such short notice, and inviting me to your home."

"No trouble at all," he says, airily. "Please, come in. Would you like a drink? Something to eat?"

"No, thank you. I doubt I'll have much of an appetite afterwards."

"Oh, you'd be surprised!" he replies, opening the door fully. "Did you know formaldehyde makes you hungry? Many people leave an autopsy feeling rather peckish."

Stepping inside you're hit by an almost tropical heat. There's an odd stink in the air, one you've smelled before but can't quite place. You can't help but notice how every room – a large living room, dining room, even the kitchen – has been filled instead with shelves and glass tanks, all lit with ruddy lights. Heat lamps.

Now you can place that odour. It smells like the reptile house at a zoo.

"Interesting decor," you say.

Peter, being Peter, takes it as a compliment. "Thank you; I really wasn't expecting guests."

You can't help but look at the cages and tanks. You see mice, two fat tarantulas, a large wasp with red-orange wings, a tank of what can only be leeches and something iridescent and vaguely horrifying in an adjacent tank.

"A bobbit worm," Black says, noticing your interest. "Beautiful, aren't they? I adore polychaetes. Do you know in the wild a bobbit worm can grow up to three metres? I doubt Eunice here will manage that, sadly."

Black is clearly itching to tell you about each and every animal here. You decide you'll indulge him after the autopsy.

Something brushes against your leg, too low to be a dog. You know before looking down that it won't be a cat, but the sheer size of the snake roaming free still takes you by surprise.

"Bashe likes you!" he says, his voice almost a squeak. He reaches downwards, letting it wind itself into his arms before lifting and cradling it lovingly. "Say hello, Bashe."

It turns and fixes you with a patient reptilian gaze, tongue flickering out as it tastes the air. You're no expert but the snake – Bashe – seems utterly uninterested in you. You wonder, for a moment, if it can sense Doe.

You reach out and stroke it, gently, more for Black's benefit than the snake's. It doesn't respond, of course. Snakes don't. Black smiles and carefully places Bashe on the ground. It coils away.

You follow Black, who mumbles an apology about a non-existent mess, down some stairs into a cellar. The temperature change is abrupt. Tropical heat to a freezer's chill.

He's made a miniature coroner's office here. There's a metal table, tools, and more generic scientific supplies in a shelving unit. The two of you haul the body onto the table.

"Gown up, please," he says, gesturing to a disposable smock, face mask and thick nitrile gloves he's put out for you.

Black dons his with practised ease, striding over to a radio and tuning it to a station that plays classical music. The bombast of Wagner's *Das Rheingold* greets him, which he seems quite happy with. A key part of his ritual, you know; other practitioners might use candles and chants, but Black is a scientist foremost, an animal and music lover second, and an occultist a distant third. He produces a digital dictaphone and places it near the body, peeling open the black bags to reveal the charred horror within.

"Please, come closer," he says, as you finish with your second glove. There's some of his usual excitement, but his body language changes. Here, in his element, he's more confident and controlled.

"Subject: Aisling Catháin. Body severely burned. Most subcutaneous fat has melted. Possibility of tallow effect? Limbs and extremities less affected; left hand has only suffered surface level burns. Face has suffered more extensive damage. Cause of death: Presently unclear."

You can feel a new, unfamiliar sensation like a shard of ice between your eyes, like a migraine, as power flows from Black into the body.

"It set my heart aflame, widluíos," the body whispers in reply. Its voice is a bubbling whisper, barely audible, and strongly accented. Black is unfazed by this.

"Let's take a look at that, shall we? What set you on fire, Ms Catháin?" Peter says. The way he speaks to the body, scissors in hand, you'd think he was a hairdresser chatting to a customer rather than a charred corpse. He opens her sternum with a casual ease.

"A bean chainte, a creature of fire and vengeance. I fought back but the flames consumed my heart."

"Almost entirely," Peter says, nodding. "Quite the feat. Very difficult organ to burn, the heart. Dense tissue."

"Who is Aiden?" you ask.

"A weapon."

"Weapon? What do you mean?"

"You want to know my secrets. Aye, and you have already stolen some. Come closer."

The corpse moves, sitting up with a jerk. Peter jumps back, shocked. "That hasn't ever—"

The left hand closes around your neck. Empty eye sockets stare into your eyes.

"This shell. It is mine."

The voice – Aisling's voice – echoes within you. The hand around your neck tightens and suddenly your body is not quite your own. Your limbs do not obey you and your vision tunnels, the world growing distant. You can hear a voice yelling, a long way away.

"You are dead, Aisling, dead and gone! Go. Back. To. Sleep."

With a wail that shakes the basement, the corpse judders and stills.

"I'm so sorry," Peter says. There are tears in his eyes. "That's never happened. I didn't... I didn't know they could... I didn't know I could..."

