

## Episode 309

### Ritual

**Josie:** Burying the body took less time than I would have thought. Mrs. Bowen was not a large woman, and the Victory garden behind the house made for easy digging. I cleaned the hallway as best I could, though mopping the blood was an imperfect task, and I'm afraid there will always be a stain there. After forty-five minutes, I had everything as close to normal as could be, and I rang Whateley-Campbell. Or at least, I rang Whateley-Campbell's number. A woman answered, possibly Irene Nesmith, though I could have gotten the voice wrong. She told me that Whateley-Campbell was expecting me to call and that if I had decoded the book, they would send someone to collect it.

I told her that things had become more complicated, and that I wasn't willing to give them the book. Then I hung up.

It only took four minutes for Whateley-Campbell himself to call back. Before he could remonstrate with me, I told him I would give them the translation if I was allowed to be part of the summoning.

"Whatever do you mean?" he asked.

"We don't have time for you to be coy," I said. "You told me the book would explain, and it has. You're going to summon the Oldest in order to stop the war. I want to be part of the ritual."

"You are full of surprises, Miss Waters," he said.

I said, "Tell me where to go."

He gave me directions and a time well past curfew. I told him I'd be there and hung up.

But so much has happened since then. I'm outside the Tottenham Court Tube station,

waiting for Simon to come back. I hope I have time to get all this down before he gets here and we return to the tunnels. Everything starts then. They'll have the sacrifice secured, and all they need are the right words at the right time. I have those in the book. Even now, right at the end, I still don't know if I'm going to do what they want. I can only believe that these spells are real—I saw their effect on the government agents who killed Mrs. Bowen. But I'm the only one who can read the book. I could throw the whole thing if I wanted. I can stop them. Or I can call down the Oldest. It's up to me, and I don't know what I'm going to do.

Either way, it's the end.

**[Theme music; credits]**

**Josie:** I've given all my other letters to Mrs. Irving, and told her that I'll post this one to her once it's done. She promised she'd keep them for me. The idea of you ever finding them, finding her, is impossible. I know that now. But somehow it still feels important that I finish the story, as far as I can. I need to tell you. It matters.

Mrs. Irving was shaken by what she had seen, but not as much as I would have thought. Perhaps her dabblings in the occult are more than dabblings, or perhaps the "Keep Calm and Carry On" spirit is much stronger than I gave it credit for. I gave her the letters and told her how important they were to me, and I told her that if I didn't come back in a few days that she could have the few belongings in my room. I have no idea what will happen to the house with Mrs. Bowen gone, but that's probably not going to be a problem until her grandson returns from the war. And either way it won't be *my* problem.

I didn't tell Mrs. Irving everything, but I did warn her that the government was after me,

and she said she was worried and would keep the doors locked and shuttered.

“It’s the Tower card,” she said. “It told us this was coming.”

She also told me that based on what she’d seen, they had better watch themselves if they were coming for me.

She’s right.

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Whateley-Campbell told me to meet them in an alley off the Charing Cross Road at 10pm. I wore a dark dress and the most unassuming hat I own, and wrapped a scarf around my head. I would have worn my sunglasses, but that would look even more suspicious. I had a vague idea that if I was questioned about breaking curfew that I could plead ignorance, so I wanted to look as normal as possible. I hoped I wouldn’t have to test that. I took a small purse, just large enough for my service revolver and the spellbook. Mrs. Irving saw me to the door at 9.

“Do be careful, Josie,” she said. And then she embraced me. It’s the first time Mrs. Irving has ever touched me beyond patting my hand during a Tarot reading. Her eyes were full of tears. I felt very strongly how alone she was going to be.

And then I walked off the porch into the grass, hearing the bolt slide home in the door behind me. I stopped briefly under the oak tree and looked back at the house. The window of the rooms I had spent the past few months in were dark, I felt a dread certainty that I would never see any of this again. I was aware of the cold night air against my skin, and of the weight of the book in my handbag. I left the garden and moved down the road towards the park.

I had not been out after curfew since arriving in London. More than the emptiness, the thing that struck me was the darkness. The blackout was total, and the silent streets nearly invisible beneath my feet. The occasional outline of a blackout curtain, backlit by lamplight, was

the only sign that I wasn't the only living thing in the city. I saw two wardens, but in the dark it was easy to slip into an alley or a doorway and they never saw me.

I passed Hyde Park and turned onto Oxford Street. As I did so, the moon appeared from behind a cloud. It was full, or nearly so, and in the absence of streetlights it cast an eerie sheen over the buildings and trees. It made me think again of *The Wolf Man*. It was exactly the sort of moon that would have transformed Lon Chaney into a monster. "Even someone who is pure at heart," the movie said, "can become a wolf when the moon is full and bright." During the film, I had felt afraid for the woman, chased through the forest by the half-wolf half-man. But now, walking the darkened streets of this haunted city, I felt no fear at all. I was the wolf.

So when I saw the figure standing on the street corner, my impulse was not to run, but to fight. I reached in my handbag, seeking not my gun but the book. Nothing could stand against what it held.

But then I realized I had nothing to worry about. The person on the moonlit corner was dead. He waited for me, and as I passed he fell into step with me.

He looked to be about fourteen, with grey ashen skin, barefoot on the cold pavement. He was wearing...but it doesn't matter. I don't need to tell you what he was wearing, because you know. I recognized your eyes, because they were mine, just as I had imagined. I should have been devastated, but it felt inevitable. And it felt so good to be with you, at last. I wanted to speak to you, to ask you so many things, but then we weren't alone.

As I walked, the dead joined us. They emerged from side streets and alleys, they climbed from bomb craters and walked out of Underground stations. They were not the historical dead I had been seeing. They were all new dead, people from now, dressed in contemporary clothes. Simple citizens, torn and damaged and bloody. I knew them. With the same certainty I'd felt

about everything since Mrs. Bowen. These were the residents of Hawthorne, blown into ghosts by German bombs that I knew were coming. Blameless unthinkable victims. They followed me as I moved through Soho, more and more of them.

By the time I reached Charing Cross Road, there was a throng around me, a spectral tide that washed me forward, inexorable as time. We swept down the empty street, past darkened bookshops and theaters, silent except for the susurrations of phantom feet.

Cecil's Court was near Leicester Square, a short alleyway full of old books and antiques, shuttered and filled with shadow in the blackout. I reached it just before ten.

Whateley-Campbell was standing halfway down the alley, with Irene Nesmith and the man in the sailor's clothes from the meeting by the Tower. I stopped near them, alone now, but I knew you were with me. Whateley-Campbell's voice was subdued, a curfewed whisper.

"Miss Waters, thank you for coming. You have the book?"

I showed him the book but did not relinquish it. I said, "It's the final spell you want, right? Summoning the Oldest?"

Everyone, even Whateley-Campbell himself, stiffened like I'd said something dangerous. It was exactly the same reaction as soldiers at Bletchley Park if one of us talked about our work outside the huts.

"It is," he said. "We had a version from a different translation, a translation we discovered too late was flawed.

"And that summoned the ghosts?"

"Among other things," he said, and I remembered the thing I had heard in the Tube tunnels.

"What's going to happen if it does what it should?" I asked.

“We are somewhat pressed for time, Miss Waters,” he said, and Irene Nesmith glanced nervously at the mouth of the alley. “What do we need for the spell?”

“I need to know what will happen,” I said. “How many people will die?”

He waved his hand. “It’s an irrelevant question.”

“Since I won’t share the translation unless you answer me, I find its relevance is heightened by context,” I said. “How many?”

“I mean the question can’t be answered,” he replied. “When the...Oldest emerges, the world will change. He will usher in a new world order in which things like living and dying become meaningless.”

“So, a large number.”

“Miss Waters, why are you here if you don’t intend to help us?”

The sailor stepped forward, not threateningly, but not unthreateningly.

I sighed. “You need darkness, you need candles, you need seven knives wrapped seven times with seven cords. You need blood from each of the participants, though a token amount seems to be all that’s required. You need the words I’ve translated. And you need a sacrifice. Blameless, and as young as possible.”

Irene Nesmith smiled. “Thank you, dear,” she said. “We have all those things but one. Simon?” She nodded at the sailor, who slipped out of the alley and faded into the shadows. I didn’t ask where he’d gone.

“We’ve chosen a place where we won’t be interrupted,” Whateley-Campbell said. “In the old days they’d have found a cave or some other naturally occurring deep place. Luckily the Passenger Transport Board has made things simpler for us.”

He led us back into the streets, and we retraced my route up Charing Cross Road to the

Tottenham Court Underground. Three other members of the group were waiting on us—the other woman from the alley by the Tower, and two men I had seen on the edge of the crater on the Stamford Road. They followed us down the steps.

We passed through the people sheltering on the platform, earning only a few curious looks as we slipped into the tunnels. It was cooler here, both because of the depth and darkness and because of the chiller plant blowing its icy air into the tunnels. We walked for few minutes in the dark, and then Mrs. Nesmith pointed out a small opening in the wall, a service tunnel it looked like, that away into black.

Once inside Whateley-Campbell risked a torch. The service tunnel was narrow and stuffy, the walls too close to extend my arms. We followed it for several hundred yards, and then it opened out into what appeared to be a natural cave, although it could be the beginning of a planned expansion that was abandoned when the war began. The space was roughly fifteen feet by twenty, hardly large, but big enough for what we needed. The group members began preparing. Mrs. Nesmith took a number of large butcher knives from her bag and passed them around. Each of the others began wrapping cords around the handles, coarse cords like a thick twine, but dark and waxy. Whateley-Campbell handed one to me, already wrapped.

“If you wouldn’t mind, Miss Waters, going back up to the entrance and waiting on Simon. He’ll be here momentarily with our last participant. And then we can begin.”

So I am here, outside the Tube station, writing this final letter to you. There are ghosts in the streets, watching me, but I don’t see you among them.

I don’t know where Simon has gone, or how he’s going to accomplish what he has to do, but I know he’ll be returning with a sacrifice. What that means is he’ll bring an innocent person, possibly a child, who we will use our knives to open up. As the innocent bleeds out, I’ll read the

words and we'll mingle our own blood, pricked with the bound knives, with that of the child.

And then the Oldest will rise from the Summer Isle and transform the world.

I could stop it in a hundred ways. I could read one word wrong and make it all go south. I still have my service revolver, and it has a bullet for each of the cultists, but I'd need to be fast and I couldn't miss once. And of course, I could just disappear—wander off into the darkened streets, throw the book in the Thames, and fly home to America tomorrow, assuming they haven't alerted the airports about me. I could figure out how to avoid the British government once I was home.

Or I could do it. I could raise the Oldest and end it all.

The sacrifice isn't the sticking point. As I watch the Hawthorne dead, gathered in the street before me, I know there's already so much blood on my hands that a little more means almost nothing in the scheme of things.

I know it was you, earlier, standing in Oxford Street, walking with me in the dark. And if you're here, if you're one of them, then you aren't...

Safe isn't real. Solace isn't real. I only wanted to make the world safer, so I've been wrong from the beginning. I've only always been wrong.

The sirens are starting, so the bombs are about to fall. We'll hear them as we bleed beneath the streets. That seems fitting.

I wish you were here. You were here before, but I can't find you. I can't help you. What happened to you? What is this for, without you?

I see Simon coming up Oxford Street, holding a sleeping girl on his shoulder. She looks no more than eight. This is it.

I'm going to post this to Mrs. Irving, so she can keep it with the others. I still don't know

what to do.

I know it can't matter anymore, but it was all for you. I am so sorry.

Josie

**[Theme music; end credits]**

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