

Dust to Dust

“For one precious moment, they felt they were part of something inexplicable, infinite, wonderful...”

– Book of the Path Transcendent

“Hello? George?” Brian Cardman called out as he and his wife, Emma, gingerly opened the lounge door in George Tully’s upstairs flat but their friend and business partner was not there nor was he in the adjoining kitchen. “The front door was open! Where the *hell* are you?”

“We’re in the main bedroom,” came the dejected reply.

“Look, you see to him,” Emma whispered urgently, taking her stylish husband’s hat, coat and swagger-stick and placing them carefully on an armchair. “I’ll make us some coffee and bring it in.”

“I won’t argue, Em,” he murmured in mild surprise. “I just thought you were stronger than this, having nursed your parents and all.”

“It doesn’t get any easier with practise, believe me,” she assured him grimly, switching on the kettle. “I’m not comfortable with the idea of Death especially *hers*. You know why. I’m afraid of what we’ll see in there. Just give me a minute to get it together, alright?”

He nodded then kissed her tenderly before going out into the hallway and on into the main bedroom. He found Tully sitting on the edge of his double bed staring disconsolately at mounds of fine grey dust lying upon the ornate duvet cover. The dust traced out a vaguely humanoid shape and he bowed his head in silent respect. He and Emma had privately speculated as to what would happen to Zhara’s ageless body once the floodgates of Time were finally thrown open - and now they knew. Dust to dust indeed.

“You knew she was dying,” he said resolutely, sitting down next to the distraught former journalist. “Yet you did an incredible thing: you made her last few days the happiest of her entire life and you were there for her right at the end, George, where it really mattered.”

“It’s funny,” Tully sniffed, dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief and blowing his nose. “I knew something was happening when she put on the clothes and sandals she was wearing when she arrived and lay down on the bed. She was in so much pain! I held her close and she told me how much she’d enjoyed sitting with me in the Otter, watching the ebb and flow of the place as the staff went about their business and the customers coming and going. I never knew if she was serious or not, but she reckoned it was *the* perfect place to meditate on the mysteries of Creation and Existence – a place where every conversation, clatter of crockery and quibbling over bills was a confirmation that the Balance and the Design were hard at work.”

“And then we’d come home and make love... Sweet Jesus in Jamaica... *when we made love...*” he trailed off, choked with emotion.

“She truly loved you, George,” Cardman sympathised. “Ever since that night three years ago when you faced your demons. Maybe you’ll meet her again in another life or maybe in another cycle of existence. It could happen, my friend, because we live in one strange Creation.”

Emma came in the room and set down a tray with three mugs of coffee on the bedside cabinet. She gazed sadly at the poignant remains then impulsively went to the window and threw open the curtains. Sunshine washed across the bed and the dust upon it as she returned to hand the men their coffees.

“That’s better,” she declared, misty-eyed and cradling her own mug. “It shouldn’t be dark in here – not for someone who knew nothing but war and darkness all her life... Oh, my *God!*” she shrieked. “Get up! *Look!*”

Tully and Cardman quickly got to their feet and all three of them stood side by side, coffee mugs incongruously in hand, to watch in astonishment as amongst the dust, swirling sparks grew and glittered like diamonds in the brilliant sunlight, finally fading away as the last mote was consumed.

It was if Zhara had never existed.

Something enigmatic, beautiful and timeless had passed away. In a rare moment of wine-fuelled introspection, Cardman later described the awe he felt at that moment as being akin to watching the Valley of the Kings crumbling to sand and being dispersed by a desert wind. He was also silently grateful that the dust did not yield to quantum shear and flash over into energy – their friend, Doctor Smith, had idly calculated that the resulting crater would have been at least ten miles across.

They were too numbed with grief and wonder to speak for several minutes until Cardman placed a consoling arm about Tully’s thin and trembling shoulders. “She’s gone home,” he said gently. “Her remains have crossed back to her original plane instead of breaking down here so that when sentient life returns to her world, she’ll always be a part of it.”

Tully stared bleakly down into his coffee. “Thanks, that helps, but do you know, that woman brought so much into *my* life in just two weeks,” he sighed. “Yet I have *nothing* to remember her but the Brenin broadcasts and they’re not that clear. Her image didn’t register on *any* photograph or recording anyone tried to make of her after that - drove the paparazzi crazy... *hey!* Stop that, will you! It’s not funny! What the *hell* are you playing at?” he protested in alarm as Cardman sniffed at his neck and body, only to be joined by a smiling and increasingly delighted Emma.

“She *did* leave you something to remember her by!” she laughed incredulously. “I don’t know how she did it but your enzyme problem has

completely gone! Instead of your usual body bouquet you smell faintly of... of *lavender*! Yes! That's it! Definitely a hint of lavender and something really *exotic*!" She inhaled deeply. "I don't know what it is but it's stimulating! You'll be fighting the women off, George!"

"Come on then, Lavender Boy," Cardman teased, clapping him gently on the back. "Zhara wouldn't want us to mope around in here all day. Let's tell the others and then go out and get *spectacularly* drunk."

Tully placed his half-finished coffee down upon the tray. "Look, if it's okay with you," he began. "Not that Emma doesn't make a cracking cup of coffee," he amended hastily. "But I'd like to go to the Otter for a while before we tell the others. Please, it's important to me."

"Okay, no worries," Cardman agreed. "We need to brief you and the Otter's as good a place as any, I suppose. A lot has happened in the two weeks since... since you've been out of circulation."

"We did watch the news," Tully conceded wistfully. "Once or twice... I think... or did we? I'm not sure."

A few minutes later, Emma was waiting impatiently for him to lock the front door. "I hope you can get back to work soon, George, because we can't cope," she admitted frankly as they set off northwards along Fairwells Road. "We have *hundreds* of interview requests for the family – maybe thousands – I lost count ten days ago – which we have to set up once the family finishes mourning and Hannah gives the go-ahead. Even though she's in pieces over Thomas and Tamsin, she's handling all the family business well at the moment. The big news for us is the House and they are *desperate*. Vigil has contacted us with a *major* business proposition that we need to run by you. You might find this ironic but..."

"Vigil reckons they've got over *three hundred* million full members world-wide now," Cardman interrupted enthusiastically. "Eighty million of those signed up in the last two weeks and the media interest has *buried* their existing PR staff. They can't cope and Vigil is offering us all the resources of the House as that membership could *double* by the end of next year!"

"It could be a poisoned chalice," Emma stated quickly, regaining the initiative. "They could easily swallow the agency, George, but at the moment they *need* an arms-length PR company like ours to deal with the world media and they want *us*! Their own people have no strategy in place to deal with the explosive membership growth or to counter hostile press campaigns – that's where *we* come in! The contract will be *global*, George!" she enthused, her pale cheeks flushing with excitement. "We'll need bigger offices and more staff and more... offices! *Everywhere*!"

"There's another thing," Cardman enthused as they crossed the Ffordd-y-Graig into Hotwells Road. "Apart from the interest in the recruitment and the Prophets, the media and the bloggers are all stirred up about the Book of All

Faith itself. We need to take a long, hard look at it. It was big before but now it's become an absolute *monster*. They've had to add another five servers this week just to host the chat-rooms. They're running out of space to house all the extra equipment in their units on the Stevenson's Estate."

Tully looked startled. "That means since the Transcending they're handling hits in the hundreds of millions a day!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, and more," Cardman beamed. "They got cables relaid the day after the bombing and they've had world-class specialists working around the clock to improve the interfaces of the Book for over eighteen months now. They've even installed the world's first bullshit-detectors."

"Bullshit-detectors?" Tully laughed. "You're pulling my leg!"

"As good as," Cardman insisted with a completely straight face. "Since the Epiphany, they've continually added iterative logical and *theological* algorithms to the Book that challenge contributors to explain their ideas and sharpen up their submissions in real time. This has allowed the Book to *learn* from these exchanges. There's even a rumour that one of the Brothers hacked into some of the Department's computers to steal the source code."

A thrill of foreboding ran down Tully's spine. "Given what happened in London, that doesn't sound like a smart move," he said.

Cardman shrugged. "It's only a rumour. They had to do *something* as the system was being constantly overwhelmed. So now, when a moron types in abuse or claims that God is a traffic-light, the Book shunts him or her into a cul-de-sac where they're connected to all the other lunatics in an isolated chat-room where they sort of cancel each other out. It seems to work but the Book even has systems to monitor their exchanges just in case the crazies come up with something credible."

"I've logged on a few times myself," Emma admitted. "The Book has a range of voices that it uses and it recognises you if you have a webcam," she shuddered. "I'm convinced it can access other data-bases because it knows *everything* about you when you interface with it. I know lots of people who are convinced they're talking to a real person. Its systems are light-years ahead of those old interactive encyclopaedias. You can *verbally* debate theology and philosophy with it in real time, it's that good."

Tully put his hands in his pockets and shivered a little as a cool northerly gust of wind was funnelled along the road between the houses on their left and the dingy, single-storey garages and workshops along the riverbank to their right. Above the latter they could see the brooding, rusting hulks of the Black Cat Two pit-head workings, left as a reminder of why Pontybrenin was built in the first place: to house and service the miners who worked the rich anthracite seams hundreds of metres beneath their feet.

"Do you think they'll ever achieve this Great Synthesis of theirs?" he wondered aloud. "Zhara told Vigil that the Book was the Destiny, the Purpose

of the House but she would never elaborate what she meant by that and I never really pursued the matter.”

“She sure gave the word ‘cryptic’ a whole new meaning,” Cardman agreed. “But as long as the membership and the Book continue to grow at this phenomenal rate then we have one sweet contract to service.”

They walked the rest of Hotwells Road in silence and turned left into Memorial Square using the eastern access lane that ran between the Digwell Arms and the White Dragon. Above them, an early afternoon sun dominated a steely blue sky where large flocks of starlings were spiralling about, the thrumming of their wings clearly audible. Tully shaded his eyes as he peered up at them. “That’s odd,” he noted. “They seem really agitated.”

Emma followed his gaze. “Not just agitated,” she observed, frowning. “They’re *frantic*. Maybe this ozone thinning has knocked out their radar or something. I read this morning that the scientists are worried about a shift in the chemistry of the stratosphere that’s letting in more ultraviolet than usual - but they don’t know what’s causing it.”

“Bit of a coincidence this UV thing has just got going after the... you know... the *Transcending*,” Cardman grumbled, still finding it hard to talk about the monumental event at the Brenin a mere two weeks ago. A slight breeze, carrying the scent of farm and pine, gently rustled the leaves of the magnificent silver birch trees that dominated the Square. “Come on, let’s go,” he said irritably, feeling exposed. “There’s a lot of press about.”

Emma smiled and took his arm as Tully drifted along behind them, vividly recalling every walk and stroll he and Zhara had made, even when it was raining. He looked back at the ancient White Dragon pub and smiled: she’d got tipsy in there one night on strong locally-produced cider and she’d sung a haunting lament in an ancient tongue that had brought the place to a standstill and reduced several Romanian street traders to tears. “You have *got* to bring her to karaoke night,” the landlord had begged him.

A few minutes later, they were seated at Zhara’s favourite table by the window in the Old Town Tea Rooms - the Otter as the locals called it - but Tully was acutely conscious that they were the centre of attention. He was getting anxious until he realised that he was with Brian and Emma Cardman - a couple who inevitably turned heads wherever they went. He smiled as he recalled a wry comment made by Thomas Lewis to the effect that Cardman *always* made an entrance – even into a telephone kiosk.

Cardman was the blond-dreadlocked elegant offspring of a Kingstown father and a Valleys mother - with *style* as the midwife, as he often boasted, dressed in a sleek, modern suit with a black silk shirt and tie and delicate gold chains. He had also placed his designer calf-length coat and matching hat on a nearby stand with a flourish but he kept his prized swagger-stick at his side. It had a large, gold-plated handle but it was not just a fashion accessory: the

expensive shaft was made from carbon-fibre and steel and it had proved to be a formidable weapon on more than one occasion.

Emma was Cardman's living counter-point: an elegant platinum blonde, originally from Holmfirth, who had expunged her broad Yorkshire accent and replaced it with the clear-cut neutral tones of a TV presenter. She also possessed a dry, almost dusty sense of humour and impeccable taste in clothes: her turquoise coat, dress and jacket ensemble, with hints of gold fleck in the fabric, complemented her husband's attire - to the nth degree.

Out of respect for Zhara, Tully had combed his lank brown hair and had put on a neat polo-shirt, his best light blue suit and expensive red-rimmed glasses but next to these two, he still felt like he'd been dragged through a hedge, a paper-shredder and a farm-yard *simultaneously*. Acutely self-conscious, he sniffed discretely at an armpit.

"Still lavender and pussy-pull," Emma whispered mischievously, causing him to redden further with embarrassment. She caught the attention of a waitress who came over with a broad smile on her face which soon faltered when she saw that Tully was without his constant companion.

"Hello, Mister Tully, where's Miss Amaud today?" she asked politely but quickly got her answer from the awkward silence that followed. "Oh, I see. I'm *so* sorry," she flustered, on the verge of tears. "She did say she was ill but I didn't realise it was that serious... I'm sorry... I..."

"It's okay, Penny," Emma reassured her after reading the name-tag on the young woman's blouse. "She passed away peacefully this morning. We've come here to remember her as it was her favourite place in all the world, thanks to you and the rest of the staff. If you wouldn't mind, we'd like the tuna special, éclairs and a pot of Ceylon tea, please."

The waitress rallied and wiped away a tear. "My condolences, Mister Tully," she sniffed, writing down the order. "She was such a lovely woman. It was a shame there was so much rubbish in the tabloids about her but we never believed a single word of it. She was just a pleasure to talk to."

Tully smiled, fighting back a wave of tears himself. "Thank you," he said kindly. "She was so grateful to you and Mrs Dixon for keeping the press out of here and letting us enjoy some privacy. We know it was difficult."

"It wasn't easy but it was the least we could do," she said. "She always had time for us and her advice was always good," she added sincerely. "It was as if she could see right into our hearts! As you can see, we're pretty busy but I promise I'll be back with your order as soon as I can."

She left hastily but stopped on the way to the kitchen to speak to the fiery-haired and fiery-tempered Mrs Dixon, the owner of the Otter, who immediately came over to offer her own condolences and take Tully's hand in a surprisingly strong grip for such a small and wiry woman.

“She was an angel, a rare ray of sunshine in these strange, dark times,” she declared, delicately dabbing at the corner of one eye with a small but exquisite lace handkerchief. “I’ll truly miss her. Please, have this meal on the house, I insist! I would be very grateful if you could give my regards to her family but if you need anything, just give us a call,” she said, leaving her business card on the table.

“Ah, I see, how thoughtful,” Cardman murmured wearily, examining the card after she’d gone. “It says: *‘All your catering needs catered for. Weddings, Christenings and... funerals!’* It’s true, *nothing* ever changes round here!” he laughed wryly. “God, I love this place!”

Their food and tea duly arrived but they couldn’t talk or eat much as a succession of waiters and waitresses were moved to offer sympathy - such had been the impact of Zhara on their lives in just two brief weeks.

“Incredible,” Cardman commented after the last one had paid their respects. “I can’t imagine what they would have made of her *before* she lost her powers. To be honest, George, me and Em were hoping she’d pull through somehow. You know, heal herself or get Gemma to fix her up.”

“Not to be,” Tully sighed. “She was badly injured by the Aberration and when she crossed over she had to leave... a part of herself behind. The damage was too great and what she did at the Brenin finished her off – as she knew it would. She couldn’t possibly recover but, thank God, she had just enough strength left to enjoy the last few days of her life.”

Emma was puzzled and stirred her tea thoughtfully for a few moments. “What do you mean? She left a part of herself behind?” she asked. “She looked fine when we bumped into you both last week.”

“It was the crossing over to this plane,” Tully replied sadly. “She tried to explain it to me but I’m no physicist. I think she had to leave some of her body matter behind during the... transition as she was so weak. It had to act as some kind of... I don’t know... a *springboard* for the rest of her to effect the quantum shift which reasserted itself once she died...”

“Lucky for us, her remains returned once she could no longer keep the quantum... whatever it was she did... going,” Cardman said slowly, an ache in his heart. “God, she must have been in *agony*.”

“She was,” Tully assured him. “She controlled it superbly but, early this morning, she lost control of the jaundice and the internal bleeding and that was that,” he moaned softly, removing his glasses to place a hand across his eyes. “No soul-light left her body. Nothing. She just smiled at me, closed her eyes... and turned to dust in my arms... even her dress and sandals...”

“Yet here we are,” Cardman declared after a minute’s bleak silence. “Two weeks after one of the strangest events in human history and everything is back to normal. Well, *almost* normal. Shit! Speak of the devils!” he grimaced

after glancing through the lace-curtained window. "There, out in the street! It's those two bastards who shot Tamsin: Hurley and Williams."

Tully stiffened in anger as he watched the two dishevelled men, dressed in rumpled jean jackets and combat trousers, as they positioned themselves carefully with their backs to the window and began handing out leaflets to the shoppers in the busy High Street.

Cardman clenched a fist and made to rise but Emma clamped a hand over his forearm. "Don't you *dare* go out there, Brian!" she hissed. "Everyone knows they're *insane*! See? Nobody's taking a leaflet."

"Some of them are!" he protested, reluctantly unclenching his fist. "George? Would you believe that the Herald gave them a 'Hero of the Millennium' award last Saturday for killing a 'dangerous freak of nature'! KYTV, RM2, Vixen and several of the US right-wing news shows have been portraying those two thugs as *victims*!"

"But none of the serious papers or channels will touch them," Emma reminded him. "Don't worry, they'll soon be forgotten."

"I wouldn't bet on it," he grumbled. "Damn it! They're putting me off my lunch," he muttered, slapping his fork down.

Mrs Dixon overheard him as she was standing at the window, her lips pursed disapprovingly as she stared through the filmy lace curtain at the activity on the pavement. "I'm sorry to hear that," she sympathised. "But there's nothing legally I can do to move them on."

Cardman looked about the busy tea rooms. "Oh, I don't know about that, Mrs Dixon," he said mischievously. "Do you mind if we borrow that large mirror you've got hanging behind the till?"

"Not at all," she consented. "As long as you're careful with it - it is Victorian, you know. But how will that help?"

"Ah, you'll see," he grinned.

Aided by Tully and watched intently by the puzzled staff and customers, he carried the huge mirror to the window and slowly drew the lace curtain to one side. He carefully positioned the mirror behind the two men then gently rapped the window glass with a knuckle.

Mrs Dixon, who had been joined by Penny, watched transfixed as the two men turned and froze in horror as they beheld their reflections in the mirror. They dropped their leaflets to claw at their faces before fleeing, their chilling incoherent cries of anguish clearly audible through the window glass as they pushed shoppers and tourists out of their way.

Having returned the unwieldy mirror to its proper position with Tully's help, Cardman sat back down at the table but his triumphant smile soon faded under Emma's disapproving glare.

"So it is true, then," Mrs Dixon said aloud, straightening the lace curtain. "Now I know why the Lewises didn't prosecute them. My God, to think that a

mere *child* can make you see your soul as Heaven sees it!" she shuddered, putting a hand to her throat. "She's torn away the veil between those men and Hell itself. You could see it in their faces!"

"I know we could have just asked them to move on," Emma apologised hesitantly. "But their leaflets call for the *extermination* of the entire family and their friends - which includes *us!*"

"I know, my dear," Mrs Dixon relented, turning to face them. "I don't like the tabloids either which is why you'll always find a welcome here. But what happened to those two men makes my blood run cold. Two wrongs can never make a right."

"True, but the trouble is, Mrs Dixon," Tully reminded her. "The universe is a hard and a cruel place."

Mrs Dixon sighed and ushered Penny back to work. "I guess so, Mister Tully," she said thoughtfully. "Because what happened to those men certainly *was* cruel, even if they did deserve it. You have to understand that Gemma Lewis frightens a lot of people in this town, including me. She can't place herself above the law like that, no matter how powerful she is."

She waved an arm regally about the place. "As you can see, I don't encourage House people to eat in here," she said, changing the subject. "I've noticed that the white suits have a tendency to swamp places and then take them over. They're buying up an awful lot of property in the valley especially around Saint Madoc's."

She sat down in what would have been Zhara's chair. "I know your agency represents the family," she whispered urgently. "But despite those strange waves of... of..."

"Connection," Emma ventured helpfully.

"That's it, connection!" Mrs Dixon agreed brightly, tapping a temple with an index finger. "A lot of people were overwhelmed what happened to them for that one second when we were all connected to *everything* - so they've blanked it out or latched on to these rumours about secret weapons. They can only focus on what's in front of their noses and right now that's the House and their Prophets. Local families are getting jobs all right but they're being priced out of the property market by the wealthy incomers. We could have another riot on our hands if the council doesn't get a grip."

"It's true," Cardman sighed. "But thanks to the Lewises," he said, indicating the tourists, hawkers and House members thronging the street. "Business is booming. Whatever they may think of the Prophets, the traders are doing really well out of the business they bring in."

"I'll not deny that," she agreed. "And I'm grateful, believe me. I've even logged on to that Book of All Faith to try and understand this Transcending business. That site is a real eye-opener. The voice synthesizer had me thinking I was talking to your Zhara for a few seconds! The software seems to know

exactly what you're looking for and, I must admit, those sections on her were very... *interesting*. It claims she was some sort of *goddess* called - what was it? *Ormuzd*?" she added disingenuously, peering intently at Tully for some kind of confirmation.

"She was a goddess to me," he said bitterly, refusing to be drawn.

Mrs Dixon nodded and got to her feet as a large party of tourists started streaming in. "I'm sorry, my dear," she apologised. "Goddess or not, she was a gentle soul and I miss her terribly. Enjoy your meal," she smiled as she got up to greet her latest batch of hungry customers.

"This tuna salad isn't half bad," Cardman approved as he resumed his lunch. "Balsamic vinegar in the Valleys! Who'd have believed it?"

Even the fastidious Emma was impressed by the food. "We'll have to come here again! Hey, what's the matter, George? Aren't you hungry?"

Tully was distracted by a group of white-suited House members accosting a group of paranormal tourists across the road with evangelical fervour. Some local youths nearby were hurling abuse at them and one brandished a stick only to have it snatched away by a burly Brother who snapped it contemptuously across his knee. The House was not a religious movement that believed in turning the other cheek. In fact, a willingness to undergo martial arts training was a central requirement for membership to any Circle of Faith - as the youths were now quickly and painfully discovering.

"I think I've just lost my appetite," he said.

"Not having second thoughts about taking on the contract, George?" Emma prompted nervously as the confrontation in the street ended with the youths fleeing to a round of applause from the tourists.

"No, I have no problem with Vigil," George sighed. "It's just that since the Transcending, House members have become a little too... you know..."

"Zealous? Fanatical?" Emma suggested. "Vigil is well aware of the problem and he predicts it will get worse with such a huge surge in numbers. Well, George? Should we take this contract or not?"

Tully shrugged his shoulders. "Don't worry, I'm in," he sighed. "Zhara told me to get straight back to work but I have a bad feeling that, one way or another, we're really going to regret working for the House of All Faith."

"Possibly," Cardman agreed. "But as long as there's a few extra noughts at the end of my bank balance, I think I can live with a few regrets."

"That's my Brian," Emma laughed.

Two Stones

Hannah Lewis sat on a kitchen chair in the back yard of 32 Ayr Street, the terraced family home of the Lewises, and gazed up at the blank blue cloud-free sky. The pine chair wasn't exactly comfortable but it was blissfully quiet in this stone-walled haven as the neighbouring back gardens and yards were all thankfully empty. She'd switched her two mobiles off and was enjoying a cup of strong tea and a cigarette, her mind deliberately tranquil but for another vague resolution to quit smoking.

However, this was no ordinary paved yard for the back of her chair rested against one of the two ancient three metre tall granite obelisks that cast their twin cool shadows across the flagstones like the gnomons of an arcane sundial. They were irregular in shape but their surfaces were a cool featureless grey with not even a quartz intrusion but she knew that they, like all the other local monuments, had much more to them that met the eye. Sometimes, when she sat out here before lunch, waiting for the sunlight to creep around the rooftops of Ayr Street, they seemed to be watching her, trying to tell her something important - *if only she would listen*.

There was little real privacy here as Cairn Terrace, being further up the flank of the mountain, overlooked the yard but she knew that the residents no longer gazed down upon her from their bedroom windows as her daughter, Gemma, had actively discouraged their curiosity over the last two weeks. She sighed contentedly and blew a smoke ring into the calm, still air.

She was startled by the scraping of another kitchen chair being placed next to hers. Gemma, dressed as usual in a plain white T-shirt, trainers and a black pair of jeans, sat down and studied the looming rear walls of the Cairn Terrace homes above them. "Nobody is watching us," she confirmed impassively as Hannah hastily stubbed out her cigarette. "Most of them are in work or at school or over at Saint Madoc's. Those that are at home know better than to stare at us," she added in a chillingly flat tone of voice.

Hannah let the question die upon her lips. Gemma only left her room to sit with her each day and she was content with that but she knew that the family could not remain inside this insulated cocoon for long. "I've finalised the funeral arrangements with Bridewell this morning," she announced. "Tamsin will be cremated on Thursday at ten o'clock then we'll return here for the service at Capel Cairn. I was hoping to arrange a buffet in the Brenin," she added. "But Elinor says the place has been under continual siege since the Transcending. The press would just mob us there anyway."

She turned her head to look down at her silent daughter, noting how fast she was growing, her round face tapering now, the light auburn hair in a ponytail and her brown, fathomless eyes, slightly larger than normal were

developing a slightly oriental look and there was definitely a point forming to the tips of her ears...

"I'm still the Leanan-Sidhe, don't forget," Gemma interrupted, effortlessly 'taking' her mother's thoughts. "I expect to get the pointy ears as I'm a 'wee Queen o' the Phoukas' as Eileen O'Grady said at the fair," she sighed in martyred tones. "Ah, isn't genetics *wonderful!*"

"I had a hard time in school too," Hannah admitted, sweeping her auburn shoulder-length hair back to reveal the distinct points so cruelly lampooned by the Daily Herald and other right-wing newspapers and bloggers. "I had to put up with endless jokes about having them done on the National *Elf*," she sighed. "Being Leonard Nimoy's love-child and so on."

"Huh? Leonard *who*? So why didn't you get plastic surgery?"

"True, and my parents could afford it, but by the time I was fifteen, I realised that they were uniquely part of who and what I was - and besides, the boys couldn't get enough of l'il old Pixie-Ears!" she added, laughing. "They used to *love* nibbling on them. Gives me goose-bumps even now!"

"Pfft! You were such a *tart*," Gemma teased, enjoying being alone with her mother. No wonder the boys had loved her: slim, athletic, delicate elfin features with high cheek-bones and the hint of an almond-shape to her deep brown eyes. Dressed simply in a white T-shirt, slacks and sandals and with just a touch of makeup to her eyes and lips, her mother was *beautiful*.

"The boys will chase after you, you know," Hannah assured her, planting a kiss on her forehead. "You just wait and see."

Gemma pursed her lips, drawing her legs up to sit cross-legged on the chair. "In your mind, you know that will never happen," she said matter-of-factly. "I will never be normal but hey, that's cool," she qualified quickly. "Uncle Thomas gave me a choice and I chose this because there's no one else to take Zhara's place. Anyway, how come you're not on the computer today?" she demanded, deliberately changing the subject.

"I have a lot on my mind, Gem," Hannah sighed. She took a sip of her tea. "Ugh, I let it go cold," she grumbled. She was about to set it down when the mug suddenly grew hot in her hand. "Umm. Thanks, Gem," she smiled. "I keep forgetting you can do that. Anyway, I'm resigned to the fact that I'm never going to earn a living or do research," she explained dully, leaning her head back to rest it against the stone. "The mortgage is paid off, the pension fund is okay-ish and so are your college funds but our investments have been hit hard by the market collapses." She bit her lip suddenly: Tamsin was *dead* – she did not need her college fund...

Gemma reached over to grab her hand. "I... miss her too," she said calmly but Hannah could feel her daughter trembling through the contact.

"I've got to keep it together, Gem," she said bitterly. "I have to look after you, Graham, Claire. I just wish we could earn some money without doing

bloody interviews or going cap in hand to the House. I've had to employ Crawshays, the only security firm who'll work for us, to guard our house because of that petrol-bomb attack last week. They aren't cheap and then we have the Black Ridge court cases: if we lose those, we lose the house and *everything*, Gem! We could even lose this place and I was told this morning that the police want a contribution to the cost of protecting us."

"Dear *God*," she snapped, shaking her head and glaring at the impassive vault above them. "After all we've done, after all we've *lost*, the vultures still want their pound of flesh! *And damn you for taking Tamsin!*" she seethed, her eyes stinging with hot wet tears as she vividly remembered her daughter, dying from shotgun wounds in the arms of her husband, Graham, as blood seeped unstaunched through the jacket he'd wrapped around her naked body at Cath Palug. She checked herself angrily, remembering that Gemma was a profound telepath - but it had only been two weeks since Thomas had gone and she'd lost Tamsin... Oh, God... *her precious, precious Tamsin...*

"S'okay, Mum," Gemma moaned softly, her head bowed as her left hand clutched at the bandages on her right forearm "It was my fault, not yours or Dad's. Perhaps it would have been better if Hurley and Williams hadn't been there - then she could have just killed me and she'd still be alive."

Hannah cupped Gemma's chin and tilted her daughter's face towards her. "Don't you *ever* let me hear you talk like that again!" she said firmly. "We *all* miss her and we *all* could have done better. Claire spotted something was happening to her before I did because I was so bloody wrapped up in finding work and *you* couldn't possibly know that the Aberration was whispering to her all the time. It was *using* her just as the Design and the Balance were using you: you *had* to be there at the Brenin to save *everybody*. It's over now so we have to be strong - for her sake if not for ours."

"I trashed her bedroom out of sheer jealousy and spite, Mum," Gemma confessed, her voice thick with self-loathing. "Then I fell for Karen Spriggs' stupid suggestion to go and heal those three men in the ICU. What a fool I was to try that! I didn't even *try* to read her mind! All those capillaries and brain injuries... I know Zhara said it was their time but I *felt* them die but I didn't stop because of the cameras, because I was so... so *arrogant!*" she laughed bitterly. "I was this wonderful, all-powerful *jerk!*"

Hannah said nothing as she finished her tea. She'd had this conversation over and over again with Gemma for the past two weeks. Karen Spriggs, the lead anchor of KYTV had received mental training from the Department of Security designed to mask thoughts. The footage showing Gemma fleeing from Spriggs and the ICU in floods of tears had made her crimson with fury: if Spriggs hadn't later died a macabre death at the Brenin, she'd have killed her with her bare hands herself. And to add insult to injury, the families of the three dead men were suing Gemma for damages.

Just thinking of Spriggs made her blood boil and try as she might, she could muster no sympathy for the grotesque manner of her demise, caught on CCTV as she was superimposed *into* the office wall. The gruesome footage including the screams of Elinor Smith, the hotel owner, who witnessed it, was still one of the most-watched clips in the history of the internet.

“It wasn’t a nice way to die,” Gemma sighed, chewing at her lower lip and staring at the gate that led out into the rear access lane. “But I can’t feel any pity for her either. Does that make us monsters?”

“*She* was the monster, Gem, not us,” Hannah said angrily. “She could easily have picked simple injuries that you could have healed but instead she had to get you into the intensive care unit. She was working for Sir John and they all *wanted* you to fail. Those men’s lives meant *nothing* to Spriggs.”

“You’re worried that the families affected by the Aberration will sue us as well, aren’t you?” Gemma said miserably.

“I am,” Hannah admitted. “Even though the House is helping them they still blame us for all the deaths and injuries. Even your old sponsors are threatening to sue the agency for breach of contract! No matter how good Slee and his lawyers are, we could all be homeless by Christmas!”

Her mouth set in a grim line: she did not want her family to be dependent upon the House of All Faith but she felt she was being forced implacably down that road. She respected and trusted Brother Vigil, Second Shepherd and acting leader of the House, but the Brothers and Sisters would do and say anything to get their Blessed Gemma to attend their Circles.

She had to find an alternative because that price was too damned high.

“I don’t want to go on TV or work for the House again,” Gemma agreed forcefully, delving automatically into her mother’s trains of thought. “On those stupid children’s shows I was a freak,” she grimaced. “But when I was opening those stupid Centres, I was *their* freak! But,” she shrugged, straightening her legs out again. “We have no choice but to accept their help unless you can find a job and Slee sorts out all the legal stuff.”

“Whatever happens, Gem, you are *not* going to work for the House, the agency or the council,” Hannah pledged through gritted teeth. “No TV interviews, no children’s programmes and *definitely* no conference or Centre openings. Brian and Emma are shielding us from the media at the moment but your father and I will do the interviews after the funeral, not you!”

“Suits me, Mum,” Gemma agreed, brightening up. “But Zhara is right: I’ve learnt so much from it all. I just wish...”

‘*Enough!*’ Hannah thought as loudly as she could within her mind: ‘*If your Uncle Thomas was alive, he’d chew your ears off for all this self-pity. I miss him. I miss Tamsin and even those three friends of his who died in London to save him and Amy. We have got to move on!*’

“I *wish* you wouldn’t try to project!” Gemma grumbled petulantly. “You have no idea how weird it is! You ‘sound’ like fish farting in barrels of tar.”

“Huh! Thanks for nothing, Little Miss Telepathic Know-It-All” Hannah huffed haughtily. “What’s that noise?” she exclaimed, her heart leaping at the sound of boots crunching on gravel in the rear access lane.

“Oh, just a patrol!” Gemma sighed, the peculiar arcane light of her stigmata briefly obscuring her eyes as she scanned the lane with her mind. “The wall’s a bit too high to high for you to see them. Two policemen with automatic rifles. They’re worried about those men who got into the lane last week. I don’t know what the fuss is all about: I’d have stopped them.”

Hannah recalled that even though the access lane entrance on Cairn Terrace had been bricked up months ago, two armed and determined intruders had actually made it into the lane only to be arrested by the ever-vigilant police and Department agents patrolling it. They belonged to the bizarre Angra Mainyu group in India which had formed after the ‘blasphemous’ coverage of the Transcending by Channel Six. The group objected to Gemma being publicly anointed as the new Ormuzd but what had incensed and motivated them to violence was the fact that she and Zhara, her mentor and anointer, both had the audacity to be *female*.

“Typical,” Gemma muttered acidly. “There’s so much violent and sexist rubbish out there it doesn’t affect me anymore. It’s just *sad*.”

Hannah felt helpless. Any mother worth her salt wants to shield her children from the world’s worst excesses: the cruelty, the violence, the porn, the *perverts* - but how do you shield a telepath when she can pluck the thoughts from a nomad crossing the Kalahari? Since the Transcending, *millions* were now thinking about her, debating her gifts - and *worse*.

“It’s difficult to screen them out, Mum,” Gemma admitted. “It was okay before but now it’s seeping my subconscious – like a room with a million radios all playing at once. Uncle Thomas used to call it the collective *animus* of the town but I’ve got the animus of the whole world in here,” she smiled wanly, tapping a temple. “The good, the bad and the really *ugly*.”

They fell silent, listening to the soothing sounds of Gemma’s paternal grandmother, Carol Lewis, and her old friend, Edith Green, preparing dinner. The clattering of pans and plates merged with strident birdsong from a tree in a nearby garden, the sound of dogs barking apathetically in a Cairn Terrace garden and the muted roar of traffic down on City Road to create a microsm of normality that they both cherished. Sitting by these impassive, mysterious stones and watching the sunlight creep across the flagstones and tubs of unkempt flowers, Hannah could forget the nightmares of the encroaching world for one sweet and meditative hour.

The mother of the House family who had moved into 30 Ayr Street came out into her garden with her two small children to hang washing on the line.

She saw Hannah and Gemma over the low boundary wall and uttered a high-pitched squeak of fear and awe that irritated Hannah intensely. Flustered, the woman instantly bowed and shepherded the children back into the house with a muttered apology. Hannah thought she seemed pleasant enough but she was so overwhelmed at living next door to the Family of the Blessed Prophets that she had been unable to articulate a single coherent sentence.

“Ee-yew, *Mother!*” Gemma teased impishly. “She made you think of a rabbit being rogered by a Rottweiler - hardly an appropriate image for my tender years! Her mind *is* a fluffy cloud of *nothings*,” she noted gloomily. “Definitely a rabbit. Hey, there was something I wanted to ask you: where’s Dad and Amy? I can’t find them anywhere. Not locally, anyway.”

“Your Dad and I had a bit of a row this morning so gone to check on the house. He’s taken Amy with him - she was feeling a little stir-crazy as you’ve hardly said a word to her. Why can’t you detect them?”

“I’ve told you before, Mum,” Gemma said quietly, adjusting the ribbon holding back her long auburn hair in a ponytail. “I try not to use my powers all the time. I have to be just *me* for a while. Not a goddess, not an angel, not a prophet, not a freak, just Gemma Bethan Lewis using my own *normal* eyes to see the world. Ach! Why can’t they leave me *alone!*” she grimaced and clutched at her head suddenly, prompting Hannah to comfort her. “They’re twittering in my mind all the time! I can’t sleep properly because I keep seeing Ashcroft’s image of Miss Drake at night - only now her class now has *millions* of children all babbling this stupid *gibberish* at me.”

“Shhh, poppet,” Hannah soothed, stroking her hair. “We’ll find a way of making it stop, I promise. Maybe you should share a bedroom with Amy for a while. You say it’s not so bad when she’s around.”

“Having her and Jillsy close by does help a lot,” Gemma agreed. “But I can’t rely on them. I’ve *got* to find my own way of handling this animus.” She put an index finger to her forehead. “But here’s no one left to help me deal with it now that Zhara’s *dead*,” she whispered sadly.

“What? Zhara?” Hannah gasped in shock. “When did *that* happen?”

“About two hours ago,” Gemma said slowly, still clinging fiercely to her mother. “She was lying in George’s arms when she died, surrounded by his total love for her. Do you know he made her so happy these last two weeks?” she sighed enviously. “She didn’t have much time for me over the last two weeks and I didn’t want to intrude as she was making up for thousands of years of lost time! No wonder poor George is so exhausted! He’s at the Otter with Brian and Emma and...” her voice trailed off as the stigmata flared.

Hannah pushed her daughter away from her as the edges of the bizarre psychic phenomena touched her face, making her skin crawl and reminding her unpleasantly of the photograph frame writhing in her hands three years ago. “What is it, Gem?” she demanded with some concern.

“Hurley and Williams are outside the Otter,” Gemma said angrily clenching her fists, her eyes obscured by the flares and streamers of arcane light dancing in front of them. “They’re handing out leaflets calling me an *abomination* and affront to God! They’re actually *boasting* to people about how they shot Tamsin! How *dare* they!” she choked, her face flushing. “I should have killed the pair of...”

“No, you did more than enough!” Hannah snapped, grasping her grieving daughter urgently by the shoulders as a yellow arc of plasma crackled briefly between the stones. “That’s why I don’t want them prosecuted, Gem! You had your revenge at Cath Palug, my girl, when you condemned those two thugs to an eternal, living hell.”

“It’s okay now,” Gemma relented, the stigmata fading until her eyes were her natural deep and fathomless brown again. “Brian is chasing them away. I know, what I did to them wasn’t *right*. Huh! I’m not making much progress as a goddess, am I?” she smiled self-deprecatingly.

“You have to stop blaming yourself for Tamsin’s death,” Hannah insisted, putting her face close to her daughter’s. “There’s not a *second* that goes by when I don’t blame myself either! I was her *mother* and I missed every single sign. Hindsight’s a wonderful thing but it’s so cruel at times.”

Gemma turned her right forearm and pulled back the bandages to study the three red, ragged wounds on the underside. The claw marks had been deep and it was obvious that they were going to leave scars. “I deserved these,” she sighed, tracing one with a finger. “I can’t bring myself to heal them because I keep seeing the beast that she became because of me. What really sucks is that I never got a chance to say sorry and now she’s *gone*! What point is there in me having all this power if I can’t bring her *back*?”

Memories suddenly cascaded through Hannah’s mind: she was in Bute Terrace three years ago, grappling with the possessed Jillsy Stoker whose eyes glowed a leprous green, her jaws gaping impossibly wide to release the mind-shattering *scream* of the Ban-Sidhe. She shuddered as she recalled the light searing from Gemma’s eyes as she snuffed out the depraved spirit, a Formori, that had possessed the young woman.

Jillsy had convulsed and passed out only to be possessed again and wind up shrieking incoherently in a canvas overcoat at Black Ridge Hospital. Abandoned by everyone but her devoted younger brother, Aaron, she’d suffered endless torment as a merciless all-too-human monster, Ashcroft, raped and ravaged her mind leaving behind a *forged* soul of stainless steel and the world’s first *proactive empath* who then became Thomas’s lover.

She remembered Gemma, her eyes ablaze with hatred and revenge, staring up at Paul Sheppard - stripped of Ahriman, his cellar angel - who watched helplessly as his own arm and hand brought the gun barrel to his temple, the finger tightening on the trigger. As they’d left the house, Gemma had leant

against her mother, unable to speak, and it was not until later that Hannah realised that her extraordinary daughter had intimately experienced the death she'd caused - *from the inside out*.

"See? I *am* a murderer," Gemma whispered having automatically 'taken' all her mother's thoughts and memories.

"So was I," Hannah reminded her. "Paul Sheppard would have shot everyone if you hadn't killed him and if I hadn't stabbed that thug in Bishop's Walk, he would have killed Alicia and then you. I know I didn't experience his death intimately as you do but every night I see his dead face staring up at the night sky - I always will," she shuddered.

"I could have just crippled the Reverend Gates," Gemma pointed out miserably. "I didn't *have* to kill him and he actually *blessed* me as he died!" she wailed gently, the tears coursing down her cheeks. "I was just so *angry* with him and Ashcroft that I just... *killed* him!"

"He was *possessed*, he was part of a merge anchoring the Beast to this world and he wanted to kill us. The Design left you with no choice, Gem," Hannah said sadly. "Just as Thomas had no choice when he incinerated his father's body at Cwmciffach. This is what it means to be a *soldier* even if you don't want to be one! You must remember that *you* destroyed the Beast then *you* freed all those poor souls who touched millions of people all across the world, changing human history and religion forever. I was *so* proud of you! I was merged with you, your Uncle Thomas, Zhara and Mena. I *know* you're not a murderer. You're my daughter and I love you to bits!"

"Thanks for reminding me about those merges, Mum," Gemma said, smiling through her tears. "I know how much you do love me and how much Zhara loved Uncle Thomas for his soul, how Mena loved him for his heart, how I loved him because he was my uncle and was there for me and I know how much you loved him for his p..."

"That's enough!" Hannah chided, going bright red. "That's grown-up stuff! Yes, I fancied him like mad for years for all that I loved your father. It was a little game we played: flirting without ever being serious. Your Dad knew all about it but he tolerated it because he knew it made us happy and even the Ban couldn't turn him against us. He doesn't say much yet but he misses Tamsin and he misses his brother terribly. He has nobody except Nathan and Bob to drown his sorrows with these days."

"I know all about grown-up stuff," Gemma sniffed, staring at her mother. "It's biology driving reproduction just as the Design drives our development as a species. The trouble is I've been left too far up Darwin's Ladder. There's nobody like me anywhere in the world and there won't be for *centuries*. Only Uncle Thomas and Zhara were like me and they're *gone*."

"You still have your family, Gem," Hannah said, automatically reaching down for her cigarettes and lighter. "And there's Siobhan and Jillsy, Amy and

Doctor Smith and maybe even Harriet – she’s still waiting for whatever Zhara’s five disciples did to her at Cwmciffach to manifest itself.”

“I’m not being big-headed, Mum, but even Siobhan is nothing like me and hack! I *wish* you wouldn’t smoke!” Gemma added archly, after coughing suddenly. “You can’t see what the smoke is doing to your lungs and body but I *can*. It makes my chest itch just thinking about it!”

“I need a smoke after another crappy morning on the net,” Hannah declared grimly. “My e-mail addresses are being hacked and spammed: I had over a thousand e-mails saying just ‘R2-45’ – whatever that means - and I think I’ve lost my contracts! A wealthy sect is harassing my employers, claiming that my involvement somehow infringes their religious rights! I edit, peer review and proof read obscure psychology articles that no lay person is *ever* going to read but my employers can’t afford the legal costs and we still have all these court cases and policing bills hanging over our heads! *That’s* why I’m smoking so much. Oh, God damn it! This lighter’s gone again!” she muttered shaking the offending object angrily.

Gemma gave her mother a hurt look and a brief yellow light flashed in her pupils. Smoke suddenly rose from the glowing tip of the cigarette.

“Thanks, Gem,” Hannah laughed wryly, gazing at the glowing tip.

“I wish I could forget what I did at Ridge Park,” Gemma sighed, twisting her fingers together in anguish and self-recrimination. “It’s been on my mind for the last two weeks. It’s like a fire in my heart every time I think of how I was showing off and playing at God for KYTV.”

“Stop it, Gem! Zhara told you what might have happened if you’d succeeded,” her mother said brutally. “The arrogance would have consumed you, body and soul. Their deaths had meaning: they brought you back from the brink! We thought we’d lost you after you’d fallen under the spell of those damned shrines. It’s a hard fact but the most important lessons in life are usually the most painful: those deaths gave you the *humility* you needed to properly control that amazing power you have inside you.”

“I was reading last night about an Algerian Muslim called Abd el-Kader,” she continued, drawing deeply on her cigarette. “I suppose I was looking for inspiration but he reminded me of you. He was a man who endured and witnessed unspeakable horrors during the French invasion of Algeria but he retained his honour, refusing to behead prisoners unlike the French who butchered and raped their way across his country. He was defeated and went into exile in Damascus where, heavily outnumbered, he then defended *Christians* from Islamic mobs.”

“I remember a first-hand account by a Colonel Churchill: “*The furious mob, glutted with spoil, began to cry for blood. Men and boys of all ages were forced to apostatise and were then circumcised on the spot. Women were*

raped or hurried away to distant parts of the country where they were put in harems yet Abd el-Kader alone stood between the living and dead.”

“Unlike modern jihadists, he was a merciful warrior,” Hannah explained. “Someone who took up arms because he had no choice yet he remained true to his ideals despite the atrocities he witnessed. I don’t know if that helps, Gem, but us Lewises are noble *fighters* just like this el-Kader.”

“He sounds like he had Zhara whispering in his ear,” Gemma smiled. “But I’ve not been merciful much over the last two years, have I? Some Ormuzd I’m going to make! Perhaps I should wear L-plates or a sign saying: ‘*Danger – Learner Goddess at the wheel*’.”

“Even Zhara got it wrong, Gem,” Hannah reminded her. “Remember? She confessed that she’d exterminated all the evil in her world but after three generations there was nothing left of that civilisation – it just collapsed. What did she call it? That was it: *a beautiful, sterile Eden*.”

“She told Vigil to keep me on the Path!” Gemma recalled. “And speaking of the Second Shepherd: he’s at the front door again but I don’t think he’s going to get a warm reception from Grammy - she’s fed up to the back teeth of him calling round here and Edith’s all the time.”

The stigmata flared briefly as she ‘took’ the House leader’s thoughts. “He still has such a lovely mind,” she smiled dreamily. “He taught me courage as he stood alone before the Beast, scared to death but totally determined to save the Reverend Gates. His brain is *whizzing* with House business! I think he walks over here every day just to get away from it all for an hour. The House has so many Circles all over the world, yet he seems to keep track of them all and...” she trailed off, smiling.

“And *what*, Gem?” Hannah demanded impatiently.

“He’s thinking about when Uncle Thomas showed him and the other Brothers all of Creation on the path in Black Ridge Woods,” Gemma said slowly, the stigmata flaring faintly in front of her eyes. “And now he’s remembering when Uncle Thomas showed him the Domain. He saw something he believes was the Creator so he has this scary certainty that what he’s doing is absolutely *right*. He wants the House to be *everywhere* but there’s no madness or megalomania in him - yet.”

“He’d be honoured to know you think that of him,” Hannah smiled. “The poor man keeps coming over to see us even though we refuse to talk to him but could you get rid of him today before he annoys your grandmother? She’s really cranky - she might brain him with a frying pan.”

At the front door, Brother Vigil suddenly found he was unable to move his finger towards the doorbell. Brother Steadfast and the two stocky House guards grew alarmed as his face went blank. Inside his mind, he heard the sound of water running unseen beneath the trees, the call of a cough, the barking of a dog fox, he saw a teacher with lips and nails the colour of blood

and pointed teeth, two hunters screaming as their souls were turned inside out, a million children with blank features, Gates toppling in slow motion, a finger tightening on a trigger, *three bleeding brains...*

In front of him, the houses became as transparent as glass and he could see figures moving like ghosts within. In the garden beyond, the two stones stood - the only solid things in a suddenly insubstantial world. Peering around the stones was Gemma, *the Blessed Gemma*, the One whom the whole of the House cried out for yet the one he wanted to protect above all else.

'I'm sorry but we aren't ready to talk yet, Vigil,' her 'voice' said inside his mind and he could 'see' that she was linked to her mother. He was also startled to 'hear' overtones of waves upon shorelines and an ebb and flow and understood immediately what it signified. He recalled the neutron-blue of Zhara's eyes and the terrible burden she had laid upon him at the Brenin.

'Now Zhara, your guardian angel, has gone,' he thought at her, bowing his head in sorrow. *'You have lost so much for one so young. I wish there was something I could do to help you but there are no words of comfort for such a loss. I am sorry to bother you but there is so much that I need to s...'*

He gasped and leant forward to place his hands on his knees.

'Sorry, Vigil, I took the information direct. I'm not in the mood to talk right now' she telepathed into him. The sudden link meant that he *knew* the apology was genuine - there were no deceits in a link even with Gemma as powerful as she was. *'I've still got to work through what being Ormuzd means and we all need to be left alone until after Tamsin's funeral.'*

Vigil clutched at his chest as a wave of raw emotion washed over him through the vestiges of the link as it dissolved. *'Mum will ring you tomorrow and we'll come over to see you,'* she projected. *'We're grateful you've helped to keep everybody away but I'd like you to go now - if you don't mind.'*

The house solidified in front of him once more and he found he had regained the use of his arm again. He resisted a childish impulse to press the bell and turned away with a wry smile on his face.

"Is everything alright, Brother Vigil?" Steadfast demanded as they walked away under the amused scrutiny of the armed policemen and Department agents posted in the street. Several curious locals and House members had come out to watch but they returned into their houses disappointed as the four Brothers approached the street corner and turned into Black Dog Rise.

"It's hard to say," Vigil confessed as they walked down the steep incline. "Because we're dealing with a child who crushed the Beast with her mind and absorbed the full power of the Aberration. She has a power and a destiny that lies way beyond our meagre comprehension."

"Did you get to tell her about all the fatwahs and death threats being made against her?" Steadfast demanded with some concern.

“She cleaned me out, my friend,” Vigil sighed. “In the five seconds we were linked, I don’t think there was anything I *didn’t* tell her!”

“The rapture of the Transcending is finally over,” the hulking brother observed sadly as five teenagers gestured obscenely at them from the other side of the road. There were two media vans stationed at the bottom of the Rise which was the closest they were allowed to get to Donald Street and Ayr Street. Vigil could imagine the long-range cameras and mikes already recording them. He also knew that hidden Department agents and devices were also watching them closely.

“I’m surprised it lasted so long,” Vigil murmured, pointing at the vans and raising a finger to his lips. He flinched at a scream that came from behind them. They raced back up the hill to find an Arabic man squirming in agony upon the pavement at the junction with Cairn Terrace, screaming fragments from the Koran. There was a molten mass upon the pavement next to him which had obviously burnt through his waistband and his jacket exposing a large patch of smoking flesh upon the small of his back.

Several armed policemen arrived and pushed the Brothers out of the way to drag the writhing man roughly to his feet and search him, finding several clips of ammunition for the gun that was now just a pool of glowing metal on the pavement. Already, reporters and cameramen had disgorged from the vans and were racing up the hill towards them as Vigil despaired being at a loss as to why Gemma had done this. Then the ominous graffiti upon the nearby wall caught his eye: ‘*The only good Freak is a dead Freak!*’ and ‘*Burn Down the Fucking House!*’.

One of the shaken agents turned to him: “We’ll take this man into custody for questioning,” he said grimly as a Department car turned into the Rise. “We can’t let him talk to the press. Stone and Charren will want to know how the hell he got so close to the family after the last two. I hope you know what you’re dealing with, Brothers,” he added in an urgent whisper as the reporters arrived and the molten metal sagged through the tarmac of the pavement. “Because we sure as hell don’t.”

Business As Usual

“It’s official, Councillor,” Doctor Roxworth declared, placing his report gingerly on Sifford’s desk. “With the exception of Cath Palug, there hasn’t been a single incident of paranormal activity reported in the valley since... since the *incident* that culminated at the Brenin. It doesn’t mean that it’s *stopped*,” he qualified quickly. “But it has gone quiet except for Kirkwall of course. He’s planning to sue the House, the council and the Lewises for the damage to his precious Occult Emporium. As you know, the council retrieved the Cithis obelisk, the thumb stone, from his cellar a week last Monday so I can’t understand why he was so uncivil to me yesterday.”

Councillor Michael Sifford, the portly Council Leader, was standing at his Town hall office window with his hands clasped behind his broad back, gazing at the bustling activity in the spacious Memorial Square below. “The man started unravelling,” he said absently. “When all those statue parts materialized and wrecked his shop and the thumb stone appearing in his cellar during the Transcending completely unhinged him. The House offered him more than enough compensation but he turned it down. His insurance company has lost patience with him and so have I. So many others in this town lost loved ones or suffered injury that I can’t bear to listen to his pathetic whingeing. I’ve had him banned from the Town Hall.”

He fell silent, thinking of the extraordinary events he had witnessed at the Brenin Hotel a mere two weeks ago. The Transcending had left him with little tolerance for mundane council matters and the closed and shallow minds of his fellow councillors. He’d rung Tully several times this morning to see if he was back at work on the pretext of discussing the council contract with the agency but his mobile had been switched off. It could only mean one thing. ‘*So, my premonition is true,*’ he thought to himself with a wry smile. ‘*The Queen has finally slipped off the chessboard after sacrificing the King.*’

He vividly recalled Thomas Lewis becoming as transparent as glass, blazing with a bitter, blinding light as he rose from the floor of the Brenin lounge, the essence of the Aberration, the Fallen Ones, locked within the beating of his fragile human heart. He had experienced something that no film-maker, no animator, no poet could ever do justice to yet he was dogged by this strange and painful... *emptiness*.

He knew he was being churlish but he would have welcomed a few words of solace from Thomas before he *transcended* - some reward for his efforts because it had cost him so much politically - even his oldest and most unquestioning ally, John Irish, was begging him to publicly disown the Lewises. One of the Cwm Crwys opposition councillors had died and Irish was up there contesting the election and reporting back that the Lewises were