

DEAD
SHALL
DANCE



SERIES DECK



created by sophia khan

LOGLINE

A maverick biologist trying to *cure death* and an eccentric heiress trying to *cure boredom* team up to investigate occult murders on behalf of London's lost souls.

tone & format

Serialized, hour-long crime drama fusing the eerie paranormal thrills of **FRINGE** and **SUPERNATURAL** with the quippy crime-solving capers of BBC's **SHERLOCK**.



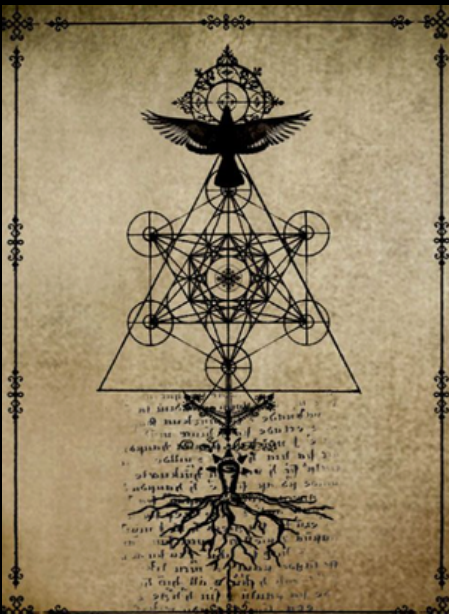
PREMISE

ETHAN CARTER, the scruffy **Bad Boy of Biology**, has devoted his life to curing death. His controversial mission and maverick flair have attracted a media storm, and boy can he milk it. But secretly, he revels in solitude. When he's not courting donors, Ethan's incubating ideas at **Ananta**, the edgy east London research institute he co-founded with his **spirited Nigerian research partner and moral compass**, KEM. Thanks to their efforts, Ananta's hyper-talented team of scientists is hurtling towards the audacious dream of ending death at full throttle—until THE BOX shows up. A **hexagonal, bejeweled metal artifact**, it disappears and reappears at will, defying logic and physics. When Ethan collides with VALERIA RAO, a **boisterous young PI with an outrageous wardrobe** and affectionate (but suitably ferocious) dog named ZEKE, things go from weird to wild. They stumble upon the body of a murdered woman who just happens to be Val's beloved, missing cousin.

Off we go, down a twisted **supernatural rabbit hole** as The Box—a device that channels the dead—dispatches Ethan and Val on *one nearly-fatal misadventure after another*, hunting down freakish foes while trying to keep their previously (mostly) normal lives intact. Whether they like it or not (Val definitely, Ethan not so much), they're caught up in a **celestial struggle that's about to get epic**. Mercifully, The Box has found its heroes, and it's not letting them off the hook while necromancers and psychovores stalk the streets of Londontown.

SETTING

Our story haunts the cracks between dodgy alleys and palace parks, mafia-run hotels and crumbling Roman baths, sumptuous concert halls and greasy chippers, abandoned phone booths and torchlit dungeons. **This is London.** Heart of a fading empire. Once ruled by marauders and conquerors, mad kings and virgin queens. Now a kaleidoscopic crush of cultures and classes where you *will* hear nine different languages as you stroll to the theatre. Where excommunicated royals and mouthy xenophobes rub shoulders with tea barons and Romani. Where Eurotrash DJs piss on Gothic cathedrals at 4 am in the rain. Where mudlarks stalk the banks of the Thames in search of lost gold. It's an endless, glorious, unforgiving labyrinth of bestial and sublime.



London has its ghosts.

They're a bloody noisy lot.

In the war between light and dark over the fate of all souls, **voodoo and Ra** are just as real as **fish and chips**.



STYLE

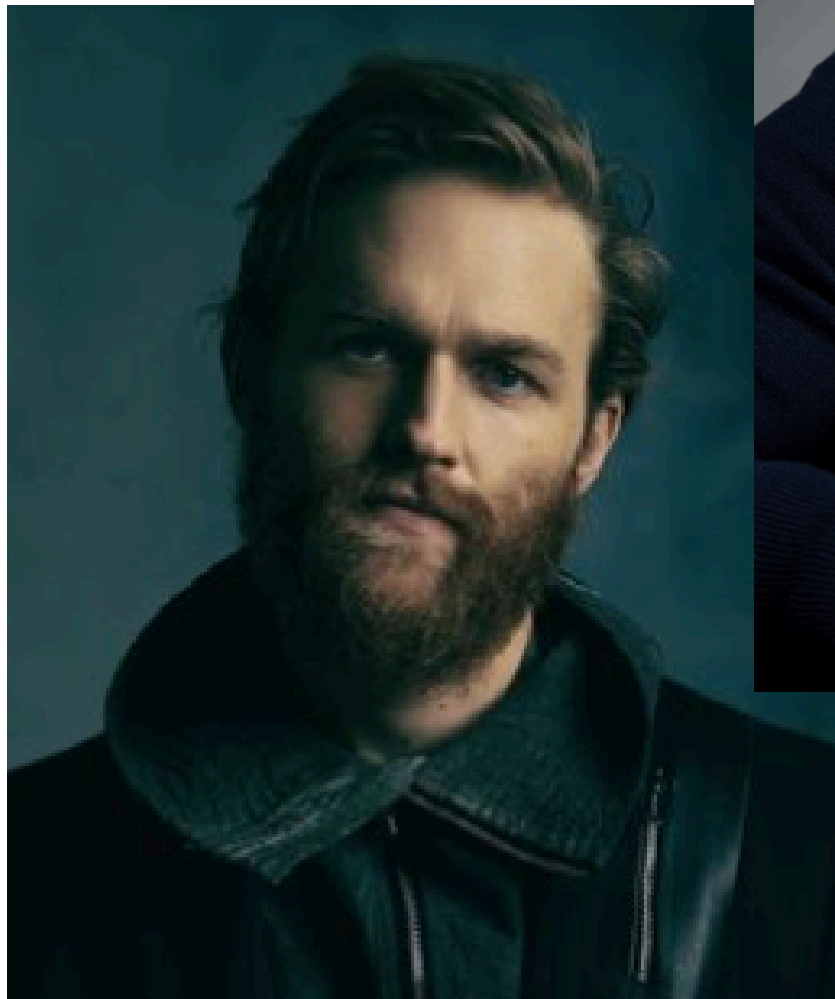
We get to play with an *iconic city's raw texture* through the slow-burn introduction of a parallel, **magical world hiding above, below, around, and within** us. If it's even remotely possible that spirits and souls, ghosts and ghouls, angels and devils occupy a dimension just outside of normal perception, why not explore it against the backdrop of one of the most dynamic, historically juicy urban centers on the planet? The visuals and pacing of this *grounded urban fantasy* may therefore feel like a kinetic war-dance between **Guy Ritchie's** jarring yet sleek punctuation of place and character and **Darren Aronofsky's** hypnotic, sweeping transcendentalism. Moments of off-beat levity a la **Phoebe Waller-Bridge** will provide temporary tonal relief from infrequent but intense flashes of violence (never gratuitous, only to serve the story).

DR ETHAN CARTER

late 30s, american, molecular biologist

A vitamin-popping, underground fighting renegade who's a lot more magnetic than he ever asked to be. Ethan worships discipline over body and mind—then compensates with reckless endangerment.

Like the young Siddhartha, young Ethan reviled at the revelation of aging, sickness, and death. But unlike Siddhartha, he rejected it. He made a five-year-old's vow to **defeat mortality**, and he means to keep his word. Ethan fled his *backwoods, Bible-thumping roots* at 13 and received an **MD/PhD from MIT** at 24. A year later, he built an institute dedicated to one radical hypothesis: *death is a disease of cellular decay that has a cure.*



After some early triumphs, his research seemed to be doing more for starfish than for people. Meanwhile, his co-founder Kem's breakthroughs held implications for cancer *and* cosmetics. So Ethan has grudgingly stepped out of the lab and into the limelight, acting as chief company spokesman. His quest has garnered a rabid following of immortalists and skeptics alike. Some say his work is unholy. Ethan says **we are the gods**. It's up to us to save ourselves.

But when The Box lands on his desk, Ethan must learn to accept that there is a world beyond ours. That terrifying, awesome, unquantifiable forces govern the flow of souls from one state to another. That death is not an end, but a beginning.

VALERIA 'VAL' RAO

30s, indian brit, heiress-turned-PI



London-born, *semi-reformed* socialite who likes **loud music** and **louder sex**. Floaty fluidity, opportunism, and cunning have kept her alive through the two tumultuous decades since her *billionaire parents died in a tragic explosion* and left her with a fortune. An easily bored adolescent, she shockingly made it through school long enough to study theology at uni, then dropped out for intensely personal reasons (*that may or may not have involved a professor and his wife*).

Too much time and money led to an extended stint as an international party girl. You know the life, **do molly on a yacht in Mallorca**, wake up a week later in **Burma covered in mehndi and de-fanged pythons**.



Plush, flippant, generous, and *haywire*, Val's got major Cleopatra potential, if only she could get her shit sorted, like properly sorted.

When a nomadic friend left his dog ZEKE at Val's Mayfair townhouse and *never came back*, Val's **carefree lifestyle took a major gut check**.

Desperate to track down her friend and return the sweet (but demanding) pup, she did some digging.

After a few weeks, Val realized that 1) her friend was *smuggling opium-laced chocolate through South America*, 2) she actually liked Zeke, 3) Zeke actually liked her, 4) *fuck that friend*, and 5) she was really bloody good at **sleuthing**.

Being occupied by a concrete task also felt rather novel. So she decided to keep Zeke, ditch the friend, and bankroll her own PI firm—the latest in a long line of flavor-of-the-month career endeavors.



THE BOX

unknown provenance

Just big enough to fit in Ethan’s palm, the octagonal metal device seems like it should open (but refuses to). Raw stones embedded into the surface glow when it’s channeling a message. It adopts the personality of the spirit it’s housing and can be quite snarky and damned obscure. The device catches energetic wavelengths being sent by earthbound souls who can’t cross over to the Beyond and translating their messages into fragmented sounds, sometimes a word, a song, or a string of numbers, not always intelligible (and not always in English). The symbolic and illogical beauty of its communication encourages intuitive interpretation.



IKEMBA ‘KEM’ EJIKEMBE

43, nigerian, geneticist

Gracious pioneer with a hearty laugh who co-founded Ethan’s institute. Kem’s immersive mind has led him deep into the human genome. He’s obsessed with harnessing the raw power of DNA, and he’s cracking some serious codes. Avid solo scuba diver, 80s crime show aficionado, pleasantly married father of three. Ethan’s main tether to the life he’s built, a grounding influence who sees into the truth of things.



DCI SHEP MATTHEWS

59, english, detective chief inspector



After two divorces and 35 grueling years on the force, Shep is beyond ready for retirement — until a killing spree lands on his desk. He may not be the sharpest DCI in English History, but they don’t call him The Bloodhound for nothing. And when he catches an irksome heiress at the latest crime scene with a spooked scientist, he smells a ripe load of trouble.

MOIRA LI MCTAGGART

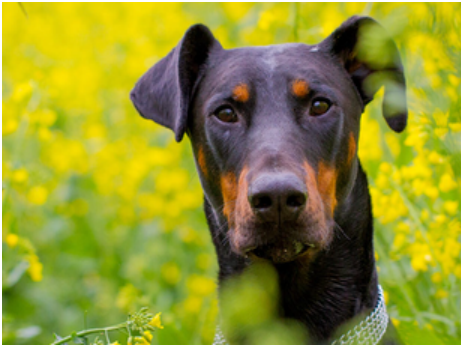
45, chinese brit, chief of police



Shep’s boss, Moira is abrasive, blunt, married to a burly Scot, and doesn’t give a toss about feelings or politics. Absolutely can’t abide civilians interfering in homicide cases. McTaggart warns Shep to keep an extra sharp eye on Val and Ethan throughout the early seasons, eventually becoming a reluctant, critical ally.

ZEKE

2, labrador retriever-doberman mix



Heart of a puppy, eyes of a hunter. More emotionally savvy than his mistress. Cramps Val’s freewheeling lifestyle and pushes her to evolve. But, like Val, he can get distracted by shiny objects. Wise, noble, slobbery.

BING

20s, open ethnicity/gender

Ethan’s miraculously competent assistant who keeps the gears of his normal life well-oiled. A true believer in the Ananta crusade, riding shotgun in the immortality van, stoked to be on the frontlines of anti-Death Day. The Box throws a fairly massive wrench in Bing’s dreams of living forever — but not Bing’s loyalty.



LORNA DOONE

50s, irish, fringe scientist

A frizzy-haired drifter who took on the name of a fictional heroine when she got laughed out of mainstream academia for ‘unorthodox methodology.’ Lorna squats in an abandoned mansion south of the river, where she’s set up a military-grade, two-story laboratory. Her bright spirit of inquiry and mother-wolf heart help Ethan to bridge the science he knows with the paranormal mayhem he’s encountering. Most of her exuberant rambling sounds like pigeon-lady nonsense. But nonsense it is not.

other principals
[not in pilot]

AQUILO

44, latino-navajo, shaman/bartender

The only *good* holdover from Val’s party days. Aquilo traded in his spirit-walker past for another kind of spirit, opening a small whiskey joint in a sleepy borough that became an overnight hotspot. Val and Ethan’s misadventures compel him to confront his unsettling abilities and suppressed shamanic heritage.



BIG FREDDIE

ambiguous 30s, korean, gangster

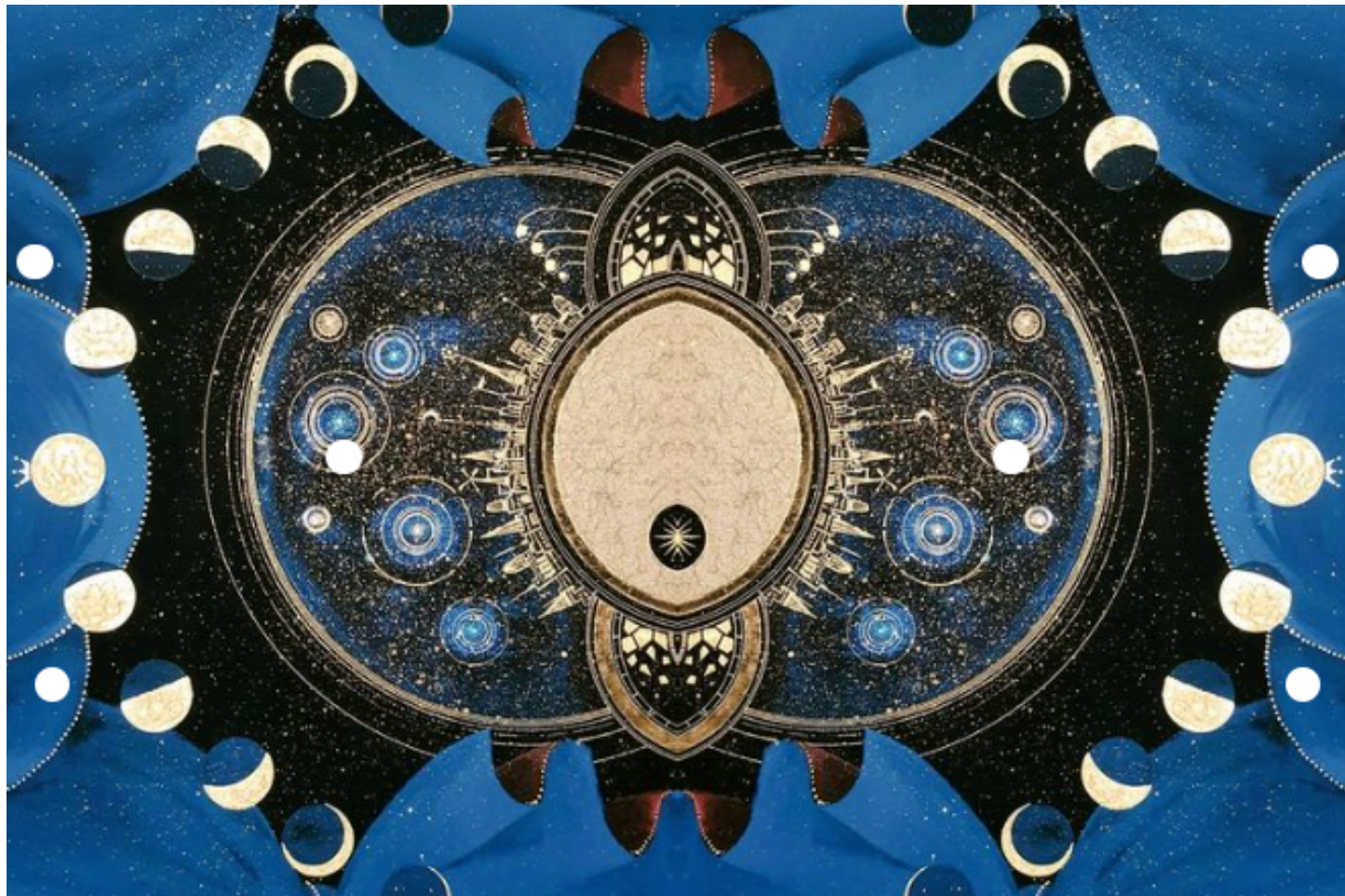
Owner of a nightclub where Val made a lot of questionable decisions once upon a time. A man of enormous proportions and means, Big Freddie is Val’s link to the criminal underground. He may seem like a hedonistic, slightly obese cherub. But he doesn’t suffer fools lightly.

SEASON ONE ARC

Our *unlikely duo* tracks down the murderer of Val's cousin as **more victims turn up: all 28, all female, all eyeless**. While Val and Ethan struggle to stay alive, out of jail, and sane, The Box also dispatches them to settle scores for other wayward spirits. These 'side missions' end up bringing them closer to identifying the main killer, whose brutal M.O. points to an **occult society with a dark mission**. Their investigation teaches Ethan how to hone his talent for getting people to talk, a clutch PI skill that the emotionally inept Val is desperate to learn. Likewise, Val's unnerving spontaneity and eccentric resourcefulness save their skin more than once. Throughout the season, they meet quirky but gifted allies such as *Lorna Doone* and rope reluctant spiritual warriors like *Aquilo* into their journey. But the deeper they go, the more Ethan's work suffers, fueling tension with Kem.

At a crucial fundraising gala for Ananta, *Ethan chooses his institute over following a lead* that a nearly hysterical Val claims will take them directly to the criminal lair, maybe even in time to *stop the next young woman from being murdered*. Scotland Yard thinks they've caught their killer thanks to a clever piece of *misdirection and false framing* by our villains, and they refuse to hear Val's pleas for backup. Undaunted, Val goes off on her own to chase down the lead, only to *get captured*. Cue massive panic for Ethan. *With Aquilo's help as a shamanic tracker, Ethan finally locates Val at a manor house on the outskirts of London—only to get captured himself*. They're still bloody novices, after all! A timely Scotland Yard intervention via Aquilo sets off a self-destruct sequence at the estate home, and *our team barely escapes with their lives*. Ethan, dazed from bomb blasts and raging fires, blacks out and encounters a misty goddess with crow's wings, declaring herself as **Ethan's guide to the afterlife**. *He tells her to buzz off*.

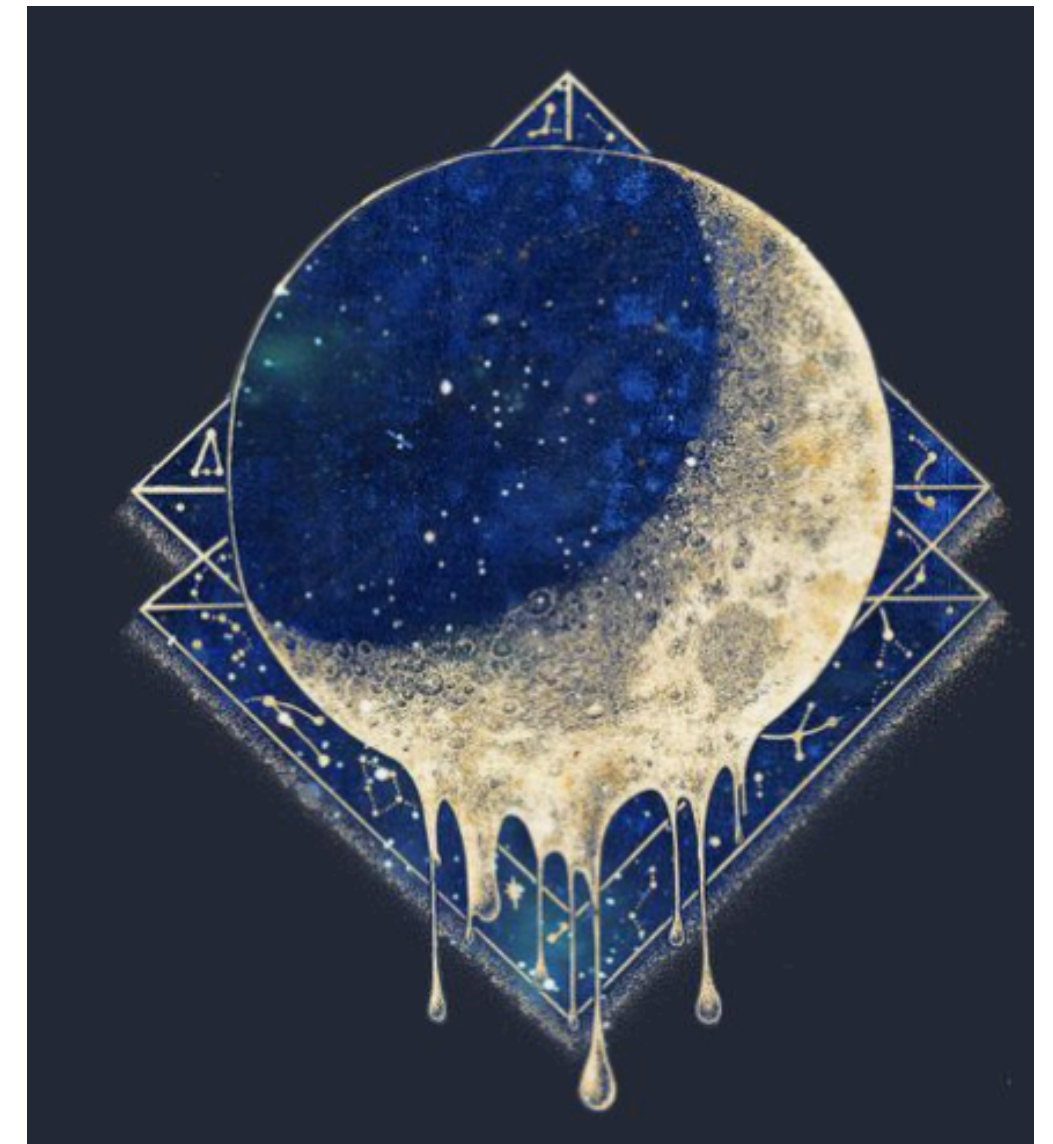




SEASON 2 & BEYOND

Season 2 will continue the storyline from Season 1's cliffhanger, bringing Val and Ethan uncomfortably close to the **cult that's been kidnapping young psychic women**. They team up with an *ancient order of Oracles* to hunt down the demon at the helm of the cult's insidious operation. With the help of the goddess from Season 1's ending, Ethan also learns more about **his purpose and why The Box won't leave him alone** (no matter how many times he tries to ditch it).

Each successive season will feature elements from distinct traditions, such as **Tibetan, Celtic, Nordic, Egyptian, and Biblical lore**, all driving the 'big bad' of each respective story arc. Ethan and Val face off against *increasingly dangerous adversaries unleashed by a supernatural force of evil that becomes more and more prominent* as the seasons go by. Choice upcoming nemeses include: a **necromancer** stealing archaeological relics to raise armies of the dead, a **deranged druid** bent on burning the sacred Veil between worlds on All Hallow's Eve, and **Himalayan demons** spreading a madness-inducing plague.



SERIES ARC



Ethan's commitment to cure death goes head-to-head with his newfound, unwanted role bringing justice to murdered souls. At the start of this confounding pilgrimage, he doesn't even believe in an afterlife. It takes several seasons for him to accept, then embrace that The Box is some kind of device functioning on a level his science has yet to understand or quantify. Using The Box as his latest object of experiment, he feverishly exploits the resources at Ananta and devours a vault of esoteric lore to pinpoint what happens between living and dying, desperate to stop the transition in its tracks. Along the way, he experiences one crisis of faith and reason after another until finally, he arrives at the very answer he's been seeking all along: a way to cheat death. But by the time the mysteries have revealed this secret to him, he has come to face and reconcile with his fears and decides to keep the knowledge hidden.

Val's meandering path in life finds clarity and focus when she joins forces with Ethan to follow The Box's call. She learns the value of work, purpose, and consequence, growing up and away from the ennui of her mostly vacuous former life of impulsive debauchery and reckless wanderlust. Far more eager and more willing to accept The Box's paranormal properties from the get-go than her skeptical partner Ethan, Val learns to trust her instincts and voice her truth. Her obsessive tendencies find a healthy channel in solving these disturbing cases, and her unconventional mind helps to crack them. She sees into places and ideas Ethan can't fathom, and the longer she answers The Box's bidding, the stronger she becomes. A valiant soldier on the side of light, Val fights to bring justice for the murdered and protect future victims from enduring the same fate. By the end of the show, she has stepped fully into her power.

Death is a river.

We all must cross.

IMPETUS

Who isn't afraid of death? Few and far between us. Ethan's particular hatred of mortality—the end of what is known, the extinguishing of an ego's bright flame of Self—has dictated his whole life. This is a story about his **liberation**, one that I feel compelled to tell because of my own evolving relationship with what lies beyond. DEAD SHALL DANCE marries years of academic study in **Ethics, Classics, and Theology at Harvard, Dartmouth, and Yale** with a lifelong passion for **Science and Futurism**. It also gives me the chance to construct a bridge across the unfortunate divide between **materialism** and **mysticism** through the character of Ethan. His abusive upbringing at the hands of dogmatically religious parents catapulted him towards rigorous rationalism. What Ethan has yet to realize is that religious and scientific institutionalism are two poles along a single spectrum and that an entirely different way of being in the world exists. It's a way of being that The Box will usher him into—and he'll be in good company with the likes of **Sir Isaac Newton** and **Leonardo da Vinci**, who embraced the material and the mystical alike. Through Ethan's quest, we learn that science and spirituality need not be foes. We have but to pause to witness miracles: breath, cellular mitosis, the great animating principle that moves atoms and stars in their ceaseless celestial ballet, that excites energy into matter, that creates patterns and sequences governing the shape of leaf, shell, and human heart. Nature's hidden code lives within us, revealing itself to ready eyes.

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