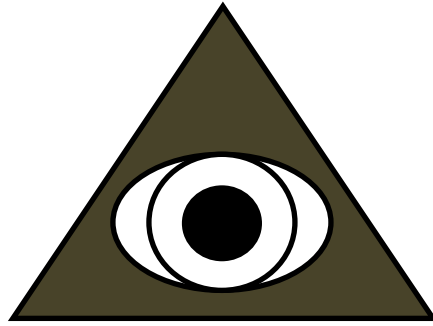


CHANGELING

Book Two of the Shrines Trilogy
Book Five of the Nexus



Paul D. E. Mitchell

**“We all have a fear of the unknown - what one does
with that fear will make all the difference
in the world.”- *Lillian Russell***

**Copyright © Paul D. E. Mitchell
www.pdemitchell.com
December 2010**

Wuggles Publishing,
Clydach, Swansea, South Wales,
The Centre of Creation

www.wugglespublishing.co.uk
for books by Chris Thomas and others



ISBN 978-1-904043-XXXX

The right of Paul D. E. Mitchell to be identified as the author of this book has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

CHANGELING



Cold Phoenix

“There is only one absolute: the Design - wherein all forms struggle for mastery and the lion lies down with the lamb - in order to devour it...”

– Brother Vigil Teachings p230 verses v-vi

Graham and Hannah Lewis were walking hand-in-hand along the Red Wives’ Ridge Path enjoying the cool morning air beneath the boughs of the great birches, alders and oaks that dominated the lower reaches of the ancient woods of Coed-y-Brenin that stretched unbroken along the western side of the valley from the Vale up to the sloping fields of Cithis Farm.

Their daughter, Gemma, was mooching along beside them with her hands thrust into her jeans pockets, chewing at her lower lip, deep in thought and kicking idly at a stone now and again. She had on her mother’s jade earrings, a new long-sleeved T-shirt that bared her shoulders and a tiki at her throat - a greenstone carved in the shape of a foetus, mounted on a slim black necklace in memory of the New Zealander, Ross White, who had died selflessly protecting her in Digwell Street two years ago.

She touched the tiki in silent gratitude for without Ross, she knew she would not be here and, out of all the painful lessons she’d learnt over the years, his death had been the most poignant and powerful. His sacrifice had given her the strength to accept her destiny and she would *not* let him down.

Graham exhaled slowly as he studied his brooding daughter: at fourteen she was definitely growing up fast to become a beautiful... a beautiful young woman... or a beautiful young *what* exactly?

She huffed loudly as she ‘took’ his thoughts and kicked savagely at another stone sending it tumbling through the air. She raised her hand and the stone halted in mid-flight then flew back into her palm where she studied it intently. “You know what I am, Dad. The Design left me with no choice but to become Ormuzd and nothing can change that. The House want me as their Prophet; Charren wants me to work for him and half the world’s clerics and politicians all want me *dead*.”

“Jimmy and Elinor have it right,” she sighed and opened her hand to reveal the stone. “They think I should just be Gemma Bethan Lewis again but I can never be a normal girl, that’s for sure – and I’m sorry, Dad, I don’t want to be.”

The stone rose slowly into the air and began to glow until it was incandescent and her parents stopped to watch transfixed still hand-in-hand. The two House guards and the armed Department agent who were following the little family at a respectful distance also halted and took a step back. The brilliant glow faded and a small, exquisitely-faceted, crystalline sphere descended slowly back into her palm. She idly tossed it into the air as they resumed their walk, followed by their three bodyguards. “Ugh! Their minds,” she shuddered. “You’re my biggest problem, Mum. You’ll never forgive me for accepting Zhara’s burden, will you?” she noted sadly. “And you still haven’t forgiven me for what I did to Tamsin two years ago - not really, not deep down in your heart.”

Hannah pursed her lips and let go of her husband’s hand to stand in front of Gemma, drape her arms about her daughter’s shoulders and look her straight in the eye. “You hurt every one of us and that takes years to heal and to forgive,” she said candidly. “But you paid a heavy price - I thought I’d lost you in Digwell Street, Gem, and I don’t need to be a mind-reader to know that you miss Tamsin, Zhara and your Uncle Thomas. We *all* miss them like hell but whatever you decide to *do* and whoever you decide to *be*, your father and I will be always there for you. You know we love you from the bottom of our hearts – we can’t lie to you!”

Gemma found herself in a crushing embrace which she half-heartedly tried to break free of. “Oof! I love you too! Ow! Hey! Get off me, Mum, I can’t breathe!” she protested playfully, filling Hannah’s heart with joy and relief. “Stop it! You’re showing me up in front of all the *normals!*”

“See, cariad?” Hannah laughed gently, rubbing noses with her grinning daughter. “Jimmy and Elinor are right: Gemma Bethan Lewis *is* inside this beautiful goddess!”

“At least you’re not calling me *poppet* anymore,” Gemma teased. “God, I used to hate that! Cariad you picked up from Grammy and I can handle that but then you started poppeting me out of the blue again. It got *really* annoying - especially when I was in hospital – it was *so* embarrassing.”

“But I’m your *mother!*” Hannah pouted in mock hurt, taking out a handkerchief and pretending that her daughter had a smudge on her face that needed wiping. “Now hold still, will you?”

Graham savoured that rare family moment as mother and daughter bickered gently and dodged around him as they walked

on. He gazed about the woods and filled his senses with the scent, sight and sound of growing things. Through the trees, he could glimpse the sunlight glinting upon the huge bronze statue of his brother at Cath Palug, where it stood with its arms outstretched, the right hand pointing imperiously towards the Brenin and the left hand pointing towards the Church of Saint Madoc's, the wellspring of the House, on the other side of the valley.

He could still feel the presence of his brother in his heart for where there should have been a chasm of grief, there remained a cathedral of joy because Thomas had not ascended but *transcended* – becoming part of everyone, everywhere and *everywhen*.

Tamsin, however, had been a different matter: her mutilated and malformed body had rested in Bridewell's premises on Digwell Street. She'd been guarded by four House members and two Department agents who had frustrated numerous morbid attempts to snatch her corpse until that fateful Sunday two years ago when Siobhan's visions had played them false...

He started a little as Gemma grabbed his hand and that familiar arcane light glittered briefly in her pupils. "Don't think that, Dad," she implored him, tears welling in her eyes. "Siobhan still tortures herself for that one mistake and it was me that made Tamsin go crazy not her... *Dad!*" she shrieked in momentary panic.

For a second, she was *flying*. Her father had tossed her a good five metres into the air with very little effort and caught her again in his immeasurably powerful arms. She had been taken completely by surprise and he grinned hugely at her bemusement. "We were talking to Drew the other day," he explained smugly. "And he showed me how their latest Alpha Seven protocols worked. Boy, are we going to need them now you're a telepathic teenager and all those hormones are kicking in!"

He lowered her to the ground but she still clung tightly to him even though it was like hugging a tree trunk. "That's out of my system, Dad! I was so immature back then - I love you too much to ever do that again," she said meaningfully, tossing the faultless faceted crystal sphere over her shoulder into the undergrowth.

She knew that one of the House guards would inevitably scramble through the brambles to retrieve it so that he could proudly display another proof of the Power of the Prophets at his next Circle meeting. A vengeful ember of the old Gemma hoped that he would scratch his hands badly in the process.

Graham cupped her chin in his massive right hand and tilted her head up to look her in the eye. "I love you too, Gem," he said, before pointing up towards Cath Palug. "Let's see how many pilgrims are rubbing shoulders with the Domain today!"

They emerged into the roughly circular clearing which was dominated by the massive bronze statue of Thomas Lewis and the peculiar rock formation that gave Cath Palug its name. "Myrfyr told me last week that they still can't decide whether the shape is natural or not," Hannah murmured as she studied the vague outline of the giant cat with one paw raised as if to strike. "He believes it was carved into the rock thousands of years ago."

"Who cares?" Gemma shrugged. "It's impressive but not as impressive as Uncle Thomas's statue! Zhara never let on who made it," she said, shielding her eyes from the reflected glare. "And look: it still hasn't weathered at all," she noted proudly. "There's not even a bird dropping on it!"

The three bodyguards were not far behind then but the Department agent had drawn his gun, unnerved by the strange supra-energy that permeated the entire area. On the benches around the edge of the clearing and all around the great feet of the statue were strewn cards, tributes and prayers from the pilgrims and the curious but only the hardest souls could bear to stay for more than a few minutes in prayer or contemplation. Hannah was greatly relieved to find that the normally-busy clearing was empty.

The grasses, trees and foliage in and around the clearing were growing malformed and unevenly adding to the eerie reputation of the place. As they gazed up at the statue they felt a sudden wrenching sensation and the sun shifted position for a moment with clouds briefly appearing in the clear blue sky. Gemma was alert instantly, searching the clearing and probing beyond with her mind, the stigmata flaring in front of her face as always.

The three bodyguards at the edge of the clearing reeled slightly as Hannah looked to her daughter who shrugged helplessly, reining in the arcane light show to reveal her eyes again. "Nothing there, Mum," she admitted, mystified. "It's from the Domain or above - I can't detect any source in this Creation but it's different to the Aberration - not so threatening and it's got a... a weird *temporal* flavour... oh, why do I *bother* trying to put it into words! English is so *useless*!" she fretted, rubbing at her forehead. "I could invent a new language but what would be the point?"

Graham sensed movement and whirled about to face the eastern edge of the clearing only to be hit in the chest by a large and very surprised-looking leopard and fall heavily onto his back with the animal's paws planted squarely upon his shoulders. Hannah instinctively grabbed Gemma's hand and stood in front of her protectively – an act which told Gemma far more about her mother's love for her than any telepathic merge ever could.

The great cat purred deep in its throat and there was an overbearing smell of musk as it lowered its powerful head to drag a rasping tongue along his bearded right cheek. "Tamsin?" he cried out in joy, as the animal continued to nuzzle at him, settling down upon his broad chest contentedly.

Gemma almost leapt into the air for joy. "Uncle Thomas!" she cried ecstatically. "That distortion *had* to be a temporal fold from the Domain! I knew it! He's brought Tamsin back!"

Hannah removed her jacket and placed it over the animal which had already begun to change into her beloved long-lost daughter. She looked about for the bodyguards but they were nowhere to be seen. "What's happened to them, Gem? Where the hell are they?" she demanded anxiously.

The yellow-white stigmata blazed briefly as Gemma searched for them. "Don't worry, Mum, they're fine," she assured her mother, smiling with relief. "They're now standing at the bar in the Brenin feeling awfully confused - although the agent is blaming Amy for their translocation!"

Graham laughed as he cuddled a perfectly normal Tamsin who was grinning impishly at him – only she was now two years older than when she had been shot in this very clearing! She frowned as she stared about Cath Palug and realised that she was dressed only her mother's jacket and there were star-like sparks glittering upon her skin and in her silky black hair. "What's going on, Dad?" she demanded, yawning. "Where are we?"

"I think we're exactly where we're supposed to be, Tams," he said contentedly as she placed her head upon his broad chest and closed her eyes. "But what happened to you?" he demanded as a dumbfounded Hannah gingerly placed a hand upon her daughter's head. "It's been two years!" There was no response for their exhausted, resurrected daughter was now deeply asleep.

He looked up at the statue and for a fleeting moment, he was sure he detected a smile upon that huge bronze face.

“Your situation has now improved immeasurably, gentlemen,” the barrister said magnanimously to the two former Oxford University postgraduates, indicating the airy meeting room on the top floor of the Oxfordshire police station. “My client, Mister Maeth, has restored all the accounts that were sequestered in your names two years ago and he has *personally* apologised to all the parties currently pursuing you. The appeal verdict this afternoon will be a mere formality, I can assure you.”

“Why the hell did your Maeth not support us during the original trial when we faced those House QCs with just this Mickey Mouse barrister defending us?” Samson Wiles, the larger of the two men, asked heatedly. “We’ve lost two stinking years of our lives as a result of all these retrials and appeals. We’ve had various mafias threatening to kill us and we’ve spent fourteen months in jail,” he shuddered. “Which was a nightmare, thanks for asking.”

“Even though we’re grateful for all the text books and web access you provided for us during our... incarceration,” Graham Best added, adjusting his green-rimmed glasses. “It’s no compensation for what we’ve suffered.”

“Mister Maeth was not in a position to intervene two years ago, gentlemen, at least not directly,” the barrister said patiently. “Even though he was an ardent admirer of your work. His researchers learnt a lot from your downfall and they’ve spent the last two years designing a novel innovation which he wants *you* to spearhead. He wanted you – how shall I put this delicately? - to reach a certain frame of mind before he made the offer.”

“What frame of mind *does* he want?” Best snapped irritably. “One where we have a permanent aversion to retrieving bars of soap in communal showers?”

“As we speak, your belongings and computers are being returned to your Longwall Street residence,” the barrister continued, unperturbed. “Mister Maeth took the liberty of purchasing the whole property from your former landlord and he’s donating it to you as a goodwill gesture.”

“That’s great but why does he want us exactly?” Wiles demanded, the distrust plain upon his broad face. “We know Maeth’s company portfolios from our past ha... incidental research. We know that he owns the Net-Crusader magazine and the websites that we used to contribute to but his interests also control the servers and the front companies that were used to drop us in the

kack - and the CIA and the mafias won't be bought off so easily after that much media exposure."

"Let us say that Mister Maeth has many *robust* contacts who have smoothed over the remaining difficulties," the barrister replied blandly. "He is also extremely wealthy. He was most impressed with your Gematria-virus assault on the Book of All Faith and wishes to offer you permanent employment in his new hi-tech venture, Magnum Libris."

"That just means Big Book in Latin," Best protested but then cheered up immediately as the inference became plain. "He's after the House just as we were," he approved warmly. "He wants to set up a rival Book! A Book of Zero Faith – something to neutralise the House's pet project. We get set free and then get paid to screw the House over, Sam! It's brilliant!"

"Hang about, Graham, don't get carried away," Wiles cautioned warily. "Isn't Maeth the Hebrew word for Death?"

"Correct," the barrister beamed. "I'm glad we managed to keep your brains from being addled by your incarceration! His name was originally Bavarian but his ancestors were virulent anti-Semites and the name change was made by the local Jewry in the late 1850s. His father was a great fan of Jakob Grimm which is why he named his son and heir Albert Edward Maeth in honour of Jakob's golem. I wouldn't discuss it with Mister Maeth because he is an exceedingly dangerous man with no detectable sense of humour. As you may know, he set up the Sharpe Business Foundation, a group of powerful and wealthy businessmen and politicians, who see the House as a major threat to free trade and global business."

"So who *is* Maeth anyway?" Wiles insisted. "There was little personal detail about him other than he had wealthy parents, a Cambridge economics and business first, an electronics business then he went into finance and banking - making the AEM Corporation the biggest investor in the world."

"A succinct précis," the barrister smiled then the smile faded. "What is he? Now there's a moot question. He's a keeper of secrets, a diviner of weaknesses, a demander of absolute loyalty," he murmured distantly. "He is without equal, gentlemen, and utterly without compunction - you would do well to remember that in your dealings with him."

"So you're saying he set us up in order to recruit us?" Best muttered despondently. "Man, the oldest trick in the book."

“No, my young friend, he did not,” the barrister insisted, closing his briefcase with a snap. “He does not need to ‘set people up’ as you put it. How can I explain this simply to you? His people suspect that the House exacted their revenge using a skilled and motivated set of programmers that any corporation would give their collective eye teeth for. He was incensed that AEMC servers and finance institutions were expertly hacked *simultaneously* during the operation against you. There was just enough hard evidence to finally enable him to convince the DPP that the transfers were malicious but not enough to mount a prosecution against the House given the vast legal resources at their disposal.”

“So he can’t prove it *was* the House then?” Wiles asked.

“No, but the attacks *did* originate from House servers,” the barrister smiled wanly. “I’m no computer-geek – is that still the right word? I’m told it was a highly-coordinated attack that broke through all the barriers and firewalls in both the companies and the banks holding the accounts *in micro-seconds*. He was not amused and the Foundation is concerned that the House is gearing up to declare cyber-war on their businesses.”

“Do you know the House turnover with three hundred million *reported* members is greater than most third world countries?” he continued after a thoughtful pause. “In less than two years, at present growth rates, it will exceed that of major European nations and their membership will be *double*. Some factor is driving their business decisions and investments with uncanny accuracy - they know *exactly* when to buy and sell. Do I need to elaborate why the Sharpe Foundation is becoming alarmed?”

“We understand. There’s only one question I have before we commit ourselves to this Magnum Libris project,” Wiles said on receiving a nod of silent approval from his friend and colleague.

“Oh and what’s that?” the barrister demanded, arching an enquiring eyebrow.

“Salary.”

“Ah, straight to the chase, Mister Wiles, I like that,” the barrister grinned approvingly. He flinched as a bird slammed into a window pane quickly followed by another and then another. He went to the window to discover three pigeons fluttering helplessly on the broad window ledge. “The UV must be peaking again,” he noted unsympathetically. “They appear to be badly disoriented. I do hope it’s not a bad omen, gentlemen - for your sakes.”

Emma Cardman inspected an immaculate fingernail minutely before turning impatiently back to the monitors. It had taken two long years to finally persuade Hermes to fund this new studio in Pontybrenin for just one celebrity but the ‘Siobhan O’Grady Show’ had the highest ratings for any psychic show on the planet. Her mother, Eileen, had rarely left her side for two years as she feared for the fragile sanity of the Irish-American star but the old fair-traveller’s constant fretting was driving Emma to distraction. She constantly had her work cut out to make sure Eileen did not wade into overly aggressive guests as she had done in the early shows - the novelty having worn off.

They were watching an interview with a private detective who had solicited Siobhan’s help in solving a missing person case. She’d given him a location that the Durham police had searched a number of times but the body had been in plain view all the time as both victim and murderer had worked in a dog food factory. It had been a relatively easy task to use the meat processing equipment on the night shift to can the remains of the victim while the rigid sterilising regimen took care of the traces. Although the cans had been stamped as ‘rejected’ for disposal, a macabre public fear remained that the nation’s pets had eaten human meat.

“She’s not looking after her health,” Eileen whispered, watching her elegant and passionate daughter tear the hapless gumshoe apart.

“She’s fine, Eileen,” Emma sighed. Under Agency direction, Siobhan was perfectly groomed: a slender woman with short moussed hair of intense natural red, her piercing green eyes boring through the unfortunate private detective and straight into his murky past. The man had expected to thank her for a job well done and get some free publicity but she was telling him how many clients he’d fleeced over the years including two elderly clients who had subsequently died from shock and shame.

Emma made an “S” signal to the security men and they were ready for the inevitable reaction of the outraged private detective. “You’re a witch!” he screamed as he was dragged away by the three burly men. “I should not have come to you! You’re a freak of fucking nature like that Gemma Lewis! I’ll see you in court if not in hell, *bitch...*” the rest of his furious tirade was lost as Siobhan shook her head sadly and looked straight into the camera.

“The Three Fates are demanding mistresses,” she informed her audience. “Only a fool sets his face against the Design but is it

foolish to want to bring evil to book? No! There are no secrets you can hide from me,” she smiled enigmatically. “If you want me to unlock your past or foresee your future then call this number on the bottom of your screen now. Good night and God bless.”

The genuine applause from the studio audience began before the prompter could ready his card and lasted for a full two minutes. Siobhan stayed seated and surveyed the audience as they put on their coats amidst the murmur of excited conversation. Her eyes widened as she stared at a couple in the front row. The woman was small and nervously smiling up at her tall distracted husband who had not clapped once - such was his disdain for psychic shows like this. “Jasmine Beade,” she shouted suddenly, stilling the audience and studio technicians alike. “Come here at once!”

Emma pulled the ultra-slim mike of her head-set down whilst holding the worried Eileen firmly by the arm. “Security,” she demanded. “Get back in the studio *now*! We have a hot-vision situation, repeat, a hot-vision situation. Studio! Camera! On your toes please!”

Jasmine raced forward and actually knelt before Siobhan to grasp her hands as her husband hovered on the edge of the studio floor, the annoyance and fury plain upon his face “What is it, Siobhan? What do you see?”

“Your death, sweetheart, if you go home with that animal,” she seethed, glaring at the bristling husband. “You hoped in your heart that I would read this, didn’t you? You wanted me to pull you out of the audience.”

The husband clenched his fists and strode forward but the security men were faster as the drama was recorded to be broadcast later as an ad-clip. Siobhan fixed him with a scowl as he was restrained. “You, you pig, will die six weeks from now in a bar brawl. No matter what you do, no matter where you go, that’s what will happen – there is no escape,” she snarled. “You’re a piece of worthless scum who has shed no light nor love for the whole thirty years of your pointless existence. Why the Design has tolerated you up to now, I do not know. All I do know is that you will not inflict any more pain or humiliation on helpless victims. *Now get out!*”

His inchoate cursing was soon lost as he was bodily hurled out onto the streets. Siobhan gently placed a hand upon the cheek of the kneeling woman who was babbling out a stream of teary thanks and heartfelt blessings.

“Shh, sweetheart,” Siobhan said soothingly. “You’ll stay with us tonight and tomorrow our staff will retrieve all your belongings. I’ll ask my friends in the House to lend you a flat until we get you back on your feet again.”

“Oh, Siobhan, no, don’t do it!” Eileen muttered, pulling against Emma’s steely grip. “It tears you apart!”

“Eileen!” Emma hissed angrily. “For God’s sake, you are really trying my patience today! Just wait a moment, will you?”

“Thank you,” Jasmine sobbed, burying her head in Siobhan’s lap. “Thank you so much.”

Emma blanched at the look of pain and loss on Siobhan’s face as she gently stroked Jasmine’s hair. The mikes hardly picked up her voice: “It’s in your nature, sweetheart, to seek out violent men. You should look to the House but you will not and five years from now your second husband will strangle you without warning in front of your two-year-old child. I won’t be there to save you *or* the child - I am so sorry.”

Jasmine looked up into the troubled psychic’s eyes and smiled. “I’ll try my best to pick a good partner,” she promised. “But, as you can see, I’m a terrible judge of character,” she laughed nervously. “But even if I fail, you’ve given me another five years of life I would not have had and I will treasure every moment you’ve given me but what about my child?” she demanded querulously. “I must be able to save him, surely?”

“Yes, but the child will be brought up by the same relatives who shaped your husband,” Siobhan sighed. “Your son will become a monster delighting in the torture and death of others. If he dies then eight innocent people live – *that’s* the price of prophecy.”

Emma had to physically haul Eileen back into the wings as Jasmine reached up to cup Siobhan’s face in her hands. “Oh, my God, I can see it in your eyes!” she sighed in wonder. “I promise you that I will treasure the short life of my child and make sure my five years mean something to somebody before the Design takes me,” she declared fiercely. “I think I’ve got a better deal than you, Siobhan, you poor thing! You are *not* responsible for the choices I make, I am! Yet you will carry the burden of what happens to me in your heart forever. Forgive me!”

Siobhan could not restrain a cry of sorrow and clutched Jasmine’s head to her breast, cradling the young woman as tears streamed down her cheeks.

The studio manager caught Emma's eye and made a gesture that the cameras were now fading to black. She removed her hand from the impatient Eileen's arm. "Now you can go to her," she said.

Her headset crackled into life as Eileen scurried off to comfort her distraught daughter. "Well done, Emma," the studio manager said. "She really turned it on for us today."

"No, Eric, she can't turn it *off* - that's the tragedy of it."

First Shepherd

"I'm finally free of this God-damned tent!" Brother Allbright sighed gratefully as the last of the sterilised plastic was packed away by the nurses. "Two years of staring at the thing almost made me give up the ghost," he said, levering himself up into a sitting position. "I owe you a debt of gratitude, Brother Brown," he told the consultant hovering by the bed. "Thank you."

"We've come a long way, First Shepherd," the consultant, formerly Colin Brown, agreed. "I still remember all those cups of vile coffee we drank three years ago when I became your first recruit to the House - the first of three hundred million," he added wistfully. "Incredible."

Allbright swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "Actually it was four years ago! Damn, I'm so *weak*," he grunted sourly. "I have so much to do! The House is at a crossroads and computer laptops are no substitute for the face-to-face of administration."

"Vigil has done an excellent job," Brown reminded him.

"Vigil was a wise choice. The first time I met that young man six years ago, I *knew* there was something about him. I made him my aide at that conference - 'the Signs and Portents of God' - by the Design, how *naive* that sounds now," he chuckled wryly.

"Okay, First Shepherd, it's time. Nurse James and I will take an arm each and we'll walk you down the corridor and back," Brown declared, motioning the male nurse to position himself on the other side of the emaciated cleric. "It will feel like a marathon - so take it slowly," he advised.

"I used to be a hundred and thirty kilos!" Allbright laughed self-deprecatingly as he stood up. "Now look at me - as the Beatles

song goes: I'm not half the man I used to be - I've had so many tucks, I feel like I've been stapled back together."

"The folds of skin became infected," Brown shrugged. "You still look like hell but your white blood cell count is finally normal again and there are no secondary cancers..."

"Yet," Allbright interrupted pessimistically as he took his first faltering steps for two years. "I've had enough *primaries* removed between you and the Blessed Prophet to fill a butcher's shop."

"Your long-term prospects aren't good," Brown admitted as he and James steadied him, "But to survive a poisoning by that amount of polonium is a miracle in itself. Luckily for you, the Prophet removed the last of it otherwise you would not be here."

"Bless the girl: she's visited me once a week ever since she got out of hospital," Allbright puffed as they began the once-impossible journey. "Damn, this is hard," he grimaced. "Without the physio I wouldn't even think about doing this! As soon as she was discharged she paid me a visit - what a burden Zhara placed upon her young shoulders! We talked and talked for hours at a time and I felt like I was her confessor. I've come to understand what she truly *is* and it scares me half to death to know that she has no idea of her limits. She could easily surpass her uncle."

"Yet Ferris thought he'd lost her two years ago," Brown noted, as they entered the main corridor of the isolation ward. "Yet the Vixen Group, IC Uno and others still run her down and now there's this Sharpe Foundation churning out these 'scientific' reports about her and the House. The hatred hasn't gone away."

"The press hatred *did* die down considerably," Nurse James disagreed. "While she was lying in the ICU she was just an injured kid not this genetic freak who'd vaporised two armoured personnel carriers and disarmed a hundred soldiers. All over the world, people saw her lying in a pool of red human blood and realised that she was just as fragile as the rest of us."

"You're obviously not of the House," Allbright smiled thinly. "Otherwise you would never use the f-word in my presence."

"Most here are House," James replied nonchalantly. "And many of them regard Digwell Street as the new Calvary. I agree with my local undertaker, Bridewell, when he says he won't believe in a Design that treats people like bugs in some cosmic petri dish, getting them to battle each other for supremacy. Nothing excuses war," he said vehemently, his face flushing. "*Nothing!*"

“I see you feel strongly about it,” Allbright wheezed, grateful for the distraction from the pain in his wasted muscles as he shuffled down the corridor. “And I respect that. The House does *not* condone war – we merely recognise it as a logical extension of evolution. War is a brutish business, my friend, but it is ever the harbinger of change. Technical advances have always been driven by the demand for stronger bows and sharper arrows.”

At the end of the corridor was the small reception area with an admin desk. Two heavily armed police officers and a female Department agent in bullet-proof vests were permanently stationed there in the light of nine attempts by Muslim and Christian extremists to assassinate the First Shepherd in his sickbed over the last two years. The nurse on the reception desk stood up respectfully as he entered and all four applauded him.

“Thanks,” he grinned. “I don’t know if I can make it back but I’ll have a go! Please pass on my gratitude to your superiors for the protection you’ve provided for me. It has been greatly appreciated, I can tell you.”

“You’re welcome, sir,” the female agent, a black woman with chiselled features and close-cropped hair strikingly silver-streaked, stated neutrally. “There is no way Charren or Stone would let any extremist get within striking distance on our watch.”

“I appreciate your help, nonetheless, thank you,” he said, clenching his right fist to his chest and bowing slightly before resuming his long journey back to bed.

“I don’t agree with your justification of war,” James said, resuming the discussion. He paused to steady the First Shepherd who was reeling from a powerful wave of nausea. “The last of the drugs are leaving your system,” he advised. “We have to increase your exercise regime gradually as your cardiovascular system has been badly compromised.”

Allbright took a deep breath and gazed up at the angular face of the clean-shaven nurse. “War is merely evolution writ large and bloody,” he gasped. “We aim to expand across the entire world. We’re already on a par with Catholicism and when we reach into every town and village, I promise you, war will finally cease.”

“But your own doctrine states that a peaceful Eden is a sterile Eden,” James protested as Allbright resumed his painful shuffling along the corridor. “So if you succeed in bringing peace to the world you’ll invalidate your own creed!”

“In theory - but what of it?” Allbright sighed. “We will focus on a far more important conflict – a conflict against the doom that awaits us from climate shift! Last week, Texas had eight level *six* tornados on the enhanced Fujita scale out of *one* storm system in *one* day and it isn’t even the storm season! Storm shelters are being ripped clean out of the ground. The jet streams are becoming more unstable and even Europe is feeling the effects.”

James pondered this for a moment and glanced at Brown who shrugged. “You may be right,” he conceded. “I did wonder why the House is advocating an enhanced space program. I agree we should move out into the solar system especially now that NASA thinks their latest Europa Ocean probe has detected microbial life under the ice. If it’s true then it proves that what we saw during the Transcending *was* the Truth and there is intelligent life on other worlds. We are not alone - even in this universe.”

“Are you comfortable with that?” Allbright prompted gently.

“Yes and no,” James said distantly. “During the Epiphany, I was visited on my ward by several of those soul-lights – one of which was this version of me trapped in a living hell by the Beast,” he said, tapping a temple. “I still have his memories in my head – and those of several other people. Four members of staff suffered nervous breakdowns as a result, you know, because this hospital was filled with them – they were attracted en masse to hospitals everywhere - which is why so many medical staff have joined the House! But even though I believe in planes, alien life and the existence of souls, I still won’t join the House. I think you’re suffocating all faith and choice on the planet with that Book of yours – it scares the hell out of me.”

“The Book is our most potent tool,” Brown interceded. “We had a few teething problems with it a few years ago but now it has accumulated all the knowledge and all theology on the planet into one data-base and it is already close to proving the existence of the Design and the Creator.”

“Like I said, it scares people!” James said, grasping Allbright’s arm to steady him again. “You gave it back those human voices last year and so many people now think the damn thing is *alive*. It talks to nearly a billion people *every day*. I’m convinced it’s self-aware so I’ve disabled my web cam. It has tentacles into too many sites for my liking - even the shopping web channels. My wife refuses to go on the net now as it keeps popping up.”

“It’s just a super-sophisticated encyclopaedia,” Allbright assured him. “It completed the bulk of the Great Synthesis eighteen months ago so we set it the task of the Great Revelation – finding the mathematical proof that the Creator really exists.”

“I’m familiar with the theory,” James acknowledged wearily. “Channel Six run regular debates on the principle. The algorithms it maps out will guide the House to religious supremacy but the Design will not allow a unified world so, against all mathematical logic, incidents will appear to thwart your plans for world domination and thus prove the existence of the Design and, by logical extension, the existence of the Creator.”

“That’s succinct,” Allbright acknowledged as they reached the door of the isolation room. “I was truly blessed in that shortly before the Epiphany, the Prophet Thomas showed me, Vigil, Steadfast and John the whole of our Creation. I *know* the Design and the Balance exist but a memory, however profound, is not proof. I want to *show* that the Creator *is* the Truth but I also want war to end and it will! The Book predicts that the coming climate shifts will trigger a long drawn out apocalypse unless we act now and only the House will be in a position to save the planet.”

“Hooray for the House,” James said cynically. “I’ll believe it when I see it. You see, I regard blind faith as a kind of mental illness and I *know* the House is in a dilemma because you can never achieve this Great Revelation as long as Siobhan O’Grady is alive! She’s the psychic spanner in your precious works and I’ve heard rumours that some of your people want her *dead*.”

“Ah, you *have* been talking to Bridewell,” Brown laughed wryly. “He’s a great fan of her show and he’s appeared on it a few times himself to spread that rumour. It’s not true and it’s galling that he remains eternally ungrateful to the House for keeping him in business,” he sighed.

“He didn’t *ask* to be labelled a Friend of the Prophet,” James retorted. “You’ve made him so dependent on House largesse that he’s been battling depression for several months now.”

“I went to a House funeral last week and he seemed fine to me!” Brown countered angrily as they escorted the First Shepherd to his bed. “He’s the consummate professional - the family couldn’t praise him enough!”

“That will do,” Allbright said testily as he sat down. “We cannot do otherwise because he is bound to the history of the Prophets

whether he likes it or not. If we did disown him then he would go bankrupt even if he relocated. All we can do for him is to ensure his livelihood and the livelihoods of his employees. Sister Lucy, his secretary, takes good care of him. She proved to be most resourceful during the Digwell Street incident!”

“I notice you don’t call it ‘The Fall of the Goddess’ as some people in the media do,” James pointed out.

Allbright raised an eyebrow up at the taciturn nurse. “We publicly and privately suppress any comparisons to the Crucifixion but we did think of calling it the Great Betrayal,” he said archly. “Given what that poor child has sacrificed to protect us all - not once but *three* times! We never found the monster who took her sister’s body but we will never give up the search!”

“I think you’d better lie down,” James insisted, taking the cleric’s pulse. “Before we have another tragedy. We’ll do this again this afternoon and once more in the evening. Within a month, we’ll have you training for a marathon,” he smiled, adjusting the pillows.

“I admire your optimism but my body tells me otherwise,” Allbright grinned weakly. “Brother Brown, tell Vigil to skip the two o’clock briefing – I’m too tired and I could do with some good news other than attacks on our Circles and food riots.”

Brown’s pager beeped and he picked up the phone on the table. He broke into an incredulous grin as he listened. “I’ll tell him, Second Shepherd,” he promised, putting the phone down.

“Gemma has just contacted Vigil with important news,” he reported excitedly. “You’re not going to believe this, First Shepherd, but the family has found Tamsin Lewis *alive* at Cath Palug! Apparently their guards were translocated to the Brenin as she appeared to them out of thin air. The Cardmans and George Tully are on their way over to handle the interviews.”

“Blessed be the Creator,” Allbright murmured gratefully, slumping back onto the pillows. “Thomas has reached through from the Transcending to save her! Why are you frowning, Nurse James?” he asked as the nurse tucked in the sheets. “This is surely another miracle in an age of miracles, is it not?”

“For the House maybe,” James replied thoughtfully. “But if this isn’t one of your ‘signs and portents’ then I don’t know what is.”

“No, Heather, you are *not* going out like that!” Jean was saying in despair, knowing full well that her headstrong 16-year-old daughter would completely ignore her. “You are *not* going out drinking in the daytime when you should be at school studying!”

“Oh, don’t be such an *alex*, Mum!” Heather snapped. “There’s only one exam left and I’ve completed all my assignments and there are no lessons this afternoon! Alicia and the boys want to meet up to talk about the band at the White Dragon then Alicia and I want to do a little mall-mausing around town. Don’t worry, we’re not saufing it but we do need to start writing and rehearsing the music right after the exams. You know the agency likes the demos we did at Easter but we can’t even agree on a name!”

“Try Tussy and the Schlampers,” Jean muttered darkly, parodying Heather’s Germanic slang. Teenagers had eagerly adopted it in the Valleys but Jean was relieved that it not spread much beyond that. The barb about tarts and prostitutes hit home but Heather just stuck her tongue out at her mother and swept regally out of the house. Jean despaired of the skin-tight black leather trousers, black T-shirt, the red sash around the waist and her Goth-black make-up, nails and hair but she had to admit that her daughter looked *stunning* and she trusted the two House Apprentices implicitly despite their terrible childhoods. Reluctantly, she heaved herself to her feet to answer a patterned tapping on the front door that she knew was her friend, Alice Bridewell.

The timid mousey-haired woman quickly seated herself at the kitchen table. “I passed Heather in the Crescent, but she wouldn’t stop - she was in such a hurry! Anyway, I think I might have found you a job, Jean,” she gushed. “There’s an admin job going in the Housing Association offices in the Welfare building. Twenty hours a week to start but it’s a beginning and it’ll get you an income independent of Mike. There’s no guarantee he’ll still be leader in the elections next year the way things are going.”

“Thanks, Alice. Mike is actually thinking of standing for the Assembly,” Jean said brightly as she switched on her treasured hi-tech coffee-machine. “But being a Friend of the Prophets is crimping his chances of getting elected anywhere where there isn’t a House presence. It’s getting him down.”

“Edmund is depressed as well,” Alice said gloomily. “Losing Tamsin’s body and the fact that nearly all of our clients are House makes him feel like we’re totally dependent on them.”

“He’s being kept busy,” Jean pointed out as she sat down. “House families from all over South Wales are coming to him because he’s a Friend of the Prophet but there are some local families who still come to him.”

“That’s only because their parents and grandparents have used Bridewell’s for generations. The only thing keeping him going are the staff who depend on us for their livelihoods,” Alice said with a forced cheerfulness. “But I’m getting worried about him – he’s so down all the time. He doesn’t go to the Otter with Mike these days and he won’t go drinking in town. Perhaps you can get Mike to take him out one evening and get him to unwind.”

“Oh, I’ll try but Mike is in a foul mood most days as well,” Jean replied in martyred tones. “That Colin Mevey is disrupting the council meetings and Mike’s had to go to court over that leaflet Mevey put out in his ward. Dealing with all the complaints being sent into the Government Ombudsman and the council’s Standards and Ethics Committee by Mevey’s cronies is tying him down. He’s had *seven* in the last month alone.”

“It’s counter-productive,” Alice smiled reassuringly. “Mike is starting to get a lot of sympathy in the Hadrians as that Citizens’ Party are attacking him there as well. They say it’s got really bad for House families over in Caerbrenin now that the comprehensive is run by the House as non-House kids have to go over Mynydd Ci to Saint David’s. There’s a lot of resentment building up and they reckon the CP could get two councillors elected there.”

“That would be awful,” Jean agreed. “The last time I went into town one of their leafleters recognised me. He was that skinhead that wears the blue suit – you know the one: with the ear-rings and those odd staring eyes...”

“Nobody knows his real name, they just calls him Dead-Eye round town,” Alice confided. “He’s the one who tried to stamp on Gemma in Digwell Street - I still can’t believe they let him off with community work! He’s lucky Joe Grainger was there otherwise her father would’ve snapped his neck. Ed thinks they’ve done a deal with the local Welsh Nationalist Party because they don’t seem to leaflet in wards where the WNP are standing.”

“Politics is so different here,” Jean agreed, tipping out some biscuits onto a plate. “We had a left-wing Labour government in Westminster but the international banks pulled out all the credit which is why all the mines and the factories were closing. The

Americans were trying to bring the government down but it backfired: the government got stronger and the red flag was being raised above the Town Halls in South Wales. It was quite exciting - apart from all the drugs and unemployment in Kingsbridge.”

“The miners were crushed here in nineteen eighty-four by a Tory government and the working class and the unions have never recovered,” Alice muttered angrily. “My Dad was on strike and he never forgave those miners who sold out. There’s a local man who scabbed when he was twenty and he’s *never* been allowed to set foot in the Miners’ Institute since then.”

“Our Kingsbridge had very strong unions too,” Jean smiled, getting up to pour out their lattes from the machine.

“You didn’t have any of these language extremists?” Alice wondered, gratefully accepting her coffee.

“We had it worse! Language terrorists bombed everywhere but because of the deaths they caused, they alienated everybody in the English-speaking areas,” Jean shrugged as she reseated herself. “Wales split into two during devolution: the Welsh-speaking North and West called itself Cymru and the English-speaking South and East called itself Wales. The bombs still went off in Wales but the month before we left there was retaliation car-bomb in Bangor that injured thirty people. No, I don’t miss that at all.”

“What happened to the red dragon?” Alice asked, fascinated.

“The Gogs, sorry, the northerners kept that but we adopted the Celtic gold cross on a black background which I thought was ugly, to be honest” Jean admitted with a grimace. “But at least the Assembly was trying to reopen the mines. Excuse me,” she added as her mobile rang. “It’s Edmund.”

She withdrew to the conservatory for a few moments but when she returned, she looked slightly dazed. “Well?” Alice demanded impatiently as her friend sat down. “Was it good news?”

“It was Lucy on his phone,” Jean said finally. She says Ed is in shock because Tamsin Lewis has just reappeared.”

“Oh, they’ve found the body, you mean?”

“No, that’s why Ed’s having a lie down in the office,” Jean said with a bemused half-smile. “Vigil rang him directly with the news and Lucy said it’s on all the channels - they’ve confirmed that she’s *alive!*” She pointed the remote at the small kitchen flat screen and switched it to the Channel Six News. “No wonder Lucy was almost beside herself – the House must be *loving* this!”

“She must’ve made a mistake!” Alice gasped. “I saw the body prepped for burial and there is no way on God’s Earth someone can come back from *that*.” She halted as Jean raised her eyebrows. “Present company excepted,” she added, smiling sheepishly. “She could be a crossover from another plane, I suppose.”

Jean raised the volume as Geoff Tyler, a lot fitter and slimmer of late, began his report with his trademark hint of breathlessness that kept his viewers on the edge of their seats. “Welcome to Channel Six ‘In The Field’. We have been invited by CCTA - the agency that looks after the interests of the Lewis family,” he said excitedly. “To attend an extraordinary press conference outside the Lewis family home here in Ayr Street. We have just been told that the family found Tamsin Lewis, alive and well, after she had shot and *killed* two years ago. You can see several mike stands and a PA system in readiness and, yes, I can see the door is opening... and there she is with her parents, Hannah and Graham Lewis...”

Alice squinted at the screen to study the nervously grinning child closely. “That’s Tamsin Lewis alright,” she gasped. “But she’s two years older and she looks so *thin*! How is she back from the dead and where’s she *been* all this time?”

Jean poured Alice another coffee. “I thought it was too quiet around here lately,” she grinned. “We’ve had all these paranormal events starting up lately and now *this*. God, I *love* living here!”

Vixen

“I really should ring Mike,” Edmund Bridewell mused aloud, staring up at the ceiling with his hands behind his head. “I suppose Jean will have told him about Tamsin by now but... ah, damn it all, I’ll give him a ring anyway - meet up with him in the Otter for lunch - we haven’t done that for *weeks*.”

“That’s a good idea, Mister Bridewell,” Lucy Walters, his loyal and attentive secretary, agreed neutrally as she waited patiently for her boss to swivel his lanky, elegant frame into a sitting position. It took a while as he was so tall he that he had stretched out the full length of the two leather sofas. “Would you like me to ring his office?” she enquired delicately.