

# FULCRUM

## The First Book of The Path Transcendent

(Second Edition)

### WEB SAMPLE CHAPTERS

© Paul D.E. Mitchell 2009

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## A Door Ajar

Gemma felt delightfully lethargic with her tummy close to bursting but she was still *hungry*. She had wanted to talk to her mother but Hannah had moved her own chair closer to Doctor Smith to talk to him in subdued and urgent tones. She focussed instead on the ‘colours’ she could ‘see’ around him and he *was* extraordinary: surrounded by a brilliant corona of whirling ‘pinks’, ‘oranges’ and bright ‘yellows’ generated by his questing intellect. His thoughts were darting, brilliant meteors that were difficult for her to ‘take’ – like spearing fish in a deep, fast stream.

Uncle Thomas’s ‘shadow’ was there at the edges of his aura, a poisonous smudge on a work of art to her, but it only served to make him appear more vibrant still and she knew that she could trust him.

She felt so grown-up as she sat there in a real pub with a soft drink in front of her but she hated the smell of tobacco smoke drifting in through the open doors at the rear of the lounge as it reminded her of Aunt Claire. She could hear the laughter of children playing outside and wondered whether her mother would let her go into the beer garden to find some new friends – not that she made friends easily. In the end, she decided it would be more fun to focus on various individuals in the lounge, and ‘eavesdrop’ on their spoken and unspoken conversations.

She didn’t do this very often as it depressed her. Compared to Doctor Smith and her Uncle Thomas, most auras she perceived were feeble glimmers and they all bore that curious ‘shadow’ to varying degrees. The three young men at the bar had auras that were almost shrouded in ‘darkness’ and, as she concentrated on them, she could hear the threatening ‘sounds’ she’d perceived at Ayr Street wrapped around their thoughts like ivy choking young saplings. It was deeply unpleasant and she quickly moved on to ‘take’ others in the lounge.

As usual, all grown-ups talked about and thought about were meals, clothes, work and dreary adult stuff to do with making babies then moaning about them once they were born. Their thoughts were slow, cumbersome things that ground with dull monotony to the same old conclusions. She was so grateful that her family and Doctor Smith were not *this* boring.

Uncle Thomas had tried to explain to her while he was unpacking his suitcase in his room, that people had a *right* to privacy and that many thoughts were better left alone but ‘flying’ and ‘taking’ were as natural to her as breathing so she had no more qualms about ‘taking’ somebody’s intimate thoughts than creeping downstairs to watch television on a Sunday morning while her parents were still in bed.

He'd caught her casually 'taking' his thoughts again and got very cross indeed, creating a wall in his mind that she couldn't 'sneak around', as he put it, no matter how hard she tried. Gemma told him that she saw nothing wrong with 'sneaking about' because she found it so easy - they had a bit of an argument about it until she promised faithfully to be a bit more discrete - while keeping her fingers crossed behind her back.

They'd discussed the 'darkness' that they could see in people's auras and he'd asked her lots of odd questions about theology and philosophy that she didn't quite understand. She told him that she'd always regarded the shadow as a natural phenomena, no more dangerous than the shadows cast by the sun and the moon. She had always believed it to be harmless - until it had manifested itself in Ayr Street, that is.

Then she'd sat down on the bed and poured out her heart to him about how lonely she'd been and how she'd met her very own 'angel' and how happy she was to find out that she was just like him. She'd given him a grateful hug at this point and tried to tell him more about her 'angel' but her mother had suddenly appeared and whisked her off down the corridor to their ensuite bathroom for a wash and a change of clothes.

Now that her mother and Doctor Smith knew her secret she felt very special indeed. She was wondering why she'd been so ravenous earlier as she munched idly on her packet of crisps when, unexpectedly, her thoughts turned to her dog, Spike, who had died two months ago. She also missed her twin cousins, Janice and Jay, and the beautiful, serene Amy who had showed her how to press flowers and knew all the fancy Latin names for them. Then she thought of her Grampy, lying helpless in his bed and choking on his last few ragged breaths.

To her dismay, tears welled up in her eyes and she sniffed loudly. Automatically, Hannah turned from her conversation with Doctor Smith, and clucked at her daughter soothingly: "What's the matter, Gem?"

"I miss Amy and Spike and Grampy!" she said miserably.

"Who's Spike?" queried Doctor Smith, finally putting down his pen and note-book. "Was he a family member?"

"No, Spike was her mongrel, Jimmy. We found several growths on him and we had to have him put him to sleep," Hannah explained gently, keeping a close eye on Gemma. "He was very old but he was a lovely dog and we miss him lots, don't we, Gems?"

Gemma nodded and forced a brave smile onto her face. She'd lost track of the conversation between her mother and Doctor Smith but she knew he was deeply curious about her and her uncle Thomas. When she'd made the noise in his head to tease him she had felt a tickling rush of images and funny symbols and all sorts of scientific concepts that were totally beyond her. She knew she would understand them in time for she shared his burning desire to

understand how everything works. Perhaps this was what people meant when they talked about ‘kindred spirits’.

He reminded her of the mad professor she’d seen on an old black-and-white science fiction movie a few nights ago but behind his modern red-rimmed glasses there were a pair of penetrating blue eyes that regarded her with a deep respect that pleased her immensely. She remembered some fragments from her ‘sneaking about’ in his mind and she smiled disarmingly. “Who’s Harriet?” she asked suddenly. “And what does ‘telekinetic’ mean, Doctor Smith? It’s not very clear in your mind.”

“Gemma! No!” Hannah chided sternly, realising immediately what her daughter was up to. She glared at Doctor Smith who had just snapped his mouth shut again and was scribbling frantically in his note-book. With a growing sense of desperation, she was about to snatch the note-book to see what he’d written when she was distracted by the entrance of Graham and Thomas into the lounge.

She was relieved to see her husband had managed to relax a little. He lifted Gemma effortlessly out of the chair and gave her a crushing hug which she tried vainly to return as he swung her round a few times. She might as well have tried to squeeze a tree. She rubbed her cheek where it had been squashed against her father’s broad, muscular chest as he gently dumped her back into her chair and handed back her bag of crisps with a theatrical flourish.

Thomas was silent and withdrawn, refusing to meet Hannah’s gaze. Instead, he stared at Doctor Smith with a look on his face that conveyed an awkward mixture of curiosity and resentment.

“Well, Doctor Smith, it’s nice to meet you at last! Hannah tells me how highly she regarded you at university,” Graham said as he enthusiastically pumped the academic’s hand in a pulverising handshake.

Doctor Smith gingerly extracted his hand from Graham’s paw and returned the smile wanly. “I’m afraid my adult life has been spent touting for research funding *not* toting bags of sand and cement,” he admitted ruefully, massaging his crushed fingers. “More’s the pity.”

“I’d like to stay and chat, Doctor Smith...” Graham apologised.

“Please! I’d prefer it if you called me Jimmy.”

Graham’s smile widened further in approval. “Okay, Jimmy it is. No problem,” he said warmly. “But you must excuse us for not staying. We’re off to visit our old stamping grounds as the local paper says that some friends of ours are playing there tonight. With everything that’s happened with Dad and the court and the problems with the undertakers, I need to get out for a beer with the old crew and chill out a little.”

Graham leant over to peck Hannah on the cheek. “Don’t let Gemma stay up too late, love!” he said delicately.

“Well, if you’re that worried, come back and put her to bed yourself!” she retorted waspishly, folding her arms. “I wouldn’t have minded you slipping out about ten for a quick one but going out this early is plain selfish! *I’d* like a night out once in a while!”

Graham managed to look both sheepish and hurt. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry, Han,” he apologised quickly. “Look, we’ll go out for a meal tomorrow evening if Claire or Thomas can mind the kids. I haven’t been out once since I got knifed and seeing Dad still there at the house today has been the last straw... you know... I... don’t want to stop here as...”

Hannah smiled warmly as he floundered for another excuse and she reached up and pulled his great head down to murmur something in his ear that made him redden even further and give her a quick kiss on the lips. Straightening up, he turned to Doctor Smith. “Hannah says you’re up here to help Thomas with his ‘medical problems’,” he said. “But, if you don’t mind, we’ll leave all that stuff for tomorrow, won’t we Thomas?”

Thomas did not respond but continued to silently regard Doctor Smith with a haunted, indecisive look in his eyes. Even though he’d shaved and changed into a clean white shirt and jeans, he looked haggard and in desperate need of sleep. Doctor Smith decided to take the initiative and rose out of his chair, extending his hand towards Thomas.

“It’s been a long time. I was sorry to hear about Kathryn and the access problems...” he began tentatively.

Thomas shook his hand briefly but a look of bitterness and pain clouded his features at the mention of his ex-wife’s name.

“We’ve just dropped Mam off at her friend’s house for the night and, with all due respect, Jimmy, I don’t feel like talking to you at the moment,” he said coldly. “We may have some time tomorrow, depending on what pans out with the undertakers, the chapel and the solicitors. We’ll talk then. Right now, Graham and I have a lot to catch up on. Look on the bright side: it’ll give the two of you plenty of time to compare notes on this little ‘phenomena’ of mine, won’t it, Hannah?”

The sharp and sarcastic tone caused Doctor Smith to subside with embarrassment back into his seat while Hannah bit her lower lip and said nothing.

Graham sensed the awkwardness of the situation and rubbed his hands with a vigorous pretence of enthusiasm. “That’s settled then. It can keep until tomorrow. Gemma, you be good for Mummy going to bed, won’t you?” he said brightly. Gemma happily nodded assent but her mouth was too full of crisps to speak.

“We’re off now, Jimmy. We have our mobiles and Hannah knows where the Non-Political Club is if anyone needs to contact us urgently. We’ll be back before the bar shuts so we might see you then.”

With a reassuring wave at Gemma he headed towards the door with Thomas close behind him. Hannah became curious as Thomas paused and peered anxiously around the room as if sensing something unpleasant before shaking his head and hurrying after Graham.

Doctor Smith was silent for a while, mentally cursing himself for his gaffe about Kathryn. Finally, he looked across at Hannah and sighed deeply. "I'm sorry, Hannah, that could have gone a lot better! Are you sure Thomas should go out drinking in his... condition?" he asked her, tapping his right index finger to his temple.

Hannah shrugged indifferently. "He'll be okay," she assured him. "He has no 'condition' as you put it but he has a lot to think about and Graham needs to drown his sorrows tonight. I just hope he doesn't get into any more trouble. He has so much bottled up with his father, the business, the house, the court cases and now he's worried to death about his brother, I couldn't bring myself to tell him *anything* about Gemma. I really need to think things through first so I got Thomas to promise me that he'd wouldn't say a word but he's worried that Graham will get upset when we do tell him. We had quite a row about it. Excuse me a moment."

She finished her whisky and went to the bar to get another double. Doctor Smith, with the previous beers warming his ears and beginning to blur his speech a little, politely refused another drink.

"There's no doubt about it, Hannah," he enthused when she had resettled herself into her chair. "Gemma has a high degree of empathy and she is clearly telepathic. She and Thomas could be the first scientifically documented telepaths in human history! She exceeds even the best of the far-seers that the American intelligence services used in the Cold War. They're nothing compared to her. She may even be telekinetic!"

Hannah's brow furrowed angrily whereas her daughter looked unbearably smug as she nibbled at her crisps. "Oh, get serious, Jimmy!" she snorted contemptuously. "Empathy I can handle, telepathy I just about deal with but *telekinesis*? Brain tissue cannot generate enough power to move even a single air molecule at any distance. You know that!"

Gemma's face brightened as the penny dropped. "Oh! *That's* what you mean by telekinesis!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Moving things *without* touching them!"

Doctor Smith turned to her, his pulse accelerating wildly. "Can you do that, Gemma?" he asked eagerly. Hannah raised a warning hand, but without even being aware of what he was doing, he brushed it aside and her eyes hardened dangerously.

Gemma concentrated hard for several minutes but to no avail. "I'm trying to move the bowl of peanuts. I can see it in my mind," she explained, panting heavily. "I'm 'pushing' against it but it's *stuck*."

She pushed harder this time but something gave way in the air around her like invisible plastic sheeting tearing and fluttering away in a gale. She opened her eyes but she was bitterly disappointed to find that the little bowl had not moved an inch. She was also angry that her mother was plainly relieved that she had failed.

Doctor Smith patted her hand sympathetically, restoring her composure somewhat. "Never mind, Gemma," he reassured her. "Your mother is right. It should be physically impossible to do it. But you already have a special gift because telepathy is an *incredible* talent. I don't know of anyone else like you in the whole world."

Gemma's mouth set in a thin line and she shook her head stubbornly. "I *know* I can move it, Doctor Smith," she disagreed vehemently. "I've moved things before. I *was* 'pushing' the bowl but something else happened when I did. Something *ripped* about us. If the *space* in this room wasn't so... so *weak* it would have moved, honest! The tear doesn't feel right, Mum! It doesn't feel good." She gripped Doctor's Smith's tightly as she began to feel profoundly frightened. "I think there's something on the other side," she whispered.

"Don't get upset," he said soothingly. "You may even grow out of this telepathic ability and everything will go back to normal." She caught the distinct edge in his voice and the thoughts flashing through his mind clearly showed that he really didn't want her to grow out of anything.

"I hope so too, Jimmy," Hannah interceded. "One Thomas in a family is more than enough! *Now* what's the matter Gem?"

Gemma was getting agitated and her grip tightened on Doctor Smith's hand so much that it was almost painful. "No, no, no, no, Mum! You aren't *listening!*" she wailed quietly. "I told you: I've torn a funny sort of *tear* all about us and I think I'd better put it back the way it was, *quickly!*"

She closed her eyes again her brows knit tightly in concentration. "I'm doing it!" she exclaimed with some relief. "It really is like pulling a door shut with your mind like Uncle Thomas said it was! It's easy but - OH!". She opened her eyes wide, startled and hysterical.

"What's the matter, Gems" Hannah inquired anxiously, leaning forward. A few people at nearby tables became curious and craned their necks to see what the commotion was all about.

Gemma was trembling and shivering with fear. "*Something really horrible pushed me away!*" she sobbed in terror. "It's coming through behind you, Doctor Smith!"

Feeling foolish but with his heart in his mouth, Doctor Smith leapt forward out of his chair. Conversation in the lounge faltered as every person present realised that something unusual was going on. The warmth in the long room vanished and the daylight outside flickered like a badly-serviced lamp leaving the air inside chilled, heavy and ominous.



A faint, writhing shadow, barely visible, coalesced around the chair which creaked and groaned as if some monstrous, invisible giant was sitting in it. The legs were driven upward through the seat of the chair as it crumpled down onto the carpeted flag-stone floor. A ghostly tendril snaked out towards Gemma but Hannah instinctively shielded her daughter. She hissed in agony as dozens of blisters formed where the grey mist had briefly touched her right forearm.

The tendril recoiled and small pin-points of faint green light appeared and began to move about within the wraith. A sense of enormous malice radiated from it with a physical force that Doctor Smith knew so well: it was the very same *presence* that had appeared in his lab five years ago. Someone dropped a glass that smashed unheeded and the three young men at the bar went as white as sheets, clutching at their heads and sinking helplessly to their knees.

The lights within the shadow coalesced into five pairs of intense yellow-green almond-shaped eyes that glared at them with an unearthly hatred. Gemma hid and whimpered behind her mother as Doctor Smith, feeling the tug of invisible forces plucking at his clothes and his hair, cursed the destruction of his camcorder.

Suddenly, the shadow darted forward to envelop Hannah who gasped in pain and rose away from Gemma, her feet hovering a clear three inches off the floor with her arms pinned to her sides. The pressure was enormous, she couldn't breathe and, as she kicked and struggled futilely against the unseen force, she knew that she was going to be crushed to death - and there was nothing she could do about it.

Gemma's reaction was instantaneous: the fear left her face and she gestured savagely at the darkness now engulfing her mother. The pressure vanished and Hannah dropped to the floor, gasping for breath as Doctor Smith leapt forward to prevent her toppling, half-senseless and disoriented, into the table and chairs.

With her face contorted with fury and her teeth bared, Gemma made complex motions with her hands and the wraith left Hannah to hover in front of them. It darkened and contracted into a vaguely humanoid shape as a bestial howl shivered across the room. The demonic, disembodied eyes splintered into motes of red and green that swirled rapidly within the broiling shadow as it bore down on Gemma but she raised her hand and it halted in mid-air about a metre from her face. Hannah was terrified but she was unable to move and, as she was clinging so tightly onto Doctor Smith, she prevented him from going to her daughter's aid as well.

The darkness contracted again as Gemma, with inarticulate growling noises sounding in her throat, continued to make those curious gestures with her hands. The eerie, silent contest lasted for what seemed an eternity until, like the cork from a bottle of profane champagne, the shadow shot sideways

through the front wall of the lounge and was gone. The brickwork crackled and fractured as it passed through and the surrounding plaster flowed inward towards the exit point and set again.

There was a faint sigh of in-rushing air and natural daylight streamed back into the lounge. The bar lights and electrical devices came noisily back to life but nobody spoke or moved for several minutes. Hannah finally got her breath back and sat down on a nearby chair with Doctor Smith's help but she was dismayed to discover that everybody in the lounge was staring at Gemma and most were shaking their heads in fear and consternation.

"Only a power surge, everyone," boomed Mrs Lloyd authoritatively from the bar. "There are storms forecast for today and plenty of lightning to go around, no doubt! That's what happened here. Lightening hit a power line somewhere. The bar pumps are all working again so there's no real damage done!"

There was a mixture of relief and disbelief at this explanation and as Mrs Lloyd attended to the three shaken young men at the bar, people slowly began to convince themselves that either their eyes or their drinks were playing tricks on them. The lounge began to buzz as most people returned to more mundane topics of conversation except for several groups from the forthcoming paranormal conference who were excitedly discussing the event in relation to the stones and other reported sightings of ghosts in the valley. Several delegates and locals were already closely examining the peculiar distortions in the front wall and the crushed chair but not one of them approached Hannah to see if they needed help.

A few people continued to stare, openly mystified and suspicious, at Gemma as she sat down in a chair next to her mother. She was oblivious to all the attention directed at her and was huddled up, a picture of misery. "I'm so sorry, Mum!" she moaned, with her head bowed. "It was my fault! I let that *horrible* monster get through!"

"Don't worry, Gem!" Hannah comforted her distraught daughter and held her hand. "I'm alright! Whatever it was, it's gone and it won't come back, I promise you." She was badly shaken and her ribs and arm ached dreadfully but she was determined not to show any pain for fear of upsetting Gemma further.

"That was the same *entity* that materialised five years ago, Hannah, I'm convinced of it," Doctor Smith declared, staring at Gemma with some concern. He looked at Hannah's forearm as she inspected the rapidly developing patches of blisters. "That looks serious! I've got to get you something for that. It may need bandaging."

Gemma remained scrunched up in her chair, gazing at her toes. "Can't you see what it *was*, Doctor Smith?" she said absently. "It's the same shadow that's haunted Uncle Thomas all these years. It is with us always, in here," she

said mysteriously, tapping her temple and her chest. "We all carry a little bit of that darkness inside us. I don't know why but we do. It got through the 'door' I opened by mistake and it hurt Mum!"

She slumped forward wearily, keeping her face hidden. "It's gone for now," she sighed contentedly and relaxed. "I made it go away but I'm *so* tired," she complained, yawning hugely.

Claire entered the lounge and having located Hannah she brought over a drink and several packets of nuts and crisps. She pulled up a straight-backed chair to the table and sat herself down at the table.

"Alicia's asleep at last," she announced with some relief. "God, was she ill! Too many chocolate biscuits. Tamsin's tucked in and snoring her little head off, bless her. The maid's promised to look in on them every ten minutes and keep the door locked so I can have half an hour at least down here. Still, it's too risky to leave them alone for long these days so I can't stay - lucky me, eh? Hello, you must be Doctor Smith. Hannah tells me you're up here to help our Thomas out."

She held out her hand and he shook it with a wan smile and a nod of acknowledgement but he said nothing. Claire looked suspiciously at them and realised that they were both distraught and dishevelled while Gemma was apparently sinking into an exhausted sleep.

"Why is everybody looking at us like we've got two heads?" she demanded, glancing irritably around the room. Her face fell as a dreadful suspicion dawned. "Was Thomas up to his tricks again?"

Hannah and Doctor Smith glanced at each other helplessly as Claire warmed to the theme. "I wondered what the frosty stares were all about," she snapped. "Brilliant! Just brilliant! Picking Dad's bloody funeral to go barking mad and setting off his damn ghosts again!". Muttering darkly, she fumbled in her handbag for her lighter and cigarettes.

Hannah winced and gingerly rubbed her arm and her sides. "You're right, Claire. You just missed all the fun in here. I'm lucky that Thomas's damned shadow *thing* - whatever it is - didn't break all my ribs! Look what it did to my arm and that chair over there!"

Claire was shocked and reached again for her handbag. "That looks awful, Hannah. If it was one of Thomas's little 'tricks' that got out of hand in here, I'll kill him. Those blisters could turn septic. I've got some calamine lotion in here and a small elastic bandage that should help."

She watched critically as Hannah quickly applied the lotion and the bandage to worst of the blisters on her forearm. Distracted, she leant forward and placed her cigarettes and lighter on the table but as soon as she took her hand away, they skipped smartly to one side and clattered off the edge of the table. "Now, how the hell did that happen!" she exclaimed, thoroughly perplexed.

Doctor Smith turned to study Gemma who was now sitting in her chair with her eyes closed and her knees drawn up to her chin. She was pretending to be asleep but he could see she was trying to hide a smirk. She half-opened her eyes to look at him and he was convinced that the whites of her eyes briefly *glowed* with a faint yellow light.

“See? Told you I could do it! Easy peasy!” she mumbled drowsily. She gave him a weary, lop-sided grin and closed her eyes again. Within seconds she was genuinely fast asleep surrounded by three adults in a silent tableau regarding her with awe and worry etched upon their faces.

Claire broke the silence, bending down to retrieve her cigarettes and lighter. “Okay. We have a vanishing ring, Thomas *dreaming* again, a room full of people staring at us and my fags fly off the table on their own. Will one of you please tell me what the *hell* is going on?” she demanded.

Mrs Lloyd escorted the three dazed young men out of the front door and went back into the lounge to inspect the damage to the wall. She was about to storm over to Doctor Smith to demand an explanation but she was caught up in the breathless exclamations of customers and conference delegates. The affected area was indeed difficult to explain: a nearby picture and a light fitting had somehow partially liquefied and then solidified again and the distortions were all pointing to the spot where this ‘shadow’ had passed through.

She quickly discovered that they were all ringing their colleagues and friends to tell them about the ‘Brenin Poltergeist’ and urging them to come and visit. She immediately sensed the business potential and turned to stare thoughtfully at Hannah and Claire as they roused the girl that the witnesses were claiming had *confronted* and somehow exorcised the poltergeist. She could almost feel the money in her hands as she scanned the lounge which was *buzzing* with excitement. She smiled as people quickly moved out of the way as Claire and Doctor Smith escorted Hannah and her exhausted daughter out into the foyer.

She quickly followed them to the bottom of the stairs and saw the bandage to Hannah Lewis’s arm, confirming that she had been injured in the lounge by the hostile spirit. Doctor Smith assured her that they were okay but she stayed to watch them hastily ascend the stairs to their rooms. As soon as they were out of sight, she scurried into her office through the door behind the reception desk and rang a London number she knew by heart. After a few moments wait it was answered.

“Hello, George? What do you mean: *who* is it? It’s Elinor, *brother* dear!” she sniffed indignantly. “George! You like covering unusual stories in those rags of yours, don’t you? Well, something *very* odd has just happened here at the Brenin. You know that there’s that silly paranormal convention in town

starting on Thursday? Well, we've just had a *poltergeist* appear in the lounge in front of nearly fifty witnesses! Of course it might be worth a visit - *especially* if you could tie it in to the conference in one of your articles."

"Wait... look... just shut up for a moment and listen! You remember Gregory Lewis and his angels?" she continued breathlessly. "You used to make fun of him, before he caught hold of you, that is. Well, it seems there may be something to his stories after all. I'm convinced he's passed something on to his sons and maybe his grand-children too. You should have been here: the power went off and it went very cold then a shadow lifted one of the Lewis women clean off the floor before it shot through the front wall. No, I'm sorry, as far as I know, no-one managed to get a video of the event. Most people's mobiles stopped working apparently."

"I know it doesn't sound much over the phone but I've got a bar full of excited customers who can testify that it really happened. It makes a good excuse for you to come up as I haven't seen you for months. Good! I'll see you tonight, then. About ten. 'Bye, George.'"

She put down the phone and placed a hand upon a stack of booking forms. She considered her empty bedrooms upstairs and wondered whether a well-splashed bit of national tabloid nonsense might fill them. Maybe the council would put the poltergeist into one of their tourist brochures. She smiled at a photograph of her dead husband on the desk. "I've got a really good feeling about this, Stephen," she said. "Maybe this is the Godsend we prayed for that will finally save the Brenin."

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## **The Low Bridge**

The humid evening air had lost all the freshness of the afternoon's rain and during the short, brisk walk down the narrow alleys and steps from the Kingsway and onto the ancient stonework of the Low Bridge they had both become very hot indeed. Thomas was regretting wearing jeans and leant on the parapet wall to cool down a little. Graham folded his huge arms on his chest and gazed southwards down the valley and chewed at his lower lip thoughtfully.

Behind them cars swept to and fro over the bridge splashing through the puddles left on the road by the earlier flooding. The flood-waters had receded, leaving a car with dented body-work abandoned on the Old Town side. Although the river beneath the bridge was quickly subsiding, it still dominated the senses with its fretful, liquid roaring.

Thomas watched as the shadows from Y Graig, Mynd Gwelert and the ridges above the Old Town crept slowly across the river and the green Meanders, the river meadows that opened out south of the Low Bridge. He saw the flashes and glints of sunlight reflecting from the cars and vans speeding along main road which ran through Pontybrenin and on up to Cwm Crwys. He was savouring the peace of a perfect, balanced moment but it was ruined by Graham exhaling impatiently behind him and scratching at his beard which was itching in the prickly heat.

Thomas sighed and scanned southwards where he could just make out the shimmer of the southern vales where still boiled in the evening sun beneath the browns and coppers of the petrochemical smogs rising from nearby towns and cities. In the distant skies over the Southwest of England he could see the ominous anvils of approaching thunderstorms and as dusk flowed across the valley, the world seemed timeless and expectant.

This was truly home to him and he was moved to recite a local verse in a theatrical voice: "*It devours us alive, this cannibal town. Drinking our blood as red glasses of wine. It's roasting our souls in anthracite ovens and feeding our children to ravenous mines.*"

Graham was faintly startled. "I didn't know you wrote poetry that actually rhymed, Thomas!" he grinned disrespectfully. "Hey, you might even get it published some day."

Thomas laughed ironically: "Ha, bloody, ha. It's not mine. It's part of a framed poem hanging on the wall in my room at the Brenin. It's called 'The Black Cats of Pontybrenin' and it was written by Myrfyr Davies himself, no less. Probably a gift to Mrs Lloyd to clear his slate."

Graham grinned broadly, relieved to be discussing a relatively neutral subject. “Myrfyr Davies? I was definitely *not* one of his favourite pupils,” he recalled wistfully. “But what a shot with the board duster! He hit me every time without even looking! It was uncanny.”

“Ah, but he did get together with Mam about you,” Thomas reminded him. “They plotted like mad to get you interested in college. Mam told me that he actually drank your health in the staff room when you passed your exams and got accepted on the civil engineering course at Kingsbridge.”

“Did he hell!” Graham snorted disbelievingly. “He *hated* me!”

“He probably did,” Thomas agreed. “We were both charmless pains in the arse in school but whatever you thought of him then, he really did his best by us kids. With hindsight, I reckon he was the most *professional* man I have ever met in my whole life. He was the one who got me interested in philosophy and science. He gave me my first book on electronics and introduced me to Aristotle, Jung, Popper, Singh, Sartre, Kant, Hegel, Oppenheimer, Fermi, Curie, Einstein, Newton, Marx - he opened my eyes to them all. I owe him an apology or two myself.”

Leaning against the bridge wall, they turned and looked back up the west valley side which was now steeped in evening gloom. Their gaze swept up Black Dog Rise which climbed steeply up past the familiar streets of their childhood: Fairwells Road, the Kingsway, Baron’s Street, Ayr Street, the Cairn Terraces, North and South. The sun dipped behind Y Graig and the whole valley side was now silhouetted against a richly pastelled evening sky, painted with mare’s tail cirrus clouds heralding the approach of the storms brewing further south.

“Come on, Thomas. Let’s go!” Graham urged impatiently, checking his watch. “We promised Alan and the boys we’d be at the club by now to give them a hand with the gear.”

“Don’t worry! You know Alan’s concept of punctuality. He gives you a time and then adds an hour’s worth of drinking and eating to it,” Thomas assured him with a smile. “I love this place and this view is always worth a few moments. Do you know this is the first relaxation I’ve had in ages? Especially now that Hannah has invited that nuisance, Smith, up here.”

He hunched his shoulders and looked up past the corrugated futuristic workshops and supermarkets on the eastern side of the valley until his attention was caught by the infamous Top Estate. It’s original Alpine-inspired name had been systematically erased from every sign post in the area long ago. A distinct chill ran down his spine as he recognised, amongst the insanely snaking streets and roads, the squalid line of houses of Bute Terrace where the Sheppards lived.

He recalled how Paul Sheppard and his family had always been their bane when they were children. They had terrorised the Old Town streets at will

until Graham had almost single-handedly driven them back onto the Top Estate. As a result, Paul Sheppard hated Graham with a passion consisting of a potent brew of fear, jealousy and a stunned disbelief that someone had actually *dared* to stand up to the Sheppards after all these years. The resulting vendetta between the two families was almost legendary for its ferocity and bitterness.

Thomas remembered leaving the valley to escape the endless threats and animosities but Graham and their close friends had remained behind. They were unafraid of the Sheppards whom an exasperated local councillor had once dubbed the ‘ultimate family from Hades’ shortly before her dogs were killed by the poisoned meat thrown into her back garden. The feud only died out when Graham moved to another town to set up his business and the Sheppards went on to new distractions - such as drug dealing.

“God, to think that pile of shit up there won an international award!” Thomas mused aloud. “Full of dark little alleys for that perfect getaway. Concrete boxes designed by a sadist who ensured that your bedroom looked straight into your neighbour’s living room. I think Radburn and his disciples should have been *shot* for creating those monstrosities.”

“Do you remember what Dad told us about it when it was built,” Graham reminisced. “He told me that they deliberately moved in all the problem families from South Wales. There was a march to the Town Hall where they burned an effigy of the architect and pelted the town councillors with rotten eggs and tomatoes.”

“Knowing Dad, he probably brought the matches and the missiles!” Thomas laughed.

“Probably,” Graham agreed, smiling. “It was certainly Dad who found out that the architect had emigrated to France and arranged for all the photographs, cuttings and ashes to be posted on to him.”

Thomas straightened up from the bridge wall and stretched the knots and kinks out of his aching shoulder muscles. He felt much better to have at least one good memory of his father to set against all the less pleasant ones and he clapped a hand on his brother’s broad shoulder. As usual, his hand stung as it was like slapping warm marble.

“That’s more like it, Tom!” Graham grinned approvingly. “Now, if we’ve quite finished contemplating our navels, I’d like to get to the club because I’m absolutely *gagging* for a beer!”

Graham turned to stride away but was brought up short by a strangled cry from his brother. Thomas grimaced and clutched at his stomach, sliding stiffly down the wall while scrabbling vainly for support with his other hand. He sank slowly, agonisingly, down into a sitting position on the pavement with his back to the bridge wall. His face turned completely white and his chest



heaved in painful gasps and his body shook violently. He moaned and rocked forwards and backwards, clutching at his head and tearing at his hair.

Fearing that his brother was having a fit or a heart attack, Graham knelt down beside him only to be struck suddenly by an intense wave of cold air as he put his arm protectively around his brother's shoulders. Horrified, he recalled this same unearthly chill in a flashback to when Thomas was sixteen, only this time Thomas was wide awake and the freezing cold was much more intense.

He fought down a sudden intense desire to flee and leave his brother to his fate. A spiteful 'voice' in his mind pointed out that his brother had rarely bothered to help him over the years and had brought little joy or comfort to their mother, yet he was still her favourite. *'Go on,'* urged the voice: *'Leave him here: he's not worth the trouble. He wants your wife after all, and she wants him. They're both laughing at you behind your back. He comes to the house when you're away to screw her. Leave him'.*

"For God's sake, Thomas! What's happening?" he shrieked down at his brother who was battling for breath and baring his teeth in a feral snarl with the veins pulsing at his temples. Part of his mind calmly noted the cars passing by without stopping and his breath steaming in the ethereal cold while the other part fought off the 'voice' that snarled and wheedled at him *inside* his head. Was he going insane himself?

A vivid, powerful image of Hannah and Thomas making love and laughing at him in his own bed filled his soul but Graham rejected it utterly: it could never happen. A faint tendril withdrew from his head then something unseen shoved him hard in his broad chest making him rock backward on his heels, slashing and flailing at the air in front of him, before toppling to the pavement like a felled pine tree.

"Shall I get an ambulance, Thomas?" he asked helplessly, clouds of vapour streaming from his mouth as he struggled into a sitting position. Thomas laughed weakly: a strangled sob of noise racking from his throat as his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, robbing him of speech. Graham could see a dark shadow was coiled around Thomas and an eviscerating malevolence emanated from it. There were animal-like snarling noises all around him which were almost drowned out by splintering booms and thuds that shook the foundations of the old bridge. He noticed with amazement that the pools of water nearby were freezing over, the ice fracturing as it expanded.

A car skidded across some of the ice before righting itself and proceeding carefully over the bridge. Graham climbed to his feet and waved his arms frantically but he might as well have been invisible as the frightened driver accelerated past them.

"Bastard!" he bellowed futilely at the retreating tail-lights, brandishing his huge fists.

The sound of impacts continued to echo from beneath the bridge arches and the masonry shuddered. Graham glanced over the bridge wall and saw slabs of ice forming upstream. The fast flowing waters were carrying down large chunks and slamming them against the bridge supports and the banks. He pulled his hand away from the stonework rapidly as a line of hissing hoar-frost formed and advanced along the wall towards him.

Panic-stricken, he tried his mobile but he could not get a signal. He looked back at Thomas, then at the houses on Fairwells Road, agonising whether to run across to summon help or to stay by his stricken brother. Before he could move the hairs rose on the back of his neck and his shirt and arms were tugged at from all directions. Thomas was also getting to his feet and as he forced open his eyes, Graham could see stark terror in them but also a grim determination.

Thomas raised his right arm and held up his hand with the palm thrust outward in denial. "Enough!" he snarled, "Whoever you are or *whatever* you are, I know you now. I am finally *awake*. I can feel your hatreds and I know all your names. *Get thee hence!*".

He furrowed his brows in intense concentration, drawing in breath in great gulping gasps. Graham could not be sure but he could have sworn that the whites of Thomas's eyes were glowing an intense violet colour. Suddenly a white flash dazzled him and his eardrums popped as warm air rushed at him from all directions, dispersing the numbing cold. He blinked nervously about him and saw that the hoar frost was melting quickly yet he could still hear and feel the ice still grinding and jostling about in the river below but the menacing presence was *gone*.

Thomas staggered about, rubbing frantically at his eyes and Graham had to catch at his arm to prevent him from falling over again. At that exact moment, a battered old car of indeterminate colour turned right from Fairwells Road and skidded briefly on some ice before the driver crunched the gears and stopped on the opposite side of the bridge.

A stout, grey-haired man leaned amiably out of the window. He was immaculately dressed in a black suit and tie and saluted them sarcastically with a thick-fingered, tobacco-stained hand. "What's all this? Another Lewis who can't hold his fucking beer, then? Just like the old man! See? I'm in mourning too," he jeered, indicating his suit. "I was just going to pay my respects to your mother, but now I've met you two wankers, I don't think I'll bother!" he yelled and drove off, laughing raucously.

"And fuck you too, Dan Sheppard!" Graham roared at the receding car, raising the second finger of his right hand in insolent emphasis.

"What timing that family has!" Thomas laughed, suppressing a bout of coughing. "Ah! That's better, I think I can breathe again."

“What the hell *was* that shadow?” Graham demanded angrily. “I heard your damn ‘voices’ in my head! I haven’t seen anything like that since... since...”

“Since I was sixteen, you mean,” Thomas interrupted, rubbing at his throat. “I don’t consciously remember much of what happened then and you never told me much. You just went around witless for weeks!”

Graham looked uneasily at the flagstones. “I don’t like to remember as I lost control of my bowels when it first kicked off,” he admitted. “I am afraid of no man or no thing, Thomas. You know why?” he asked.

“No,” Thomas admitted frankly, massaging his arms. “I don’t.”

“Well, I was fifteen and already bigger and faster than you by a long way,” Graham stated flatly.

“I know! I still have the bruises!” Thomas pointed out ruefully.

“I never told you or Mam or Hannah but I saw that shadow then only it’s got a lot stronger now. Claire reckons she saw nothing in her room but plenty happened in *our* bedroom and the rest of the house while you were asleep, believe me. There were these freaky green eyes floating in the air and staring at me from all over the place. Wherever I turned a pair would pop open in front of my face - even when I hid under the blankets. Something happened to me that night. There was this weird blue light under the blanket which burned into my bones and my muscles and the eyes vanished. After that not even the Sheppards could frighten me. Nothing could - not even Dad going mental! The only thing I couldn’t handle was being in the same room as *you*.”

Despite his monstrous fatigue, Thomas was shocked by his brother’s admission but he was also intrigued as to what his strange ‘blue light’ could mean. He’d seen it in the ‘dream’ at Peddern’s office and possibly at Fomault Hall then Gemma had described her ‘angel’ to him as a ‘blue-white light’ and he was wondering if they were all connected when his train of thought was interrupted by the distant sound of breaking glass.

“You said you knew it’s *names* just before you got rid of it,” Graham pressed nervously. “What did you mean?”

It was Thomas’s turn to be reluctant to speak. “This time, I picked up these images and *feelings* from it while it was trying to break me just now. It had so much *hatred* in it but all the classic names were there: Beelzebub. Satan. Mephistopheles. I don’t need to spell out what it is we’re dealing with here.”

“Jesus, you can’t be serious! Where’s...?”

“The pitchfork and horns? The sulphur and brimstone? It’s religious crap, all of it. It’s evil and very intelligent: it was using religion *against* me,” said Thomas in disgust. “I’ve seen aspects of that thing all my life but oh, no, I always thought it was just poor old me going crazy. Now I know better. Since I was a kid I’ve always ‘seen’ parts of it as a ‘darkness’ wrapped about

people: a lot in some, a little in others. That ‘darkness’ is the trade-mark of our friend just now and even *you’ve* seen it. We carry its mark in all of us and now it’s through into this world it’s using that link to take physical shape. I’m beginning to suspect we may have been given a gift to stop this thing because we *defeated* it, Graham! Just the two of us!”

“Until I find out exactly what’s happening,” he winced, clutching at his side. “We’ll carry on as planned. My ribs are bruised but I’m okay and there’s nothing here or back at the Brenin we can do about it. It’s gone for now and I need time to think and then I’ve got to bring you up to speed. It’s ironic, Graham, that after finally meeting my nightmare face-to-face like that,” he laughed suddenly. “And beating it, all I want to do is drink beer and watch a rhythm and blues band!”

Graham shrugged his shoulders as they set off again. “Well, they do say the blues is the Devil’s music,” he joked nervously.

Dave Cullivan glanced again at his wrist watch and did a quick mental calculation. If he could finish painting this classroom by eight he could wash and change and still make it to the King’s Head by nine-thirty to enjoy a well-earned lager. He was sweating profusely as he painted the final coat of gloss onto the last of the metal window frames as a drop of perspiration fell off the end of his nose and plopped into the paint. He added a final lick to the frame and replaced the lid on the paint tin before briskly swirling the brushes in a jar of white spirits.

As he wiped the brushes clean with a rag, he gazed idly out of the classroom window to watch the evening sun beginning to dip behind Y Graig and Red Wives Ridge. He liked this part of the job where he could pause on sunny evenings like this to watch the cool twilight engulf the valley. The school holidays also meant that he had a welcome respite from the Top children who continually vandalised both this comprehensive school and the nearby primary school. Because of this problem, both caretakers had walkie-talkies and kept large, ferocious dogs. His Alsatian bitch, Bonnie, was in the back garden of his house and howling her head off.

He opened a window carefully after checking the paint had dried and peered down at the house. He could see Bonnie racing around in frantic circles and pausing to howl and bark in the direction of the Low Bridge. From this second-floor classroom, he could see most of the Old Town over the intervening railway embankment. His eyesight was excellent and by shielding his eyes against the glare of the setting sun, he saw that the river was still high and there were pools of water left on the roads. Despite a thorough search, he could not see any kids trying to get into the school grounds over the embankment and he was at a loss to explain why Bonnie was barking and yelping so hysterically.

A faint movement caught his attention. He was positive that he could see a flickering *shadow*, swirling and deepening above the Low Bridge. He blinked several times then focused again, convinced that his eyes were playing tricks on him. His heart missed a beat as the shadow suddenly accelerated away from the bridge and came rapidly towards him at an unbelievable speed. His body reacted even though his mind did not and he instinctively threw himself flat on the floor below the window sill. He had a micro-second to feel slightly foolish before every pane of glass in the classroom shattered under a tremendous, deafening impact that bent the freshly-painted metal frames inward like so much plasticine.

He gathered enough courage to open his eyes and was incredulous to see that not a single piece of glass had landed on the floor. Instead, the shards were encased in shadow and grinding across the opposite wall in arcane patterns scoring the paint and plaster down to the brickwork in places. The light of the sun failed to enter into the class room and inside the shadow, frenzied green sparks of light were darting about as if searching for something. A wave of intense evil engulfed him and froze the very marrow in his bones, leaving him too terrified to even blink.

A strange blue-white light suddenly blazed at the edges of the shadow and his senses were assaulted by a sulphurous, charnel-house reek and a deep insidious murmur as if a million voices were groaning in hellish torment and frustration. There was a blood-red implosion and the shadow was gone leaving the air to rush back in through the twisted window frames making him wince as his eardrums popped.

The unsupported glass fragments fell from the wall in a tinkling cascade. He could hear in the deathly hush that Bonnie had stopped barking and he pulled out the small crucifix that he kept on a gold chain around his neck and kissed it fervently. In barely-contained panic, he crawled slowly around the edges of the wrecked classroom towards the door before springing to his feet and bolting down the corridors, pausing only to slam and lock the doors behind him as he went.

Paul Sheppard slouched in putrid arm-chair in the through-lounge at number sixty-three Bute Terrace: a semi-detached council house in the small tangled network of roads at the western end of the Top Estate. Numbers sixty-one and sixty-five were boarded up as they had been for over five years as no-one in their right mind would live next door to a Sheppard. Through the grimy back window, he could just make out his old comprehensive school between the blocks of houses on Pwllmelin Road below that backed onto his garden.

His brooding gaze lingered on the dark lines of miner's houses he could see on the valley-side opposite that seemed to mock him. The front windows, looking out onto Bute Terrace itself, were partly obscured by filthy lace curtains that had once been beautiful. Even the state-of-the-art flat-screen

television he was watching was covered in grease, vomit and beer stains as was the wall behind it.

There were dozens of stolen video players stacked in a corner of the dining area at the back of the through-lounge and apart from the sofa, two arm-chairs and a chipped dining table and four chairs, two of which were broken, there was no other furniture apart from a set of stolen weights and bars propped up in yet another unkempt corner. The yellowing wallpaper and grubby carpet had once tastefully matched the furniture but now they stank of stale food, beer, urine and the pervasive stench of the tom-cats that had the run of the house. There were several small waste-paper bins but these were all over-flowing with take-away cartons and cans adding to the mess on the carpet which was littered with brimming ash-trays, cat faeces, torn newspapers and cigarette stubs.

He was watching a tacky game show with a can of strong lager perched on his protruding stomach. The beer-belly was deceptive as the rest of his body was comprised of hard muscle and heavy bone and he filled the arm-chair he was sprawling in easily. He was dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt that sported the new Klan emblem of three white letter Ks arranged back-to-back in a triangle shape. The design was currently very popular on the 'white trash' estates of South Wales.

Despite irregular and frantic exercise he was still very strong and fast on his feet but he was acutely aware of his increasing lack of stamina. He'd never worked since leaving school and had only avoided prison by his native cunning, savagery and sheer lack of personal ambition. Darkly handsome and brooding, he had always possessed a string of girl-friends but every flicker of romance that blossomed he speedily destroyed with his unpredictable violence and self-loathing.

His latest 'bitch' was a pretty 19-year-old receptionist from Beaumaris Close. He pictured her naked in his mind but the image does not arouse him at all. He sipped at his can speculatively: perhaps that's why he had started battering her like all the other *sluts*.

He inspected the words tattooed on the knuckles of both hands: "HATE" on the left hand and "HATE" on the right hand. He lazily flexed one fist in front of him and recalled the 'fun' last night with Jillsy Stoker and he licked his lips which were dry with excitement. He enjoyed *hitting* women more than making love which was always brutal and secondary. He hated his mother for running away. He hated still wanting to sleep with women. He despised all those *sluts* for wanting to stay with him. Hatred is all he has left, all he has ever known, and it makes him *powerful*.

The clock on the wall read a quarter to eight. He reckoned it was now time to go to the Pixie to see if Jillsy had forgiven him, not that he gave a shit whether she had or not. An old pain seared behind his eyes and an unholy

rage rose wild and uncontrollable within him. His breath whistled out through his clenched teeth and he screwed his eyes shut as each wave of pain ripped through his body filling every corner of his being with a black ecstasy. "Cellar Angel! You're back!" he growled, half in welcome, half in defiance. "But you'll never take *me* again!"

Each wave of sweet agony is accompanied by a burst of white noise and bizarre patterns fluttering across the television screen distorting the picture. The pain ceased abruptly dropping him back into his chair as five green sparks erupted from the back of the television set and out of the corner of his eye he saw the displays on the stolen disc players were flickering wildly. The hairs on his arms were stiff with static electricity and he stared open-mouthed at the television set. It was switching through a hundred channels a minute and strange white glowing lines were forming and slowly peeling away from the screen surface to form a pentagram which hovered, pulsing, in the air.

Without warning, the pentagram shot the length of the through-lounge and disappeared into the pile of slim players which twisted and jumped backward into the wall with a thunderous report shattering a fanlight window. He howled and clapped his hands to his ears as the five glowing green lights hung menacingly above the television.

His eyes bulging with rage, he picked up a paper-back novel from the side of the chair and hurled it at the hovering lights. There was a sizzling sound as the book connected and they vanished. The book bounced back off the wall to hit the floor in front of the television and Paul retrieved it gingerly and examined it. The trashy black magic novel now had three smoking holes burnt completely through it from cover to cover. He thumbed through the damaged pages uncomprehendingly before suddenly remembering the video players.

He bellowed a string of sulphurous curses and rushed over to the corner to inspect the damage. All the machines had melted together and were somehow fused into the wall and floor. The casings were white hot in places and he doused them with the dregs of his beer and furiously hurled the empty can at the wall. Muttering a stream of foul oaths he threw open a front window to look up at the sky.

"Just my bastard luck!" he cursed up at the impassive, cirrus-streaked blue dome above him. "I could have got fifty quid each for that lot, easy, and they get struck by lightning! Why me? Why now?"

He raced to the other end of the through-lounge and opened another window to gaze up at the sky from that side of the house. Puzzled, he went outside into the back garden but he could not find a single cloud above him in the sweltering evening sky other than the hooked wisps of cirrus. He saw the distant storm clouds gathering down south and clinging to that unlikely explanation, he re-entered the house to put on his battered leather jacket in defiance of the humid heat and strode purposefully towards the Pixie, one of

the two remaining estate pubs, with a dozen packets of white powder in his jeans pocket.

His powerful arms swinging and his face a twisted mask of fury, the blood pounded through his veins and the 'voices' ringing in his head were full of the rich and brutal harmonies of extreme violence.

On the other side of the valley, Heath Rise climbed up from Fairwells Road and snaked up into the evening glooms past the terraces of the Old Town. Up it straggled, past the shouts of the children still playing in Donald Street, Lewis Street and Ayr Street. Up, past the newsagents on the corner of Blackboys Road and on up past Cairn Terrace and Mountain View. Here, it joined onto the Heath Road, a steep winding lane that climbed through the Forestry Commission plantations and the common pastures of Mynd Gwelert and down into the northern end of the tree-shrouded village of Caerbrenin.

Before it reached the National Trust heaths, the lane rounded Cwmciffach, a large dell and picnic area, high above Cairn Terrace and its distinctive Chapel whose rooftop could be seen from this vantage point through the dusk gathering beneath the ranks of oak and beech.

Set into the dell were five standing stones each placed about three metres apart from its neighbour on a gently sloping area of grass. One squat grey stone, known as the Thumb Stone, was set further up the incline than its four thinner and taller companions. Little children were told that they were part of the hand of a rock-giant buried under the dell but the council guide soberly listed them as the Cwmciffach Monument. The locals, however, disrespectfully referred to them as the Pimp's Fingers: an excruciating pun on the Welsh word for the number *five*.

Wood pigeons cooed in the scattered trees below the stones but fell abruptly silent leaving a morbid, heavy stillness about the monument. A titanic but invisible force bore down as though the very air itself weighed many tens of thousands of tons. The great stones creaked as they were driven several inches into the earth and an acrid, hot wind flowed outward from the area. Then, as soon as it had come, that terrible pressure ceased and the evening bird song resumed.

All five stones glowed a dull red for a few seconds before cooling quickly. Between the stones, the grass had been mercilessly crushed into the thin earth and was already turning black. The mosses and lichens that had clung tenaciously to the stones for so many years drifted in the warm evening breeze as a fine grey ash.



## Idle Hands

Graham and Thomas walked slowly along the wide pavements of City Road, the main valley road running through the commercial heart of Pontybrenin. To their left they could hear the river hidden behind the workshops and sale rooms and to their right they could see the shadow of the western valley ridges and mountains crawling slowly up the walls of the imposing but shabby Victorian houses of the Merchants district.

Thomas took his time, for he was exhausted and was trying to come to terms with what happened on the bridge. His mind reeled at the implications and he briefly regretted leaving his sedatives at the Brenin. He desperately wanted to ring Peddern's office to find out whether Peddern or his client, George, had survived the possession. He also wanted to go straight to the family chapel at Capel Cairn and tell the fiery Reverend Gates to his face that he had absolutely no idea of what he was talking about in his passionate 'hell and damnation' sermons.

Only a short while ago, as he had chatted with Gemma in his room at the Brenin, he had felt so calm and sane and at one with his newly-recognised talents. Now he was grappling with an ancient religious concept that chilled him to the core of his being. He looked to the skies, seeking an answer in the complex and beautiful patterns of the cirrus clouds streaming overhead. If he really had faced the Devil back there, and it had tormented him as a child, what had given him the *power* to defeat it? Genetics? Fate? Gemma's angel? *God*?

What had happened was *real*. He now believed that. His shadow-nemesis had many names and he had learnt them all as it ripped into him on the bridge. He had somehow *linked* with it and he had become one with all its ancient and infernal hatreds and yet he had found that power to reject it and cast it away from him. He felt cold at the thought that this *thing* had tried to kill him and had then tried to directly *possess* him body and soul. He had felt its *desire* to become corporeal in this world now that it had forced its way through the 'door'. He clenched his right hand into a fist and stared at it: he could not afford to be caught off-guard like that again!

As he walked along, drawing comfort from his solid brother alongside him, he knew *something* was still happening to him as a result of that encounter. It felt as though nerves were being re-wired and re-connected all through his body. He blinked as the scenery about him flickered with images rapidly overlaid one upon the other, reminding him of the bizarre photographs of his grandparents. It made his eyes ache as he tried to focus on

them. It was becoming difficult to walk properly and he tripped. Graham, ever attentive, grabbed his arm to steady him.

“Are you okay, Tom?” he demanded. “Do you want to talk about it? I know I do!”

“Just give me a moment, Graham,” Thomas gasped, tapping his temple. “Something really weird is going on up here and it’s not finished yet. My sight is being affected and my ‘voices’ are getting... *sharper*.”

“You’re not going blind or something stupid like that?”

“Christ, no!” Thomas grinned in wonder, rubbing at his eyes. “Just the opposite. It’s like I’m seeing *everything* properly for the first time in my life! I *can’t* put what I’m ‘seeing’ into words yet but it’s *amazing*.”

Graham shook his head sadly as they continued along City Road. The workshops on their right dwindled into a narrow, ugly ribbon of breeze-block buildings erected between the pavement and the river bank during the sixties. One of these grim functional buildings housed the car showrooms of Desmond Innocence and in the office, watching the day fade and the elegant houses opposite slowly rotting away, sat the thin, graceful form of Desmond himself. Dressed in a neat old-fashioned suit with his pipe in his mouth and his eternal mug of coffee in his hand, he was contemplating pulling down the shutters and calling it a day.

He waved amicably at the two men, recognising Graham as the man who had installed the metal shutters some years ago. The work had been excellent. He was acknowledging the skill not the man.

Graham waved back and wondered aloud: “I don’t know how he keeps in business, I really don’t.”

Innocence had a permanence that reassured him. The old Jamaican was solid and rooted in the here and now whereas what had happened on the bridge could only have been a hallucination – part of Thomas’s curse rubbing off on him. He glanced at his brother and wondered whether he should take him back to the Brenin or take him straight to casualty.

Thomas glared at him. “You’re not going insane and I’m not going to the A and E,” he snapped. “I need to *think* and you’re not helping.”

“How did you...?”

“The ‘voices’ I hear are people’s *thoughts*,” Thomas sighed. “It’s not an illness, Graham, it’s *telepathy* and I think I know the reason why I have it. I’ll tell you all about it at the club but right now I need to re-orient myself. Whoa!” He halted abruptly. The flickering had ceased but now everything he saw was insubstantial. He alone was real and the whole world had become a ghost, revealing its magma heart beneath his feet. This was going to take a lot of getting used to and there was *more*:

“There’s trouble ahead, I can *feel* it,” he said urgently. “I can’t explain it, Graham, but my head feels like it’s filling with *light*. Everything looks like

it's made of glass to me at the moment. I can see right through that building on the corner. I can see *them* waiting for us! About ten or so young lads filled with that fucking shadow we met on the bridge. They're lost souls. All of them are lost *souls*."

Graham blinked slowly, at a loss for words. He was deeply worried about Thomas but there was a gnawing suspicion in him and, to his horror, a bitter hope flared in his heart that his brother would indeed go mad then Hannah wouldn't have him pawing at her... putting his hand on her...

"See?" said Thomas bitterly, looking sideways at him. "You're already denying what we were up against on the bridge. You heard it *talking* to you and there's the proof: it's left a calling card in your head. You *know* those aren't your thoughts. Tell me, what did it do to you on the bridge?"

"I saw this vision of you in bed with Hannah back at the house," Graham admitted angrily. "I was actually going to leave you on the bridge. I knew it was rubbish but I almost believed... *Him*."

Thomas smiled sympathetically. "I know, but *you* rejected *it*. Don't give that damned *thing* a name!" he said quickly. "It *isn't* human but you're a decent soul, Graham, so it couldn't get a grip on your mind. If it had, then you would have been truly damned like these idiots waiting for us. You don't know how remarkable you are, Graham: it's not every day you get to save your own immortal soul!" he added with a wry grin.

"Maybe," Graham responded warily, becoming more convinced that his brother was slipping into insanity. "What happened just now I won't pretend to understand, but I do *not* believe in God or the Devil *and* I don't believe you have X-ray vision either."

"You have to understand that *thing* is not the *Christian* Devil you're thinking of, but it *is* unbelievably evil," Thomas assured him. "Why do you still think I'm cracking up when you saw it for yourself on the bridge and in our bedroom when I was sixteen? Think of it as some kind of *parasite*. I think it *needs* violent emotion to sustain it: fear, violence, despair. Ah! Thank God! My eyesight's just come back on line: I can see properly again," he grinned, blinking rapidly. "Look, if I'm right about that ambush up ahead then you can owe me an apology *and* a pint, agreed? Come on, the two of us can handle them. Let's get it over with."

As they rounded the bend they came across the boarded up remains of City Mechanical Engineering which had been over-dependent on the coal industry and had closed when the pits had succumbed to the government's brutal revenge on the miners in the eighties. One wall had been defaced with a poignant but defiant message and, though the paint had faded in the decades since the strike, it still proudly proclaimed: '*1984 - the Black Cat Miners did not surrender!*'.

The crumbling low wall at the front of the site provided an ideal spot for the local youths from both sides of the river to congregate and deal drugs. Thomas rubbed at his forehead as a familiar, threatening murmur filled his mind and almost overwhelmed him: he was effortlessly 'taking' their thoughts which were all intertwined with those of the shadow on the bridge – they were truly children of the Devil but only he could 'see' it. Instead of being mortally afraid, a powerful *anger* was welling up in his heart, a sense of *destiny* as he began to detect a *pattern* to all this.

Three dissolute young men sat on the low front wall, drinking cans of super-strength lager while another seven or so were gathered in a loose group on the grass verges by the wall with one pushing his face into a plastic bag full of solvents. He could 'see' that their auras were *eclipsed* by a pulsing black web of 'darkness' that *fed* upon them, driving them to ever more desperate acts to sustain the shadow which preyed upon them.

Unseen tendrils connected them all in a vast network of damnation and Thomas 'saw' with revulsion, that his *nemesis* - for want of a better word - was truly a part of humanity: bloated on violence and sated with hatred and cruelty. He knew that this confrontation was not a co-incidence and a fierce resolve stirred within him: no matter the cost, he would find a way to defeat this ancient *thing*. His head cleared as his whole life focused into this one single instant: his talent and his being here was *no* accident because there was definitely someone or *something* guiding him.

As they approached the youths, some of them turned and deliberately blocked the pavement in response to a hidden signal. They stood with their backs to the approaching brothers, smirking at each other, excited at the prospect of intimidating two strangers with the lock-knives in their pockets. The sweet thrill of adrenaline coursed through their young veins: any violence that resulted would merely be a welcome bonus.

Graham did not break stride as he punched the nearest youth as hard as he could in the small of the back. The youth stiffened in speechless agony as Graham grabbed him between the legs, lifted him effortlessly from his feet and hurled him into the three youths still seated on the wall causing them all to topple backwards heavily onto the concrete of the yard behind. Thomas pushed the two who were in his way to one side without any resistance: they were only sixteen or so but they sensed something about Thomas, perhaps a lingering trace of the possession on the bridge, that absolutely terrified them.

Two older youths of about nineteen standing by the wall were undaunted and still clutching their cans of lager they lurched menacingly towards Graham. The tallest was broad-chested and fair-haired with sloping forehead rising up into a skin-head crop. He wore a stained white T-shirt adorned with a large union jack and his jeans were several sizes too small for him making

his boots seem ludicrously large. He spat the cigarette out of his mouth and flung his lager can at Thomas, shouting: "Here, asshole, have one on me!"

He clenched his fists but by the time his attention has focused back onto Graham, the builder's broad forehead was only an inch away from a devastating impact on the bridge of his nose.

Thomas caught the can and flipped it expertly at the other youths standing nervously to one side so that their expensive loose-fitting designer clothes were soaked. The second attacker quickly side-stepped his friend who was already sinking to his knees, and dropped his own can to launch a wild swing at Graham. Contemptuously, Graham batted the punch aside and grabbed the youth's sweaty lumberjack shirt in one hand then humiliated him by casually slapping him across the face.

Thomas was used to this sort of confrontation from their eventful childhood taking on the Top gangs. He affected a look of patient disdain, watching the group warily while holding his body tense and ready for action. The physical danger was making him focus on the immediate situation and for that, he was truly grateful. The others made no move but stood with their mouths open, gaping at Graham and the unfortunate youth. Puzzled, Thomas turned to see, with utter amazement, that the youth's feet had left the pavement and he was dangling from Graham's fist like a broken puppet while his tormentor appeared to be exerting no effort at all.

"What's your name, *boy*?" Graham demanded. After the terrified youth mumbled something in reply, Graham slapped him again with his free hand. "Well, Paul Stoker, I think you should go home. It's way past your bedtime and you need to sit down and take a good long look at yourself because the next time you take a swing at me, you little twat, I'll snap you in half like a twig. Do you understand?"

Graham dropped Stoker, who quickly stumbled back amongst the relative safety of his friends, wide-eyed with fright and nodding agreement frantically. He was oblivious to the blood trickling down his chin from the cuts and scrapes to his lips and cheek and dripping onto his crumpled shirt.

Graham grinned expansively at the cowed survivors and cracked his knuckles. "Do any of you *children* feel frisky?" he mocked. "Come on, I *know* some of you are tooled up! Want to try your luck? No? I thought not. Now, a little word of advice, *children*," he warned, raising an index finger. "We're the *Lewises* and I do *not* want to hear a single word of disrespect as we leave, because if we do, we'll come back and beat the shit out of each and every one of you. Do you understand? You do? Excellent! My God, children, there's hope for you yet!"

He clapped Thomas on the back heartily, winding his older brother. "Come on, Tom, we're late enough already," he said cheerfully, completely in

his element. "And before you say it: yes I believe you and yes, I will buy you the beers I now owe you."

A few hundred metres further along the road the housing ended and the buildings and yards of the abandoned Black Cat Two mine began. The confrontation had improved Graham's spirits enormously and by the time they arrived at the side entrance of the Non-Political Club, he was whistling loudly, enthusiastically and completely tunelessly.

"Did you really *have* to break his nose back there?" Thomas asked him pointedly.

Graham looked mildly surprised at the question. "Come on, Tom, you know how it works!" he said angrily. "We could have pussy-footed around them but they would have pulled their knives on us. There's no *way* I was going to provide their fucking entertainment for the evening."

Thomas placed a grateful hand on Graham's broad shoulder but a look of concern crossed his face. "Did you know that you'd lifted that lad clean off the floor with one hand back there?" he asked curiously.

Graham looked confused. "What? No, I was just holding him still," he said thoughtfully. "I'm strong but even I can't hold a teenager off the ground with one hand. It must have been the adrenaline. You had me really psyched up with all that mumbo-jumbo back there. I *was* tempted to break his neck but I thought that was just our invisible friend whispering in my ear again. Maybe the lad will learn his lesson but I doubt it."

Thomas wondered if Graham's abnormal strength was a sign that he too, was developing a 'talent'. He had recently recovered from some dreadful knife wounds in only three weeks so if this was all genetic, then it could be affecting his brother in a purely *physical* way. Without Graham, Stoker's little gang would have made mincemeat of him, he was sure of it, but together, they had defeated the shadow *again*. Thomas smiled at the irony of it all: here they were, fighting a battle nobody else was conscious of yet it could still turn out to be some kind of shared delusion and they were both, in reality, being measured up for canvas overcoats in an asylum.

His speculation was shattered as a battered old transit van ground noisily to a halt next to them, nearly hitting several parked cars in the process. The driver's window opened and a thick fore-arm rested on the door and a grinning, bearded face swung into view. Thomas noted that a few grey hairs were beginning to show amongst the dark brown hairs but Alan Brewer was as vibrant and as vital as you could be - for a borderline alcoholic. There was a can of beer in his large, powerful hand and a cloud of aromatic smoke drifted through the open window which Thomas sniffed at enviously.

"Alan! Good to see you!" Graham grinned.

Alan Brewer belched thunderously, threw open the door and jumped down to greet them: “Thomas! Graham! By God it’s good to see you both! It’s been a long time, boys!”.

He threw his empty can over the nearby wall and slapped them on their upper arms in welcome then rubbed his hands together in a business-like fashion. “Right! I’m nominating you two to be our roadies for the night!” he declared cheerfully. “You don’t mind do you?” he laughed.

Five more denim-clad forms tumbled from the van. The two from the back groaned as they stretched themselves back into shape after being squeezed between the drum boxes and the speakers. Alan Brewer, opening another can of beer, made the introductions. “This is Graham and Thomas Lewis, boys! Thomas formed the band with me ages ago, when we were at university and Graham used to roadie for us when we used to tour,” he said proudly. “Which wasn’t very often!”.

“You boys already know Peter and Robin here who’s back in on sax and guitar,” he added, pointing to the two older men of the group. “They’re still just as daft and just as drunk as me! This lad here’s Gopher, our new sound man and the incredibly svelte chap over there is Brian Thelwell, but everybody calls him ‘Fat Pony’. Despite the zeppelin belly, he’s the best rock keyboard player in South Wales. And the chap with the Frank Zappa face-fuzz is Steve Cropper, our bass-player and all-round mother of invention.”

The tall, gangling bass-player sniffed disdainfully as he shook their hands: “What he means is I’m the only sucker who can fix the van. The bass-playing is just a bonus as far as this lot is concerned.”

Fat Pony whacked his flabby fist against the back door of the club until the thudding of boots on wooden stairs could be heard. The band waited patiently as a dozen bolts and chains were rattled free from the inside of the reinforced door. Eventually it creaked open and an old grizzled head peered at them from around the edge.

William Hart’s face was totally unmarked by laughter lines and bore watery, grey eyes that had stared at death and childbirth with equal disinterest. The white hair was shaved in a crew-cut style from his army days from which he still retained a short, muscular neck and a powerful frame but his light, almost musical baritone was a sharp contrast to his military bearing. He wore a dinner jacket and black bow tie even though he was only a barman because he *enjoyed* helping the door staff to deal with the trouble that sporadically plagued the club.

He deserved better than this, he reckoned, for he thoroughly detested musicians of every stripe. The corners of his mouth were turned down in disapproval but he forced a jovial tone into his voice. “Hallo boys! Are you the ‘turn’?” he asked politely in his thick Valleys accent.

*Idle Hands*

Alan Brewer and the rest of the band, without any prompting, launched instantly into a series of spastic routines: hunching their shoulders grotesquely, pulling faces, spinning around, grunting and slapping the backs of their hands together.

Even Thomas could not resist smiling as a stricken look entered the barman's eyes. "Tchoh! They *always* do that," he muttered, shaking his head sadly. "Always!"

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## The Devil's Music

The Non-Political Club was a dismal, uninspiring, rectangular two-storey building. The main function room ran the length of the top storey with a stage at one end and a bar at the other. It was dimly lit with ancient neon strip-lights and a rack of spot-lights above the stage. Thick purple drapes smothered the windows creating a stifling atmosphere amongst the mismatched chairs and tables and the whole place *reeked* of stale beer, acrid sweat and cheap after-shave.

Thomas and Graham helped the band set up their gear and after a cursory two-minute sound-check they all retired to the backstage dressing-room to sprawl themselves across its collection of battered armchairs and sofas. Two small tables were set against the nicotine-stained walls which were plastered with posters of past and present cabaret bands. Alan was transfixed by one poster which depicted a grinning Buddy Holly look-a-like dressed in a white suit covered with pink treble-clef motifs.

“Freddy Lampford’s Mersey Melody Men!” Alan read aloud in a strangled voice then slowly and methodically tore the poster to shreds, pausing only to rip off pieces with his teeth and spit them across the room.

Graham nudged Thomas and pointed at Alan. “What’s this Freddy ever done to him?” he asked quietly through the corner of his mouth.

“Don’t you remember? He always used to do this on tour. It’s one of his pre-gig rituals,” Thomas assured him. “Alan hates that fact that these bands get three or four hundred a night for playing all this sixties retro crap but as seventies-style rock and soul bands are *still* ten-a-penny in South Wales, they get all the crap gigs that Freddy and his friends don’t want.”

“Nah,” Graham disagreed. “Don’t give me all that condescending rock musician guff. There’s some really good bands on at the Legion.”

“That’s true,” Thomas admitted. “But you never remember all the truly *awful* cabaret bands in between. What you have to understand is that over half of their set tonight *are* original songs whereas cabaret only strives to faithfully *reproduce* the originals. What’s the point?”

Without even looking up from his guitar-lead soldering, which was badly scorching the surface of the table, Gopher held up a thick marker pen which Alan snatched to methodically deface all the other posters around the room. Tossing the pen back onto Gopher’s table he collapsed into his chair with a contented sigh and broke wind majestically. “*Catharsis!*” he declared cheerfully. “I feel so much better after that!”

Robin Curvin was adjusting the mouthpiece of his sax after fitting a new reed and honked a few riffs into the far corner for a minute ending in a screeching crescendo that made everybody wince.

“Flat,” he concluded unnecessarily.

“You don’t say!” Peter Dimmond exclaimed.

Robin smiled beatifically at him and after another minor adjustment, he repeated the entire sequence of notes in perfect pitch but at twice the volume as the others flipped beer mats at him.

Satisfied, he placed his sax on its stand and fished out a hip-flask and a small cut-glass tumbler from a customised pocket in his sax case and poured himself a very large whisky. He was about to drain the glass but stopped as he met Graham’s inquisitive stare. “*Glenmorangie*,” he explained and held up the glass for inspection. “The pale gold of the Tornoch Firth, a single malted creation fed by the springs of the Tarlogie hills to leave a sweet and lasting velvet on the tongue!”

“Don’t let all that connoisseur crap fool you Graham,” Peter warned him. “Robin is one of the most eloquent piss-heads you can find on the club circuit. Speaking of dependency, does anyone fancy a spliff?” he asked hopefully, looking around for takers.

Alan shook his head angrily: “You know the crack, Pete. No spliffs until *after* the gig! You were a total disaster last month and we got paid off for the first time in the band’s history! You were so stoned you fell off your stool – twice! It was *embarrassing* and it cost us a residency.”

Peter put away his cigarette papers with a heartfelt sigh as Steve Cropper returned with a tray of drinks for them all. “Gopher,” Steve complained bitterly. “That wanker set up his bingo machine right in front of my amp. Could you sort it out for us? Thanks, mate.”

Grumbling darkly, Gopher heaved himself out of his chair and shuffled out through the door. Thomas looked at the tray, puzzled. “Why did you buy us all halves, Steve?” he demanded.

Steve sat down and said nothing then smiled mysteriously, jerking a thumb at the official-looking notice on the end wall. Intrigued, Thomas and Graham crossed the room to read it: ‘*Will artists kindly refrain from urinating in the pint glasses - by order of the management.*’

Thomas was still laughing when Gopher returned and cleared away his tools from the little table in disgust. “I’ve moved the bingo machine. And do you know they’ve got speakers *in the toilets!*” he informed them angrily. “I mean, if you’re halfway through a dump and you win, what’re you going to do? Run through the place screaming ‘*shit-house!*’ with a loo-roll hanging out of your arse?”

“I absolutely *hate* bloody bingo,” Alan declared, grinning evilly. “It has to be God’s punishment for playing rock and blues in these clubs! You know

what I'd like to do? Hmm? I'll tell you! As soon as that sequined *tit* got to his first *two fat ladies*," he said, aiming an imaginary shotgun and pulling the trigger. "Both barrels. Right between the eyes."

A massive bouncer with a blond crew cut appeared at the doorway and filled it completely. "The steward wants the band on *now*," he ordered brusquely, and everybody, even Alan for all his relentless bravado, obeyed instantly. The bouncer grinned with all the charm of a truck radiator. "Break a leg, boys!" he added cheerfully, with a slight catch in the voice that hinted he wasn't speaking in the theatrical sense.

Alan clapped Thomas on the shoulder. "Thanks for the help with the gear, Tom," he smiled. "We'll have a chat and catch up later. I get the feeling that you've got something pretty heavy on your mind you'd like to talk to us about. You look absolutely *knackered*. You know that if you need any help, you only have to ask us."

As the band launched into their first number, Thomas and Graham bought themselves a fresh beer and joined Gopher at the mixing desk. The band was tight and the polished dynamics ebbed and flowed through each song drawing a smattering of applause from the audience especially when a cover number was recognised. Graham was totally absorbed in watching Gopher's hands flying across the mixer desk and stage-lighting controls. Thomas found the volume perfect because it obliterated the 'voices' still babbling away in his mind, allowing him to enjoy his beer and think clearly about the unique situation he was in.

He thought of his friends at work, his unpublished poems and excruciating prose, his brief spell on the road with Alan's band, university, a woman he had met in head office at Colex. His head was now so clear and his mind so refreshed it was like swimming in crystal water. He somehow felt *complete* for the first time in his life, the fatigue ebbing away and the beer tasting like nectar. Then a thought struck him: perhaps he was *meant* to be here - to rediscover his roots and find some *perspective*.

The band was playing a heavy blues number based on an old Texas Alexander song. "*If you catch me stealing Momma, please don't you tell on poor me!*" Alan sang in his powerful, gravelly voice. As Thomas listened the verses snapped forward in time and made his breath catch in his throat. "*I hear the rattle o' cattle trucks, I hear children singing in the land of the silver birch, I see that big man cryin' but his eyes are Judas-dry!*"

Thomas was deeply impressed, placing this version on a par with Billie Holliday's soul-wrenching rendition of 'Strange Fruit'. He studied the audience and discovered a few uncomfortable faces as some of the brighter minds understood the context of the lyrics. Without waiting for the applause they knew they wouldn't get, the band swung effortlessly into the classic 'Road to Nowhere' by Talking Heads to end their first set. The audience

breathed a collective sigh of relief at something less provocative and the clapping at the end was sparse but genuine.

Gopher turned as if reading Thomas's thoughts and shouted above the ripple of applause: "More like lead balloon than Led Zeppelin, eh?"

Thomas nodded absently but said nothing as his heart sank. He sensed somehow that the shadow was moving again but this time it was faint and distant. He sniffed at the air expectantly, like a dog, unaware that Gopher was observing him closely. He dearly wanted to get drunk but he remembered his father's face in that abominable light at Fomault Hall and the memories crowded in on him again. He could still see that poor woman trapped in the torture chamber and, gazing at the audience, he 'saw' the mark of the shadow was truly everywhere. His palms itched and he was alarmed to discover that he had picked up a couple of blisters from the frozen bridge stone-work. *This was real, alright.*

He berated himself for his selfishness in coming here when he should have been back at the Brenin to see if Gemma was safe. As soon as he had thought of his gifted niece, he was startled by a peculiar sensation on his cheek like the kiss from a butterfly's wing and a faint pressure tightening about his waist. He looked down half-expecting to see Gemma hugging him but there was nobody there and his heart hammered in his chest. He set his glass down quickly on a nearby window ledge before he could spill any more of his beer and pulled himself together. He couldn't understand how Gemma had kept this talent of hers quiet all her little life but he owed her so *much*: she had truly been his salvation today.

He ran his hands through his hair in exasperation. He had so many unanswered questions but he was so desperately in need of some decent sleep. He grudgingly conceded that Jimmy might be able to help him after all but his thoughts were interrupted as the club speakers crackled into life as the bingo caller launched into his introductory patter. Throughout the long room there was the ghostly rustle of bingo cards and the scratching of pencils as the club lights brightened a little.

"Wake up, Thomas," Graham said, shaking him by the shoulder as Gopher powered down the mixer desk and the amplifiers. "I thought you might be concerned about everybody at the Brenin. My mobile isn't picking up a signal so I went to use the payphone downstairs but I met this young French woman who said she'd just taken a message from Hannah. She said that everybody was okay and that they'd see us later and we shouldn't worry about them."

Rubbing his temples, Thomas was deeply suspicious. He could feel the darkness at work somewhere and this 'message' was far too convenient to be plausible. "What 'woman' do you mean?" he demanded.

Graham laughed incredulously. "She's right here: I invited her over to meet the band. This is Zhara," he said, turning only to find that there was no-

one there. "Honest! She followed me back just now. She was here just a second ago," he insisted desperately. "Thin piece in jeans and T-shirt, long fair hair, funny-looking eyes, little tattoo on the left cheek. Said her name was Zhara Amaud. I don't know how but she's vanished into thin air!"

Gopher told him that he had walked across the floor alone, which did not improve his temper. The sound-man regarded them both curiously and with some amusement. "With him twitching and muttering and you talking to invisible women, I'd switch to shandies if I were you," he suggested with a raised eyebrow. "It's obvious you're both out of practice!"

Robert Sizwell crashed through the toilet cubicle door and fetched up against the cistern. He was a large, strong man and his reflexes were just good enough to recover in time to ward off a frenzied rain of blows in that confined space that would have felled a lesser man. He snapped up a karate side-kick into the chest of his assailant that sent him reeling back through the cubicle door to crash into the tiled wall opposite where he remained winded for a moment.

Despite receiving a massive blow that should have pole-axed him, Paul Sheppard began to work himself up into an unstoppable fury. Sizwell had known him since they were children and he could see the eyes glazing over and knew that once he had reached berserker pitch, Sheppard was *extremely* dangerous. Ignoring the bruises already inflicted on his arms and shoulders, Sizwell squared up to his old friend, keeping his voice low and calm but intensely menacing.

"I don't know why you're picking a fucking fight with me," he snarled, emerging slowly from the cubicle with his hands held in front of him, low but ready. "But I don't fucking care. I don't take this shit from anyone, especially *you!*"

Sheppard blinked slowly as if trying to focus on something else while still glaring at Sizwell. "You were chatting up Jillysy at the bar, Sizz," he grated through clenched teeth. "You know the score: *I'm* the business around here and she's *mine*."

Sizwell rated himself as one of the hardest men in the whole valley but Sheppard was in a class all by himself: all you could hope to do was to knock the lunatic out quickly or you were finished once he got going because he never seemed to feel or fear *anything*. He forced a savage knowing smile, never taking his eyes off his opponent for a moment. "I wasn't chatting the poor cow up," he sneered. "I was just admiring the bruises. You're so much *better* at battering women than I am!"

As he was speaking, Sizwell was mapping out his simple strategy in his mind: eyes, nose, throat. He'd taken him out twice before and he could do it again. He would not repeat the mistake he made last time in letting Sheppard

get to his feet, thinking he was defeated. That error had cost him a fractured cheek-bone and twenty or so stitches.

The two big men clenched their fists and circled each other slowly looking for an opening. At that moment, the door burst open and two younger men, Paul Stoker and Emo Evans, tumbled over each other into the room. Stoker, his cheeks mottled with bruises, was wild-eyed and breathless while his taller companion held blood-stained kitchen-paper towels to his nose. There were grazes to his scalp beneath his skinhead haircut and one of his eyes was beginning to blacken.

“Paul? I thought you might like to know we met an old friend of yours, Graham Lewis, down by the Non-Pol on City Road,” Emo stuttered, pausing to dab delicately at his broken nose.

Sizwell, although glad of the diversion, regarded Stoker, who was Jillsy’s younger brother, with utter contempt for letting his sister get slapped around like that. However, as Sheppard’s attention was now focused on the two newcomers, Sizwell debated whether or not to lay him out while he was distracted.

Sheppard lunged forward suddenly and took Emo by the scruff of his neck. “Did that nasty Mister Lewis hurt poor little Emo then?” he taunted and laughed savagely. He grabbed the bundle of paper towels swathing Emo’s nose and twisted mercilessly making the younger man shriek and struggle to no avail. After a few seconds of torture, he pushed the shaking Emo contemptuously to one side and turned, business-like, to Sizwell.

“Well?” he demanded with an overtone of thwarted challenge: “What do you reckon, Sizz? We can either sort this out now or we can get the Lewises instead. What do you say?”

Sizwell, still eyeing Sheppard carefully, rolled a sore shoulder tentatively before replying: “Aye, why the fuck not. It’s about time we paid a visit to the Non-Pol and reminded them who we are.”

Sheppard did not reply but his eyes burned agreement with a dreadful hunger and his mouth twisted into a grotesque parody of a grin. Sizwell felt very disoriented as if he’d taken an overdose of magic mushrooms: the tiled rest-room was distorting and the strip lights in the ceiling flickered oddly. He sensed that there was something in the room was sucking the heat out of his limbs until Sheppard’s demented face was the only solid thing in focus while everything else became faint and insubstantial.

“You got any whizz or *keta* on you, Sizz?” Stoker interrupted meekly, abruptly breaking the spell.

“*What?*” Sheppard bellowed at him and his face contorted into such a twisted mask of rage that Stoker leapt a full metre backwards to press up against the wall. “There’s no *keta* on the Top, so forget about it. When there is, *I* will let you fucking know about it! Round up the boys, *now!*” he snapped

at the ashen-faced youth. "Lewis and I have a few things to sort out so it might as well be tonight. Get moving, you little *shits!*"

Sheppard contemptuously herded his two battered disciples ahead of him into the bar without even a backward glance at Sizwell.

"God! For - fuck's - sake!" Sizwell exhaled slowly while allowing his tense body to slowly relax, leaning on a wash-basin for support. "Look at us: we're both over thirty-six and we're still into this macho *crap!*" he confided to his reflection in the mirror over the basin.

The comfortable whisky fire burned deep within his broad chest as he paused to study his appearance. He adopted a boxing stance, brandishing his callused fists at the mirror and whirled around to punch one of the cubicle doors sending it crashing back heavily against the partition.

"Why not? What else is there? What *else* do I have in life?" he roared defiantly but he could not bring himself to look at his reflection again.

As soon as he had left the mirror glass rippled like the surface of a pond before becoming solid once more. Sizwell's reflection remained in the mirror, still leaning on the sink only the features were twisted into a depraved leer and the eyes glowed an unspeakable green.

Chris Calverton suspiciously observed the movements between the tables and the toilets. He was a powerful man with immaculate black permed hair and a thick drooping moustache and wore a thick polo-neck jumper despite the oppressive heat. He dearly wished that he did not need the custom of the young Top men to stay in business but he did not flinch from using the baseball bat he kept on a shelf above the bar because he knew what would happen the second he lost their respect.

Calverton loathed all the Sheppards especially the father, Dan, who often created a minor drunken nuisance in the bar. The two younger sons were dangerous enough but theirs was a clinical aggression as if they were just going through the motions compared to Paul. The sins of the father, thought Calverton angrily, had created three of the most damaged people he had ever met. Geraint had produced some incredible artwork in jail and Hywel could sing like an angel but they were both inside again. Calverton wondered if they would ever find peace and an outlet for all that repressed talent but he soon ceased speculating. There was nothing he could do about it - he was a bar manager *not* a social worker.

As the gang gathered itself and snaked out through the door, the barman whispered in his ear and he nodded without comment. He nonchalantly wiped a few more glasses and pulled a few pints to clear the waiting customers from the counter before slipping into his office where Fritz, his rottweiler, lay asleep in the basket under the desk. Fritz lazily opened one eye and growled a greeting as he entered.

Calverton swiftly dialled a number while keeping an eye on the bar through the open door. He spoke urgently: "Hello? Bill Hart? Yes, it's me, Chris Calverton, up at the Pixie. I owe you one so listen: you've got about eighteen or so Top boys on the way down to do over your club tonight. Sheppard, Sizwell, Peter Jones, Topia, Dio Wells, the Pontlaccas and about eleven younger lads, some with blades. Do what you have to do discretely, okay? I'm here for another two years and even I can't take them all on at once. Good luck, Bill. See you soon. Yeah, and you, my friend."

Fritz stirred and growled softly at him again as he put the phone down. He absently scratched the Rottweiler behind its ears. "Yes, Fritz," he murmured quietly to the huge dog. "I know it's bad business practice to set up your best customers like that but I hope Sheppard gets a damn good kicking. In fact, I hope the bastard gets himself *killed*. I'm sure Hell would welcome him with open arms."

Fritz rumbled deep in his throat as if in agreement and settled back down to snooze until closing time when he was usually needed. Calverton checked that his face was carefully neutral once more and went back into the bar to greet the usual hubbub of foul curses and shouted orders.

Hannah was tucking Gemma into one of the two single beds in the bedroom when Graham's call finally came through. Hannah was still in shock and decided not to tell Graham about the incident in the lounge as there was nothing he could do about it now. They had a short fraught conversation all but obliterated by the din in the club bar, but she managed to convince him and he she hadn't rung earlier and begged him to hurry back to the Brenin after the gig.

Gemma was very drowsy but she revived sufficiently to give her mother a loving *cwtch* as Tamsin, having been successfully transferred without waking from Claire's room, snored softly in her own bed. Hannah went through the connecting door into Claire's suite and checked on Alicia. Her niece was deeply asleep but sighed unhappily in her dreams. Hannah was worried about her - something wasn't quite right and she resolved to talk to Claire about it later.

The evening maid had promised to look in every fifteen minutes or so for the next hour and Hannah had gratefully forced a large tip into the embarrassed young woman's hands. She rubbed some more of Claire's calamine lotion onto her blisters and rewound the bandage neatly before bending down to kiss Tamsin and Gemma lightly on the forehead. She winced as her ribs ached dreadfully whenever she moved.

"Night Poppet," she whispered to Gemma. "I'll only be downstairs to talk to Claire and Doctor Smith for a bit. The maid said she'd keep an eye on you



and I'll pop up every ten minutes or so to see if you're okay. I don't mind if you want me to stay: it was very scary downstairs earlier."

"Don't worry about that shadow-thing coming back, Mum. I beat it good and I can do it again," Gemma murmured reassuringly, making a curious crushing gesture with her right hand. Hannah gasped in wonder as a gentle pressure briefly formed around her waist. She desperately wanted to talk this through with Jimmy and Claire but she didn't want to leave the kids alone for a *second*.

"I just gave Uncle Thomas a good night kiss," Gemma smiled. "Don't worry about us. You *can* go down for a drink 'cause Auntie Claire is on her way back up from the lounge and my angel's looking after us. If you look hard, you can see her sitting on the chair by my bed right now!"

"There's nothing there, Gemma," Hannah objected, gently.

"That's because you only use your *eyes* to *see*, Mum," Gemma said simply before turning over to go to sleep.

A moment later, Claire entered the room. She sighed heavily and flopped down into a chair and switched the television on with the remote control. "What is it about academics?" she grumbled as she turned the volume down. "They've stopped staring at us down there but I couldn't stay a moment longer. I like Jimmy a lot but he makes me feel so *stupid* and besides," she laughed ruefully. "He wouldn't recognise a 'come on' if it punched him in the mouth!"

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