

London Mythos

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Chapter 1

Andrew hadn't thought anything of the stranger he'd sold the coffee to. A pleasant looking business woman, blonde hair hanging over the shoulders of her well tailored suit. Nothing out of the ordinary in the heart of London. He'd smiled at her, and then fumbled her change, dropping it on the counter. He rushed to pick it up for her, but her hand grabbed his. He got a static shock and pulled his hand back, shaking it off. He laughed at the stranger and apologised.

She smiled. 'See you soon, Andrew.'

'Umm, you too. Have a nice day.' She was the first person to use his name in this new job and it disarmed him for moment. The hazards of wearing a name tag.

The next person in line stepped forward and ordered a latté. Andrew set to work, grinding, frothing, and accidentally dropping a mug, earning disapproving looks and amused glances from customers.

Andrew had the early shift at Coffee Republic near Embankment, so when he finished it was still light outside. A rarity as the days were closing in, almost at the winter solstice. Or so his calendar app told him. He stuffed the itchy black shirt, black trousers, and green apron into his

locker. He got into his jeans and tshirt as quickly as possible, slipped into his Timberlands and coat, and headed out the front door, waving goodbye to his manager as he went.

‘Hold on!’ His manager shouted.

He spun around, wondering what he’d forgotten. ‘Yeah?’

The manager handed over a small green badge. ‘Probation is over. Welcome to the team.’

‘A month already?’ Andrew took the badge. ‘Thanks. See you tomorrow.’

As Andrew walked along next to the Thames, the smell of - what could only loosely be described as water - filling his nostrils, he turned the badge over in his hands. It said “Andrew”. He’d finally upgraded from just “Trainee”. For a second he thought that should worry him, but he couldn’t remember why. His first real job after giving up on his dream. And now he’d been promoted. He sighed at the loss of his hopes and dreams. No. No, it was only a temporary setback. One day he’d try his passion again, but for now he needed to pay the rent.

He put his headphones over his ears, and sped up, heading for Charing Cross station. He kept his eyes on the uneven paving slabs that qualified as a pavement round these parts, and weaved between the ballards without really thinking about it, following the same path home as he had everyday for the past month, the Thames on his right, and low buildings on his left.

But it was still early. He hadn’t really explored London much since he’d started work. He bobbed his head. ‘Yeah, why not?’

He looked up, and caught a stranger’s eye. *Oh, right. Don’t talk to yourself outloud.* At least he hadn’t been singing. People had been sent to prison for less on the streets of London. It was dangerously close to social interaction.

He contemplated where to explore. A tourist attraction? He supposed he could, but something just didn’t appeal. Then again, the Natural History Museum was always fun just for its scale, if nothing else. But no, he could do that at any time. He needed something that took full advantage of the daylight.

He shrugged. *St. James’ park. I’m in a walking mood.*

He walked up the narrow street between Embankment and Charing Cross, packed to the brim with chain restaurants on both side of the road, and an old cobbled street. He’d have made faster progress in a pitch black forest. He kept his eyes on the street, making sure not to fall, so he completely missed out on the signs dotted all over the road, but his smell got everything. The unmistakable tang of fragrant Indian curry, the sweet Chinese sauces, and then the harsh hit of German sauerkraut and mustard.

He took the steps up to Charing Cross station. He knew he was *close* to the park, but decided to brave the tube instead of try and figure out London above ground.

One stop over on the Bakerloo line, and he was stepping out into Piccadilly Circus. The crush of tourists and honking of car horns made it hard to appreciate, but the statue of Eros was beautifully backlit by giant glowing signs promoting the latest energy drink, or... the blue screen of death. Andrew chuckled at that, and then turned around, heading down the hill towards St James' Park, still fighting the crowds. It didn't seem to matter which way he turned, he was always going against the flow. He stopped off at the Tesco to grab the cheapest pastry he could find, past the red busses that filled the streets, and the giant columns holding the statues of famous war heroes high above his head, until the green of the park finally opened up.

Crossing the final road - more of a gulf, really, designed to fit entire parades in its breadth - between him and what the duck's would come to know as "the great giving of the bread", one of the black cabs sped in front of him, trailing a cloud of diesel smoke, making him cough.

Oh yeah. That's why I don't explore London. The people.

He walked past the fancy restaurant disguised as a post-modern statement on human's hatred towards trees, and stood at the shin high railing in front of the lake. He pondered for a second *why* the railing was there. It didn't offer any real protection between him and the lake that dominated the park.

He shrugged and pulled the croissant out of his jacket pocket. All beady, avian eyes turned to him. Ducks, geese, pigeons, swans, cranes, herrons, and pelicans descended, waddled, swam, and flopped his way. He probably should have brought more than a single croissant.

The first goose to reach him stopped, padded its feet, and quacked. But geese weren't ducks, so it was more of a bassy hiss. Then the goose rushed past him. So did the duck that was hot on the goose's heels.

Andrew checked behind him. No one was handing out anything better than he was. He shrugged and turned back, only to be pushed out of the way by the bulk of a swan. He staggered back, thoroughly confused as even more birds fled the lake. The pigeons quickly took to the air now, and disappeared past the great oak trees. He looked around, hoping to catch the eye of a stranger and shrug awkwardly as if to say "what is the world coming to when stale bread won't buy you the companionship of our feathered friends", but everyone was walking away. In fact, he could only see two groups of people. In the whole of the park, there was a group of speed walking Japanese tourists, frantically taking pictures as they walked out of the

park, and five cosplayers throwing common sense in the face of the biting cold air, walking towards him.

Credit where credit was due though, they had really gone all out on their costumes. It was good to have a hobby, and he thought that maybe he should strike up a conversation about which characters they were supposed to be. He certainly didn't recognise them. Also, they seemed a bit old to be cosplaying. Early to mid thirties, perhaps? They all wore tight tops, with baggy leggings - three of them in black, one in dark red, and one in Gandalf grey - They had golden metal boots coming up to just above their knees, with the golden armour continuing up their right thigh. Their right arms were completely covered in the same, from gauntleted hands, bracers, and shoulder plate. Medieval gothic ninjas was their general vibe. He was surprised they were allowed to carry their foam weapons so openly. They each had something different, whether it be sword or staff, and a variety of guns. He tutted to himself at the lack of uniformity.

Cool detail work on the foam, Andrew thought to himself, noticing the guy in the middle most of all. Tall, with a brown shaggy beard and unkempt hair. When not cosplaying, he probably owned a small pop-up gluten-free bakery inside a dessicated phone booth. Hipsters.

The group of five walked past him, continuing further into the park. 'I like your costumes,' Andrew said to their backs. They kept walking, ignoring him. He nodded to himself, *fair enough*.

He looked around, and was now sure that everyone else had left. Which was very odd. What was more odd, was that he couldn't make out any wildlife, either. In fact, he couldn't even hear the cars on the roads surrounding the park. The silence would have been unnatural for anywhere, not just central London.

It was just him and the cosplayers now. They had hopped one of the railings into a grassy area next to the lake. They were talking to each other and seemed anxious. But then, they were cosplayers, so maybe they just lacked some social skills. He ripped off a hunk of stale croissant and popped it in his mouth. The ducks hadn't been nearly as thrilled about his coming as he'd hoped.

If wildlife is fleeing, I probably should too...

He started to amble slowly towards the only other people in the world, it seemed. He wasn't really sure why. Maybe it was some stubborn desire to do what he'd set out to do and explore London. He wouldn't be deterred by unnatural phenomenon! Or maybe it was more primal than that, and he didn't really understand why he was still there.

He froze in his tracks as the sound of water splashing broke the silence. Not like someone had dropped a pebble in the lake. More like someone had dropped a house in the lake. A fountain of

water shot up into the sky several stories before crashing down. He saw the shock wave ripple across the water, dragging a wave larger than himself along with it. He just had time to think / *should have ran* before the air hit him, blowing him off his feet.

He landed hard, his ears ringing as if an explosion had just gone off next to him. He gasped for air just as the wave of water crashed onto him, and he spluttered, almost managing to drown without even being in the water. He rolled over and heaved out whatever had gone in.

Water way to go, he thought. With that, all of his snark was gone, and whatever had been making him hang around the abandoned park had gone. It was time to run.

He got to his feet, and the ringing in his ears was replaced with burning. A mixture of crackling fire and television static. He glanced behind him, and hovering just above the lake was a giant tear in reality. With the noise of it, came the smell of burning flesh and sulfur.

He got to his feet and started to back away, unable to take his eyes off whatever it was. Things started falling out of it. He was too far away to make out what they were.

Gunfire erupted, and Andrew instinctively dropped to his belly, staying as low as possible. He looked around for where it came from, and sure enough, the cosplayers had opened fire on whatever was coming out of the portal. A mixture of pistols, shotguns, and assault rifles all emptied their barrels towards the middle of the lake.

What. The. Fuck.

Andrew's brain kicked back into gear after the overwhelming shock of whatever the hell was going on here. He got to his feet shakily - his inner ear must have been damaged as he found the world swaying around him - and stumbled away from the gunfire and burning portal.

He had only made it a few awkward, faltering stumbles, when he heard another tsunami style crash of water behind him. He turned, and something to match the size of the portal had come through it. Giant and red and scaled. It was a thick snake with horns and a scorpion's tail, as tall as a house and four times as long. Small sparks chimed off its armoured scales as the group of whatever they were continued to fire on it, but seemingly with no effect.

Fear gripped him. A real fear. Terror so primal he didn't understand it. He turned, his mind a blank, his fight or flight instinct taking over - and flight being the clear winner. He could barely stay upright, but his mind wouldn't let him think anything other than *flee*, whether he was running or crawling, he had to run.

He'd made it back to the restaurant, and the bushes next to it. The trees between him and the portal served to muffle the sound, and his terror receded enough for him to notice something that his hind brain told him to pay attention to. Priority had shifted from the threat of that weird

portal thing, now far enough away to not spell his immediate doom, to the group of people sat around one of the restaurant's outside tables, looking intently at him.

"People" might be a bit of a stretch, however. Certainly they weren't people like Andrew had ever seen before. He'd be the first to admit that he didn't know what the hell was going on right now, and that perhaps his mind was playing tricks on him, because honestly, what were the chances of a giant portal, demon and all, managing to evacuate St. James' Park? Everyone would just assume it was an event and would all be clamouring around for a good picture. In fact, that made a lot of sense. Cosplayers, an elaborate light show, and now more cosplayers? Maybe a film was being shot and the camera crew had missed him. He wanted to look around for a camera crew, but wasn't so sure that taking his eyes off of the three *things* in front of him was a good idea.

They didn't look terrifying like the portal had. But they sent waves of primal caution running through him. An instinct that humans developed back when sabertooth tigers were a real threat to society. An instinct that told him a large predator was about to pounce. They didn't quite look human. They were taller. Or, longer, at least. Two of them had hair so yellow it could have been carved from gold ingots, while the third lacked any colour. A shocking white, as if all the colour had been drained from not just their hair, but their skin as well. The yellow haired ones looked identical, with long inhuman ears, evil yellow eyes, and wore brown leather tops. The white haired one wore a loose top and a skirt that matched her complexion of pure white.

The yellow haired ones were sipping from espresso cups, and motioned for the third to do *something*. The white haired one shrugged and walked towards Andrew, who wanted nothing more than to run away, but was all too aware of the terror behind him. He was trapped.

As the white monster walked towards him, on steps so light it seemed to be floating, Andrew locked eyes with it. They were the only trace of colour on the thing, and they were a deep, dark black. He couldn't focus on anything else. But no, they weren't black, they were brown. And her hair was a mousey brown that had been dyed blonde at the tips. She was still taller than him, with a slim athletic body, annoyingly hidden by tight blue jeans and a red blouse, with a golden choker around her slender neck.

'Hello, Virtue. What's your name?'

Andrew stammered for a moment, wondering why this beautiful girl was asking for his name so calmly at a time like this. Eventually he managed to tell her.

The girl giggled. 'Of course that's your name. What else would it be?'

'Umm, I don't know?' Andrew didn't know if that had been a real question. 'What's yours?'

'I'm Laura. Why don't you come and sit with us?'

Andrew looked back to the two predators Laura had been sat with. 'I don't think your friends like me. Also,' Andrew pointed behind him, 'I was running from something. So I'm going to continue that. Thanks.'

He took a step towards the park's exit, but Laura sidestepped and stayed between him and freedom. 'Oh, that's nothing to worry about. We're keeping an eye on it, in fact. Join us.' She smiled such a genuine smile, and her face lit up with beauty.

Andrew looked behind him, and could still see the haze and glow of the portal beyond the trees, hear the sound of demonic and human screams, but for some reason, it just didn't seem quite as important as it had before he'd met Laura. It was still pretty bad though.

But he couldn't just run away from something a bit scary in front of a beautiful woman! He'd never get her number that way. Men did stupid things for women all the time, and hanging around a supernatural battlefield wasn't the worst thing he'd heard of by far. 'Okay, yeah, sure. Sure, why not.'

He took a tentative step towards Laura, something still scratching at the back of his brain that this wasn't a good idea.

Laura reached out a hand to take his and guide him to the table, and alarm bells went off in his head. A girl this hot wanting to touch him this soon after just meeting him? That was definitely suspicious, but... he who dares, wins. He reached out his hand, ready to be led, when a woman spoke.

'You don't get this one, wraith.'

Andrew and Laura both turned to the woman that was now stood next to them. Andrew had been so focused on Laura, that he hadn't heard this woman approach. She was taller than Andrew by a bit, the same height as Laura. She was still wearing the same suit from earlier. The pleasant looking business woman from the coffee shop.

Laura jumped backwards, the shock plain on her face.

'None of your people came through the portal,' The business woman said. 'Why are you still here?'

Laura looked back to the yellow haired espresso drinkers, who had stood, and again, without Andrew even noticing, were now right behind Laura. He wasn't sure if he wasn't paying attention or if they were just *that* damn fast - at this point why couldn't superfast weird looking people be a thing - but he did know that he *didn't* know what was going on here. At all.

'We were just leaving. We haven't breached the treaty,' one of the yellow haired guys said, pulling Laura back.

The business woman looked at me, but was clearly still talking to the trio. 'And I assume that your talking to Andrew was purely innocent. No ulterior motive?'

One of them nudged Laura, who began to talk. 'We never... we weren't going to do—'

The business woman waved her hand. 'Begone.'

They all turned and ran. We both stood, watching them go. After a few steps, Laura turned and mouthed "I'm sorry" to Andrew, who smiled, but then shouted, 'I didn't get your number!'

Laura looked nervously at the woman next to Andrew, shrugged, and turned to escape.

'Really, Andrew?'

'What? She seemed... nice.'

The business woman seemed ready to argue the point, but instead introduced herself. 'I'm Gabriel.' She made no move to shake hands.

'Oh. Umm, you seem to already know my name. And, isn't that normally a guy's name?'

She smiled a thin smile. 'I had a father that didn't pay much attention to such things.'

'Well, then hello Gabriel. I have—'

'Questions, yes. It would be odd if you didn't.' She looked around Andrew to the bank of trees obscuring the portal. 'We'll answer all of those soon, but not now. You won't remember it.'

'Won't remember what?'

Gabriel started slowly walking towards the portal and motioned for him to follow. He did without really thinking about it.

'Specifics. Your mind is under incredible strain right now.'

Andrew nodded. 'I see. How so?'

'This is your first time in a sphere. It taxes the human mind.' She looked to his blank expression. 'The sphere of influence exerted by the infernal gates. It pulses with waves of corruption and unease. Most humans find themselves turning away and avoiding the area without even knowing why.'

Andrew nodded. 'Probably for the best. It looks kind of dangerous.'

'Yes, very. And then a wraith glamourous you. Your brain is being stretched to its limits. It's why you're so docile right now.'

'I feel normal. I'm not docile.'

'Yes you are.'

'Okay,' Andrew said, seeing the truth behind her words.

‘Don’t worry, you’ll be back to your usual self in a few days.’

They rounded the bend, and the infernal gate came back into view. The lake beneath it looked like it was covered in oil, a thick black tar across its surface. The group of cosplayers were still on the bank of lake, some lying down. Andrew started to suspect that they might not be cosplayers, however.

The snake like beast was nowhere to be seen. The infernal gate began to shrink, and as it did, the blood and blackness from the lake was pulled into it, a thick stream being pulled back to where it came from.

They had walked in silence, Andrew placidly following Gabriel until they were almost on top of the group of five warriors. The red one was stood ankle deep in water, watching the gate close, and the others were further back, almost on the public path. The one in grey was leaning over one of the others, his hands searching for something.

‘Hello, Virtues.’

They all looked up from what they were doing. Gabriel motioned for the red watcher to continue.

The grey one he’d noticed from before, with the bushy beard and wild hair, part viking warrior, part bistro cafe owning hispter, continued frisking one of the men lying down. ‘I’m already kneeling, but I promise I’m kneeling for you now, instead of the purely functional kneel it had been before.’

Gabriel turned to Andrew. ‘Thorne here takes issue with prostrating himself. Try not to let his cynicism rub off on you. It grows weary after a few decades.’

Andrew nodded.

‘There’s no point, and you know it,’ Thorne said. ‘Could have really used you a few minutes earlier, Gabe.’

Gabriel moved forwards and looked at the man Thorne was knelt over. She put a hand on his shoulder. ‘I’m sorry.’

Thorne looked up at Gabriel and shook his head softly. He took his hands off the still body. ‘I know. You had somewhere else to be. I know.’

The watcher in blue turned and shouted, ‘Something else is trying to get through!’

Thorne was instantly on his feet, rushing to his discarded weapon.

‘Rest,’ Gabriel said. ‘This is the least I can do. Catch the boy, please.’

A taloned foot the size of a man had emerged from the gate, and the waves of terror hit Andrew in the gut once again. Part of him was screaming that he should turn to run, but he felt

sluggish and numb. Mentally, not physically, like part of his brain was shutting itself down. The exhaustion Gabriel had spoken of, perhaps?

Gabriel turned to the infernal gate and strode confidently towards it. Her business suit began to flutter in a breeze that wasn't there for anyone else. The red portal loomed over her, and she threw her arms out to her sides, hands open. Andrew wondered what the plan was. What *she* was. What anything was anymore.

Gabriel stepped out onto the lake. Andrew staggered at some unseen force, but Thorne caught his arm.

A flash of light bloomed from Gabriel's back, and the last thing Andrew saw before he passed out were wings of purest white unfurling from the arch-pleasant-looking-business-woman Gabriel.