

# LEVER

## The Second Book of The Path Transcendent

(First Edition)

### WEB SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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## Capel Cairn

Graham Lewis walked slowly through the graveyard of Capel Cairn. He was watched in sullen silence by three teenage boys seated upon a large memorial stone. The oldest of the three glanced up at the white-washed walls and grimy windows of the chapel and shivered a little in the cold March air. Kyle Williams was fourteen, video-hardened, fist-hardened and unafraid of anything - even the ghosts that haunted this forsaken bone yard.

Graham was now standing respectfully in front of a simple, neatly-kept grave. Kyle wondered if he was a wrestler because he had a brutish, bearded face and the brown leather jacket was stretched tightly across a massive chest. Graham's powerful hands were clasped together with the fingers interlocked as he stared intently at the headstone, ignoring the three boys completely.

Kyle knew every word on every stone in Capel Cairn and that one read: *'Gregory Lewis. Son of Josiah and Rebecca Lewis. Beloved husband of Carol and beloved father of Thomas, Graham and Claire. Taken at last by the Black Cat Mines. Rest in Peace'*.

There was several minutes of awkward silence and Kyle, despite himself, felt moved by curiosity to speak. "My Dad says there's no body buried in there, mister," he said insolently. "The box was empty he says, 'cause he knows the undertaker, see, who told us there was something well odd about the funeral."

His younger cousin, Taz Williams, could not resist going one better. "Well, my Mam reckons that nutter in Ayr Street done the old man in. And he got Doc Ferris to cover for him, see?" he said slowly, keeping a wary eye on the huge and brooding man nearby.

Kyle rubbed at his pale face and yawned. This was getting boring. He took another swig from his can of White Fire Cider and contemplated the sweet warmth in his stomach and turned to stare moodily up at the fields beyond Cithis Farm on the slopes of Mynydd Ci. The breeze was a gentle westerly and he could smell the stink of the pig sties. It was also lambing season, he remembered, perhaps they could steal one. Or stone one to death. Nah, he thought lazily and sighed. Too much effort.

He was passing the can of cider to his friend, Jason Howells, when it was intercepted by the largest hand he had ever seen. Kyle was stunned: the stranger had moved across to them quickly and in complete silence. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as the man poured the cider away, nonchalantly crushed the can into a small shapeless ball and tossed it accurately into a nearby bin.

"Yeah, right," said Jason sarcastically. "Nice one. Thanks a bunch, mister. You one of them paedos or what? "

## Capel Cairn

The three boys were seated on a massive, granite memorial stone that capped a family grave but vandals, armed with metal poles and bars, had levered it out of position exposing the naked earth beneath. Graham laid his shoulder against one corner of the stone and effortlessly heaved the huge slab, with all three boys still seated upon it, back into position with a grinding of tortured stone.

Graham turned to Jason, whose mouth was hanging open. “For your information, lad,” he said icily. “The family grave you three are sitting on belongs to my mother’s family while this grave contains the remains of my father. You may not remember me but I know your Mams really well and I don’t think they would be happy to know about you getting pissed on cheap cider in a graveyard.”

“No future, no jobs, no point,” Kyle intoned calmly. “Besides, Gates doesn’t mind us being here as long as we don’t vandalise the graves ‘cos he knows we got nowhere else to go. We can’t go down the Rec ‘cos of the Top boys and the mountain is dead boring. If you says you knows my Mam then you’ll know she has so much booze in the house that she and my Dad never notices if a can goes missing. So don’t go threatening us, okay?”

Graham stared at him and Kyle realised that he was sweating despite the chill in the air and, to his horror, he could not meet that gaze.

Finally, Graham turned his attention to Taz.

“That ‘nutter’, as you called him, is my *brother*,” he said darkly. “He did *not* kill our Dad. The coal dust did. I think your Mam had better watch her mouth unless she wants us Lewises on her doorstep.”

Taz gulped and went ashen but he impressed Kyle by refusing to be intimidated. “So why does nobody go near his house in Ayr Street and why have all the neighbours put their houses up for sale then?”

Graham pondered for a moment and pain filled his eyes. “It’s a fact of life, son,” he said finally. “People are always afraid of anything out of the ordinary. Not that it’s any of your business, but we took out a club full of Top Boys last year. We beat the holy crap out of them but one got a lucky shot in and near-blinded my brother so he has to keep indoors until the doctors can sort his eyes out. After all that, *Kyle*, he could do without fat, useless, drunken cows like your Mam spreading rumours.”

Kyle was stung to defend his mother even though he despised her. “You can’t scare us,” he snarled up at Graham. “My Mam is... ”

He could not speak any further as a hand the size of his head clamped about his throat and lifted him up effortlessly until his face was level with that of Graham who grinned amiably at him.

“Listen, *boy*. I am *not* your fucking social worker so don’t think for a moment that I wouldn’t rip your head off. So. Piece of advice. *Nobody* messes with the Lewises – unless they want to end up like the Sheppards. I am going

to put you down without snapping your neck but I don't want to see you or your little friends by these two graves again, understand?"

The other hand shot out and gripped Taz by the throat and he too dangled as helpless as a rag doll. "And if I ever, *ever* catch you spitting on *my* father's grave again," his captor growled. "Your Mam will need an instruction manual to put you back together."

He gently lowered them to the ground and the three boys stood in a line in front of him. He studied each of them closely in turn until all three felt as if their legs were turning to jelly. After what seemed like an eternity, he pointed to graveyard gates. "Now, if you don't mind, lads, I want a little privacy so I'd like the three of you to *piss off!*"

Without a murmur or a single backward glance they trudged angrily towards the gates and after watching them leave, Graham sank to one knee and placed a hand on his father's headstone. There were tears in his eyes.

"Dad, it's been nearly a year," he said quietly. "Sorry I haven't been up much to help Claire with the grave and stuff but I've been picking up a few hobbles and got tied up selling off the business while Hannah's been busy with the review work and the part-time teaching."

He laughed briefly. "I ended up with a hundred hours of community service for last year's fight but the sale has paid off the legal bills and the mortgages. When I'm not doing the odd fiddle, I'm up at the gym three nights a week now. Fair's fair though - I usually have the kids all day but Hannah seems permanently mad at me as she says I can't cook or clean the house properly no matter how hard I try."

"As you know, Claire finally divorced Mike and got custody of the kids but he had her prosecuted for assault but now she's found all this kiddie-porn on his computer, he's been arrested instead. I hope they throw away the key. So that's the news, Dad. Anyway, I've got to go: I promised I'd pop in and see Thomas while I was up here but to be honest, Dad, I *hate* visiting him: I can't even *look* at his face without that damn stigmata of his getting in the way - but I'll try. He is my brother, after all."

"Oh, and Tamsin says 'hi' and Gemma says she bets there are carousels in heaven. She made this for you," he added, carefully placing a tiny crêpe-paper rose on the grave.

He patted the headstone awkwardly and stood up. He blew his nose loudly and wiped his eyes with a handkerchief before mopping up the offending sputum from the lettering with a handful of leaves and grass.

Kyle had watched Graham for a few moments through the railings before going down the steps onto Ayr Street to join the two younger boys who were subdued, standing with their shoulders hunched and hoods pulled up to completely hide their faces.

## Capel Cairn

Some crew, he thought. They were making a name for themselves as a thorough nuisance in the Old Town shopping areas but they would never beat the Top Boys at this rate.

“We’re going to bell up number thirty-two,” he decided. “We need to show them that the Old Town Posse is still in charge.”

Unconvinced, the others followed him at a distance until they reached the Lewis family house and looked at it disdainfully. The window-box sported long-dead flowers, the blue paint was starting to peel and all the curtains were closed as they always were. A thin wisp of smoke coiled up from the chimney which meant that their intended target was at home. Good, thought Kyle and pressed the doorbell button.

Unknown to him, seated in shadows in a large leather armchair in the front room, someone was watching him. The sunglasses, walls and curtains might as well have been made of glass for they did not hide Kyle from that dreadful gaze. The wiry frame and ginger hair, the arrogance and contempt on that thin teen face were all clearly revealed to the watcher within who raised a hand and grinned savagely.

Jason and Taz felt a strange numbness spread up their fingers and toes then their breath began to steam in the air about them. They looked at each other nervously then edged back up the road back towards Capel Cairn where the chill abated and they could rub some life back into their hands. Kyle watched them go with contempt and turned back to jab at the doorbell button again then jumped: in those seconds of distraction the door had been opened without a sound but there was no-one in the hallway.

Puzzled, he looked back at his two friends waiting by the chapel. When he looked back the door had inexplicably and silently closed again. “This is really cool,” he said aloud. Hardened by the horrors of cyber-space, he was intrigued rather than frightened and went to ring the doorbell again but instead his finger jabbed into plain wood-work. The button was now on the *other* side of the door-frame. It was crusted with old paint and could not have been moved recently but, somehow just now, it had.

Undeterred, he pressed it again, and was rewarded to see a shadow approach the grimy frosted-glass pane set in the centre of the door and he got ready to shout obscenities and run. With a sinking heart, he realised the shadow was on the door as well which meant it had to be made by someone standing behind him...

He whirled around to find his nose almost touching the huge chest of Graham Lewis who loomed over him. Kyle could not believe such a big man could creep up on him that quickly without making a sound. He was not surprised that the two younger boys had fled without warning him.

There was no way he could dart around this monster and the next thing he knew was a brief burst of stars as he collected a slap across the back of the

head and the indignity of being propelled up Ayr Street with a hefty kick in the seat of his pants. "Kyle," Graham called after him. "Tell your Mam and your Dad that I'll be over later to have a little *chat* about you."

Kyle slouched away angrily up the street to his home at number two and opened the door. Only as he entered the house did he raise a defiant finger at his tormentor and quickly slammed the door behind him.

"Kyle," came his mother's voice from the kitchen where she was burning the dinner. "Your Dad's out back and he wants a word with you."

Graham angrily yanked open the curtains to let the bright daylight stream into the dusty front room. "Tom, you *can't* sit in the dark forever," he growled through gritted teeth. "You have *got* to get out. You look awful. The local kids are getting curious and that means hassle."

His older brother was dressed in a creased grey T-shirt and jeans with only a pair of sandals on his feet. He was slumped in one of the arm-chairs with his saturnine face pale and his black hair, which had not been cut for months, straggling lank and uncombed to his shoulders. He still looked athletic but his skin was pale and tinged with an unhealthy pallor.

He wore thick, black sunglasses and Graham shuddered as he glimpsed the stigmata - as they called the phenomena - at work behind the lenses.

Thomas held up a book in front of his face. "I've been practising!" he laughed mirthlessly. "Do you know I can now read every word on every page without even opening the cover?"

"Yes, I know this," Graham sighed. "It's like that old B-movie we loved to watch as kids, the one where that mad scientist treats his eyes until he can see right through the universe and looks into the Eye of God."

Thomas snatched off his sunglasses and glared up at his younger brother. "*If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out,*" he said bitterly. "Only in my case it wouldn't make the blindest bit of difference!"

As usual, Graham could only stare with morbid fascination. Thomas's eyes were a dark purple apart from the pupils but, worse still, in front of the eyes, was a *writhing* purple glow. Graham knew that it was a *psychic* manifestation of his brother's talent reaching into this world: it wasn't real but when you tried to focus on it there was a twisting sensation at the back of the head as your brain vainly tried to interpret what you were 'seeing'

It was an uneasy reminder of the fact that Thomas could 'see' right through flesh and bone and effortlessly 'take' his every thought.

Because of this phenomena, Thomas could only bear short trips to the local shop when he knew it would be empty of customers and relied on Claire to do the main shopping for him. He had tried for months to find a 'cure' but all his research and efforts had turned up nothing.

“I prefer the curtains closed as there is no darkness for me anymore,” Thomas said in a chilling, matter-of-fact tone. “The world is an open book and a closed door to me. Gah! It’s their *minds*, Graham! I just can’t handle the *stink* of so many ignorant, ill-educated minds! But,” he sighed, waving an arm around the room. “This is all I have – sorry, all *we* have. Home! Be it ever so humble! The thing is: I am as truly happy here as I would be anywhere else and, luckily for me, I have some income thanks to Young Doctor Ferris signing me off as permanently disabled.”

“Hannah sends her regards, Tom,” Graham said with a forced cheerfulness as Thomas replaced his sunglasses. “She’s taken the girls down to Edith’s to see Mam for a while. Mam says she hasn’t seen you for over a week and she’s worried.”

Thomas shrugged and leaned forward to pour himself and his brother mugs of tea from the teapot on their mother’s prized coffee-table. “Mam’s fine living with Edith and it’s impossible for me to get about like this,” he pointed out. “I tried to buy a newspaper on Sunday but I lost concentration and the lass at the counter damn near fainted. Oh, and another thing: that bitch who used to work at the Brenin has been stirring things up but the local rag backed off when I threatened them with legal action. I can’t afford any more exposure or I’m going to get lunatics hammering at the door twenty-four hours a day never mind the kids messing me about.”

Graham swallowed hard and sat down in the other armchair and sipped at the tea. Despite the fire in the grate, the room felt cold and the sight of his brother’s face, as ever, thieved the heat from his bones. He could not get used to the stigmata no matter how hard he tried.

“I can damp it down but I can’t control it completely,” Thomas said suddenly, ‘taking’ his brother’s thoughts. “Believe me, I’m really trying! I can’t put it into words but, to kill this light show, I have to kind of *deny* my own existence and my talents. Try pretending that you aren’t real for a couple of hours and you’ll see what I mean.”

“I can’t even sit out back in the sun,” he muttered quietly. “Did you see the neighbours have both put their houses up for sale? They feel unsafe in their beds, they say, as they reckon I Dad in as well as Sheppard.”

“I know, Tom,” said Graham, grimly. “I came across three little shits who said as much up at the chapel when I was visiting Dad’s grave. I still think we should have gone for a cremation.”

“We couldn’t take Dad’s remains up to the crematorium. You know that! After those cock-ups a couple of years back, the crematorium staff double-check the contents of coffins and how could we explain away the inconvenient lack of a body? Besides, Gates didn’t object to the delay and Dad had already sorted out his plot up at Capel Cairn. Point of principle, he said, after what had happened to his parents all those years ago.”



“Pity we couldn’t get Bridewell in to bury him,” Graham said.

“Bridewell almost had a total breakdown after his place on Digwell Street was badly damaged when Dad’s body disappeared,” Thomas reminded him. “And according to Edith, he’s developed one mother of a tic whenever someone mentions us. So it had to be Chappells - with Pricey’s help of course.”

“Yes, but don’t forget the little extras to Pricey’s mates for their discretion about the coffin contents - or rather the lack of them,” Graham noted sourly. “And we have a lot to thank Young Doctor Ferris for. He really came through for us.”

“The Ferrises have seen a lot of strange things in this town but he *has* become very friendly with Jimmy and Elinor up at the Brenin,” Thomas laughed ironically. “Isn’t it strange? The very people who set out to expose us less than a year ago are now the only people willing to help the family.”

“There is nothing odd about that, Tom. Jimmy always wanted to help you. He’s still curious about you, I’ll grant you that, but I don’t think he wants to plug you into a computer again. Besides, he has his hands full keeping his job at the University with his sponsors being awkward and the secret services still investigating that caretaker that went missing.”

“What about Elinor’s annoying little brother?”

“George rang Hannah at work the other week,” Graham said warily. “He’s had visits from Charren who just sits and stares at him, asking the same questions over and over again. George wants to move back to the Brenin as all his work is getting blocked from higher up.”

“Really?” Thomas exclaimed, sitting up in his chair. “I *knew* they wouldn’t let it go! What about Gemma? Has anyone been snooping around her lately?”

“No,” Graham said with some relief. “Thank God, she’s reasonably happy at the new school and keeps her... talents well hidden. But she finds the school routine dull and the teachers can’t cope with all the books she sneaks in. The headmaster called me in the other day to complain about it.”

“Books?” asked Thomas, delighted.

“Yeah. Descartes and Newton. Einstein and Hawkins,” Graham grinned proudly. “She’s on the net all the time. She’s like a vacuum cleaner, sucking up knowledge so fast that even Hannah can’t keep up! She called me a classic paternal empiricist the other day and I’m still trying to work out whether it was an insult or a compliment. It’s not funny, Tom.”

“I’m sure she meant it as a compliment. What about Tamsin?”

“Oh, she’s as normal as you could want. Thumps Gemma over the head with a teddy bear every now and then to get attention. That sort of thing. Has tantrums. Wets the bed occasionally. Doesn’t like broccoli.”

“Especially the way you cook it,” laughed Thomas.

“Oh, ho, very amusing. What’s that?”

## Capel Cairn

There was another sharp smack of a small stone hitting a bedroom window pane and Graham pushed a curtain aside to see Jason and Taz running away up the street.

“Thank God we’re not at the end of a terrace,” he noted angrily. “Or we’d be much more vulnerable. You’re going to become a target for every little shit in Pontybrenin at this rate, Tom. Those two were at Capel Cairn earlier. I can see I’m going to need that little *chat* with their parents and see if I can nip this in the bud.”

“Relax! I *knew* the stones wouldn’t do any damage,” Thomas assured him. “I can handle things if it gets any worse. I have a few tricks of my own, remember?” he laughed and wriggled his fingers theatrically.

Graham glared down at his older brother.

“Tom, you know damn well it *is* going to get worse and you will have no choice but to do... *whatever* it is that you and Gemma do. *That’s* what scares the shit out of me.”

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## Donald Street

Gemma Lewis sat half-doing in an armchair by the fire thinking about her ninth birthday party. Several of her classmates had been invited over and Tamsin, her younger sister, had been allowed to bring some of her new school friends as well. It had been a *disaster*.

The games her classmates wanted to play were so *dull* but they got on so well with her cousin, Alicia, that Gemma had ended up alone in a corner at her own birthday party. Even Derek, Alicia's cheeky younger brother, had given up on her after a couple of half-hearted insults.

Worse still, her mother and Aunt Claire had tried, again and again, to rally attention around her which only made her embarrassment a hundred times worse. While all this was going on, Tamsin, oblivious to everything, had led a small but cheerful rag-tag rabble racing around the feet of the increasingly desperate adults who eventually forgot about dragging Gemma back into the rough and tumble of the party.

Tamsin was now bouncing up and down on the lap of Grammy's old friend, Edith Green, in a cheerful but determined manner and continually interrupted the adult conversation until the last piece of the chocolate Swiss roll was surrendered into her hands.

"Don't you *dare* look so smug, you little horror!" Hannah laughed, ruffling her daughter's short black silky hair. She fished out Tamsin's tattered teddy bear from a shopping bag and sat both child and bear down in a chair by the television to watch some garish cartoons.

Gemma yawned and rested her chin on a hand to watch the adults, content to be back in Pontybrenin for a while. Somehow, sitting in this old lady's house and being surrounded by all this wonderful bric-a-brac, fading sepia photographs, ticking clocks and a *real* coal fire, made her feel *safe*.

She knew, with all the panic about the environment on the television, that burning coal was almost an act of civil disobedience. She looked up at the little bit of sky she could see through the back window. It was an innocent blue with the occasional tuft of cumulus scooting past but only last week three villages had been flattened by the country's worst tornado disaster and the news programs were full of global warming stories again.

"Have you noticed that Tamsin doesn't seem to move like a child these days?" Edith was saying shrewdly as Carol poured her a cup of tea. "She makes no sound when she moves and when she was out in the garden just now, she jumped straight up onto the garden wall."

Hannah was a little nonplussed. “So what, Edith. Why is that unusual? She *is* very athletic and we think she’ll make a good gymnast. After all, I was in the County gymnastics team when I was only twelve.”

Edith sniffed as she stirred her tea. “I was quite the tomboy when I was young,” she said. “But in all my years I have *never* seen a five-year-old leap onto a six foot wall from a *standing* start! Call me old-fashioned if you like but it isn’t natural. Frightened the life out of old Mrs Cox.”

Gemma thought adults were *so* slow at times. Of *course* Tamsin was special but she was special in a purely *physical* way - like their father was. Hannah was looking at Tamsin suspiciously and she desperately tried to block out her mother’s emotions and thoughts but failed.

Since Bute Terrace, Hannah could detect even the gentlest of intrusions into her mind and she glared across the room at her daughter with narrowed eyes. “*Don’t you dare!*” she mouthed.

Carol shifted her ample bulk in the chair to distract Edith more than anything else. “How long do you think Graham is going to be up at the chapel, Hannah?” she asked.

Hannah looked at her watch. “Oh, he’s only been gone an hour and he did say he was going to look in on Thomas,” she said.

“I tell you that boy of mine is going to martyr himself soon unless he gets a bloody grip!” Carol sighed theatrically. “Poor old Claire has enough on her plate without doing his shopping for him as well.”

Edith looked across the room at Gemma who was idly inspecting some medals laid out on a little table next to her chair. “Those are my father’s medals,” she said proudly. “And that’s my father-in-law’s VC from when he served with the Polish regiments. Do you remember my Dad, Carol?”

“Course I do, bless him,” Carol laughed. “Your father was a lovely man and got on all right with my Dad but he didn’t take to Gregory’s parents when they bought that shop down on the Fairbanks.”

“The kids used to love the old shop when Josiah and Rebecca were there but Dafydd ran the business into the ground,” Edith sighed nostalgically. “The whole place was a *museum!* Pots, pans, rakes, onions – everything seemed to hang from the ceilings and where that stuffed bear came from I’ll never know. The first thing old Greener did, when he bought the shop off Dafydd, was to put poor old Bruin on a bonfire. Broke the kids’ hearts round here when he did that, I can tell you.”

The air was full of Death and the spiteful whine of ricochets. The world was a shallow foxhole full of mud and terrified infantry. The horizon was a low ruined wall off to the right, seductive in its offer of cover, and a shattered tree to the left which continually shed pieces of bark and splinters as bullets slammed into it. There was a barked command and they leapt up from the

foxhole and ran, keeping as low as possible towards the relative safety of the wall. Enemy machine guns, positioned further up the slope, opened up and tracer bullets scythed towards them.

They returned fire as they ran and Gemma threw grenades at the machine gun nests putting one of them out of action. Gemma felt something slam into her and she sank down behind the wall to press a hand against her stomach. She looked down to see what was causing this terrible warm, wet *agony* and gasped. There was blood oozing between her thick, tobacco-stained fingers...

“*Gemma!*”.

Gemma stared transfixed as her hands returned to normal and the blood upon them faded, becoming aware of a heavy silence in the room. She knew better but the vision had been too powerful: “Your Dad was wounded in Italy, wasn’t he?” she exclaimed. “He got shot in the stomach while throwing a grenade at a machine gun nest! Huh? Oh, *sorry*, Mum!”.

She winced at the anger in her mother’s elfin face and saw her grandmother bite at her lower lip in the awkward silence that followed.

“No,” Edith said quietly, ignoring the two women. “It was my father-in-law. He took out several machine gun posts in a battle in Italy at a place called Monte Cassino. He survived his injuries and settled in Wales but he was left with terrible health problems for the rest of his life.”

“Oh don’t look at me like that, Carol!” she chided. “I’ve known you all for most of my life and even my Bill knew more than you think and he wasn’t the brightest bulb in the Christmas tree, bless him. You’ve been with me for nine months here and I’m a nosey old cow and you’re not too careful on the phone either. You forget I’m in the room sometimes.”

Hannah’s heart sank like a stone. “Look Edith, we all had a rough time last year but it isn’t what you think...” she said quickly.

Edith drew herself up and stared hard at Hannah. “Oh, please! I may be seventy in age but not in I.Q.! I believe there are things we are never meant to understand - not even the Reverend Gates, bless him. Thomas gives me the creeps with those dark glasses of his and my eyes water whenever I look into his face. Your Graham is unusually strong as well, don’t forget. Everyone knows he lifted two men clean off their feet in the Otter.”

“Everybody round here knows that Josiah and Rebecca were mediums,” she continued remorselessly. “And these girls of yours are *clearly* not run of the mill either. Oh, don’t you go tutting at me, Carol Lewis! You’ve been reading the tea leaves at the Hall yourself, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but that was only a little bit of fun, Edith.”

“Really? Well, fun or not, your ‘lucky’ numbers were nearly a hundred per cent accurate. You don’t know yet but those numbers you gave to the Ford sisters came up on the lottery. They won ten thousand pounds – not that you’ll get so much as a thank you from those tight-fisted cows.”

“Pure coincidence!” Carol snorted. “I have absolutely no talent at all!”

Edith smiled at the outburst and felt a little smug at the consternation clearly written on Carol and Hannah’s faces. “So, with all that, I am not surprised one little bit that Gemma has a touch of the second sight and your Tamsin is more cat than kid,” she concluded triumphantly.

“Mee-ow!” Tamsin shouted over her shoulder and giggled.

“You do surprise me at times, Edith,” Carol said a little dejectedly. “But I can’t fault you as a friend to me and my family.”

“God knows I’m really grateful for the company, Carol! Since Bill died I’ve found living on my own hard to bear. On the plus side: it’s rarely dull with you lot around. Now, to add to the mystery,” she smiled mischievously. “This letter came this morning. I haven’t a clue who it’s for but it’s from America and it’s addressed to a Miss Leanan Sid-*hee*. I think that’s how you pronounce it. S-I-D-H-E is how it’s spelt anyway.”

She looked up at Hannah who had gone grey. “Hmm. I *thought* it might be for you,” she said innocently, handing Hannah the letter with a flourish.

Gemma came and stood next to her mother’s chair as she opened the envelope. “It’s for me, Mum! See there? It’s from that Eileen O’Grady we saw at the fair. You remember? She had a speaker under the table and Tarot cards up her shawl and I blessed her.”

“Blessed her?” said Carol and Edith in puzzled unison.

Hannah sucked at her lower lip before replying: “Claire and I took the kids to the fair in the Court Lane car park last year and we met this old fraud working under the name Madame Mirabilis.”

“I remember you telling me that Gemma saw right through her,” Carol exclaimed. “And she packed her bags and went off somewhere after she gave you that warning for Thomas.”

“Too many of these mystic con-artists around,” Edith said angrily. “With these supernatural conferences getting bigger every year because of the town’s reputation, we’ve got Tarot shops and mediums and all sorts springing up everywhere. Gates was going on at sermon last Sunday about all the witchcraft stuff in the shops. Ouija boards and all that.”

Carol drank a little more tea and clinked the cup noisily back onto the saucer. “Why can’t they all grow up?” she demanded. “We’ve even got those All Seeing Eye people going round the place in their white suits, selling bags of those flowers they say fell out of the sky last year. Drugs more like! They’re even more annoying than those damn Hari Krishnas.”

Hannah was astonished at the outrage of the two older women. “Don’t you think they have a right to practice their non-violent religions?” she said reasonably. “But this is perfect as far as I’m concerned,” she added with a smile. “Having all these cultists and ley-line lunatics around town has kept the

press away from Thomas and Gemma. Nobody out there knows what happened at Bute Terrace and we all kept our heads at the inquests.”

“We owe Sergeant Price so much you know,” Carol declared wearily, massaging the bridge of her nose. “He convinced everyone that drugs caused the death of those two thugs up by the Rest and that Paul Sheppard committed suicide after shooting Dan and wounding him and Graham.”

“How is Graham now?” Edith asked Hannah. “He was shot twice, wasn’t he? In the stomach and the shoulder? Terrible to think of all that trouble on the estate, but at least it got rid of the Sheppards. Everyone says there’s a lot less crime now with Paul and Dan gone and the two brothers still inside.”

“Graham was fine, Edith,” Hannah lied. “The bullet grazed his shoulder and the other went through his side but just missed his kidney, thank God! He was well enough to go back on site in a month. He healed really quickly and now he’s free of looking after his business, he does a few odd-jobs but at least he has plenty of time for the kids while I’m at work.”

Edith gave her a disbelieving look but let it pass. “Well, he was luckier than that poor sergeant,” she observed. “He has to use a walking stick and they would have pensioned him off but for this shortage of decent officers. The pair of them are heroes to most people in the town – charging in like that and saving everybody *and* for getting rid of the Sheppards.”

Hannah laughed wryly. “It did help with the court case back home. He got a hundred hours of community service which he really enjoyed doing.”

Gemma was fidgeting impatiently and held out her hand. “Mum! You *know* the letter is for me,” she begged. “Can I have it, *please*?”

“Oh, all right, Gem, but read it out. I’m curious to know what happened to the old faker.”

Gemma wrinkled up her nose at her mother who smiled back at her. “She wasn’t all bad, Mum,” she protested. “She really *was* Mirabilis and Feithleinn O’Cruachran even though she was only pretending to see things in her crystal ball but she did try to help people. Wow! Look! She’s sent me a signed photo of her and her daughter in America. It’s not a long letter but she writes really nicely with all these funny swirls and neat lines.”

“It’s called copperplate writing,” Hannah said looking at the letter. “Don’t keep us all in suspenders, Gem, read it out.”

“Hello, little Leanan,” Gemma began, mimicking the old woman’s Irish brogue perfectly. “After you laid your blessed hands on me I saw things so clearly! I went straight home and packed away the tent and my nonsense for good and got out my savings and locked up my little cottage and went and did something I should have done twelve years ago. I went and made it up with my daughter and gave her all her grandmother’s books and notes and the jewellery that she wanted her to have.”

“I had such a talk with Siobhan and I said I was so sorry for being jealous of her and her grandmother’s gifts. So here I am, staying with her in her New York apartment which is incredible! She is doing so well and I keep my hand in to earn a few dollars. But guess what? Siobhan uses her gift to help lots of people but she also makes a fortune from the stressed-out millionaires who call in her services and from all those fancy books that she writes. She calls herself a ‘psychic detective’ and the New Yorkers can’t get enough of her! Was I ever the fool for charging pennies for reading palms and Tarot cards when I could have been charging dollars!”

Edith looked at the photograph and the signature in amazement, “I know her!” she gasped in delight. “She’s *the* Siobhan O’Grady! She’s been on all those chat shows lately plugging her books! Well, I never!”

Gemma gave her a pained look at the interruption and resumed reading out the letter: “Siobhan said she ‘felt’ what you did. She said it was like a big bell ringing all across the world. She said one great evil was gone but so many others remain. She says no matter what you do, they always find a way to come back.”

“She says hello to you and asked me to thank you for stopping the Ban. She had a run in with it during one of her cases and it scared her near to death. Since then she’s met this wonderful man with a strange name called Thomas Imwellith who drinks too much but has been such a help to her lately. She says he knows a lot about you and your family.”

“I wonder,” Gemma said half-aloud.

“What do you mean, Gem?” Hannah asked.

“Oh, nothing Mum. It’s just that Imwellith sounds like the Welsh word for ‘visitor’. She says here that Siobhan is worried that we might be in for more trouble and... she’s had premonitions of me lying dead in a black church! This is *so* cool! She says I should keep away from the three headless bishops, the Eye inside the Triangle, the Eater of Souls, the Fallen Father and the Grey Man. Wic-ked!” she grinned excitedly.

“And she says she’ll pray for us and not to worry. She says Siobhan will be over soon to promote her latest book and they might drop in to say hello if we give her a contact number. Ahh, that’s nice! She said: ‘bless you Leanan, I will carry your Blessed Light with me always.’ she laughed delightedly as she turned the letter over. “PS Siobhan knew where to send the letter. She is pretty good at this you know! Love you, Wee Phouka! Feithleinn.”

Gemma held the letter to her chest and sniffed back tears of joy. “Wasn’t that *nice* of her, Mum?” she sighed. “She did so much for me, you know. She showed me how not to be afraid of who and what I am!”

“Er, what exactly are we talking about here?” said Edith, looking totally bewildered. “What exactly *is* a ‘Leanan Sid-hee’?”



Carol sagged back in to her armchair and rubbed at her forehead wearily, gazing fondly at her grand-daughter. "It's pronounced more like 'Shee', Edith. It's an old Irish name for the fairy folk and the Leanan is a kind of queen," she smiled proudly. "Show Edith what you can do, Gemma. She's been playing the detective, badgering old Myrfyr, going to the library and all sorts. Show her or she'll never stop snooping otherwise."

Edith looked abashed but Carol laughed at her, not unkindly. "Jimmy told me what you've been up to, Edith," she said.

Edith had the grace to look a little sheepish. "Hmph! Now *there's* a man who can't keep a confidence!" she grumbled. "You know I can't abide mysteries, Carol. Now, what did you say Gemma was?"

"A Tuatha, Auntie Edith," said Gemma proudly. "I'm a throwback to the old days. A Phouka! A wee Queen o' the fairies! A Leanan-Sidhe!"

She did a little curtsy and sat on the arm of her mother's chair and Hannah, hating every moment of this, squeezed her hand. Carol reached over to grab Hannah's other hand. "Edith needs to see," she insisted. "She needs to know *exactly* why you're so worried for Gemma."

Edith looked into the little girl's deep brown eyes and was startled to see a yellow glow form in the pupils. A tingling sensation rippled across her forehead, reminding her of the few times that Thomas had visited.

Suddenly, there were noises *inside* her head. She could make out the sounds of children in a school playground. Happy sounds. The lapping of river water. Leaves rustling in a warm, dry breeze. The distant forlorn jingle of an ice cream van. They coalesced into words inside her mind. '*How do you like this, Auntie Edith?*,' said Gemma, without moving her lips. '*Now watch what a Leanan can really do!*'

Edith's cup and saucer slid across the table and the teapot rose into the air and tea poured from the spout into the cup. The teapot settled back onto its mat and the milk jug repeated the process. The cup and saucer then slid slowly back across the coffee table to halt in front of Edith whose eyes were now as round as her saucers. A teaspoon rose up into the air and floated towards the sugar bowl but it clattered noisily back onto the table.

"Oops! Sorry about that," Gemma said aloud, pouting at her mother. "But Mum *never* lets me practice around the house."

"It's like having a TV remote in her head," Hannah explained weakly. "I'm worried she'll end up as the psychic equivalent of a couch potato if I let her do it all the time. You alright, Edith?"

"Bless me, yes," Edith answered shakily. "Myrfyr tried to explain it all to me. Telepathy and telekinesis. Speaking without words, he said. Moving without touching." She let out a huge breath and gingerly picked up the cup and saucer. "It's going to take some getting used to and no mistake."

Hannah felt she had to make the point. “You *can't* go around telling anyone about this, Edith,” she said dejectedly. “It already feels like the world and his dog knows about her and God knows what that Siobhan meant about Grey Men and headless bishops,” she added, shivering. “I’ve a good mind to write and tell her to stop frightening Gemma!”

“I’m not frightened, Mum, but I will be careful!” Gemma said happily. Then her heart leapt. She could sense someone approaching the front door. There was a sensation of ‘colour’ flaring in her mind – a searing orange flecked with an unpleasant black that reminded her of the first time she had met George Tully at the Brenin. It was not a pleasant aura and it reminded her strongly of the smell of stale, nervous sweat.

There were vivid images. A naked woman tied to a bed. Words. Words as sharp as knives. A Name. Fear. *Anger*.

“What’s the matter, Gem?” Carol demanded with some concern.

“Mum!” Gemma said with despair in her voice. “There’s a reporter about to knock the door! That woman who used to work at the Brenin’s been telling him things again and he’s out to ask questions about me and uncle Thomas. Just a second... yes, got it! It’s Derek Williams.”

“Oh, *him!*” said Carol derisively. “I wish I had been there to see Claire bust his nose in the Otter! He writes such *drivel* in the Post. They have him covering all the supernatural guff in his column. Trouble is, he mentions us when he bangs on about Bute Terrace and the ghosts at the Brenin...”

“Don’t remind me of *that*,” Hannah shuddered, rubbing automatically at the faint scars along her right forearm.

“He’s brought up the school, the King’s Head and Bridewell’s place,” Carol continued. “But all he can say is we were present at most of it. Lucky for us, nobody round here believes a word he writes.”

“Thank God,” said Hannah with feeling. Then the doorbell rang.

“*I’ll* deal with this,” Edith declared firmly, going to the door.

Raised voices sounded in the hallway and they heard Edith telling him in acid tones that Carol was not in and wouldn’t answer his stupid questions anyway before slamming the door in the startled reporter’s face.

“Bless you,” Carol said warmly as her friend sat back down in her chair looking both exhilarated and pleased with herself. “You’re Sherlock Holmes *and* a spin doctor all rolled into one!” she grinned. “Just when I think I know everything about you, Edith, you always catch me out!”

## The Grey Man

George Tully was busy in his seedy bedsit, hastily stuffing his clothes and his few remaining possessions into a rucksack and a tattered suitcase. ‘*Gods,*’ he thought angrily to himself. ‘*How did I let myself get reduced from a three-bedroom flat in the Mall to a pit like this?*’.

He paused in his packing to smile at some good memories: now *those* were the days when spin doctors would pirouette just for him in the most expensive of bistros. Glorious days when ministers wept in frustration and political careers went completely tits-up with just a subtle hint here and a little speculation there. *That* was real journalism not this modern, lick-spittle, internet-driven garbage with hacks too lazy, too scared or just too damn stupid to question even the most outrageous of press releases.

But since his return to London, he’d only received one small commission from the Times and one from the Standard. Even the free papers and the e-zines were not interested in him and his web-site profiles and blogs were being mercilessly flamed by professionals. Meanwhile, interest rates wait for no poor man and his meagre savings were gone but he did feel a little happier now that he had cleared all his debts, save one.

His landlord was about to call for the rent so he was planning to perform the time-honoured tradition of doing a runner. The last of his cash was laid out on the bed since hackers had targeted his on-line accounts forcing him to withdraw his money and shut them down. In a strange way, he felt honoured that *someone* was going to so much trouble to make his life a misery.

There was nothing left in London for him now as doors were being literally slammed in his face whenever he tried to find work. He could smell fear everywhere and there were unconfirmed rumours that the Department of Security had ‘arranged’ a recent accident that had seriously injured several members of a BBC team covering the current political crisis.

McCarthyism was back with a vengeance. He’d lost count of the furtive conversations he’d had with dispirited journalists in the corners of numerous, nameless pubs. They’d all confirmed that a secret list of untouchables was now being circulated amongst their employers by a new company innocently called Business Matters Limited.

“BML’s a bloody front for the spooks, George,” muttered Bill Palmerson, an old friend from the Evening Standard days, as they had enjoyed a quiet pint in the Isle of Dogs pub, their favourite haunt.

Bill had aged badly, thought Tully, even his jowls had jowls and the suit was shiny with wear unlike the dapper Palmerson of yesteryear who had rubbed shoulders with the grandest of Tory grandees.

“They’re like the old – what was the bloody thing? – the Economic League – that’s the fella! - only this lot don’t just target the lefties,” Bill grumbled, looking over his shoulder. “It’s anybody who has the brain or the brass balls to ask *questions*. Bosses are told on the QT to buy into this list or lose their advertisers and tax breaks. *Bastards*.”

“You didn’t complain when the old League was up to its tricks,” Tully pointed out. “I seem to remember you approved of all that union-bashing!”

Bill took another enormous swig of his beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Ah! That’s the stuff! Better than bloody Pimms any bloody day of the week,” he noted happily. Then his mood changed suddenly and he looked at Tully sharply.

“The League were *wankers*, George. This lot are most certainly *not*,” he growled. “I’ve seen the lists and you, my friend, are right up there at the top. Along with all the klaxons and hooters, George. Whistles and bells. I’m surprised you don’t glow in the dark, the way they’ve got you tagged and bagged. I’ve called in *all* my considerable favours and *nobody* wants to touch you with a barge-pole. You, to paraphrase your namesake, George, are now a *non-journalist*.”

“What?” Tully spluttered in outrage. “My c.v. is impeccable! Times and Standard, Express and Mail. Jesus, I’m hardly loony left!”

“Shh!” Bill hissed at him, raising a warning hand. He leaned forward across the table to whisper: “Since the merger of all the security departments and the new funding, the spooks have been on neat testosterone. They need that new enemy within and we are *it*, my old mucker. Anyone with half a *brain*! Christ, George, just talking to you like this is enough to get me fired. From a very large cannon.”

“What happened to the *fire*, Bill?” Tully demanded of his old friend. “We had them all by the balls then, didn’t we?”

“Hah! So you think! The so-called One Hundred ran this country then and they still do now, George, only it’s a different breed of One Hundred. Just ‘cause you don’t blow the froth off the top, doesn’t mean you don’t drink the beer beneath. It’s your round, I think,” he smiled, placing his empty glass down with a thump.

Tully went to the bar and returned to find his old friend lost in thought. He placed the beers carefully on the beer mats and tore open a packet of crisps and a packet of nuts.

“Ah, how the mighty are fallen,” Bill groaned, looking with disgust at their meagre meal. “Reduced to a councillor’s lunch! It’s all they used to eat in the old days, you know. Slipping out of the town hall to plot in the nearby pubs. Cackling over their little caucuses. *Pathetic*.”

Tully sipped at his indifferent beer. “What’s the info about the new Department structure?” he asked. “It’s got all the M.I. and parts of Scotland Yard as well as Customs and Excise. It’s one hell of a beast.”

Bill drank deeply before replying. “The new Act has bugged up the whole shooting match,” he sighed. “Even the military police come under their control now and the generals do *not* bloody like it, my old mucker. They think the Department of Security is too damn powerful, George. There are no balances and checks in place!”

“Under the Act,” he grated, his face mottling with anger. “The spooks only answer to the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister or the ‘Four Fuck-wits of the Apocalypse’ as we call them. They’ve been got at, all four of the bastards. Them *and* their personal secretaries!”

“The spooks now have responsibility for military security in the UK,” he said, counting the points off on his fingers. “Ports, airports, bases, anti-terrorism, immigration, emigration, espionage, counter-espionage, badinage – the whole bloody kit and caboodle. We can’t even *list* the new powers of detention under the new D-notices they served last week. You can vanish for *months*, George, and *they* don’t have to tell *anyone*.”

“Do you know,” he continued angrily, jabbing a finger at Tully and his voice beginning to burr a little from all the beer. “The rot started ages ago when that *Labour* Government first allowed information extracted under torture to be used as evidence against suspected terrorists. Now, the new Department of Security can routinely torture *anyone* that they like under the new Security Act, based on bloody precedent.”

“Oh, come on, Bill,” Tully said despairingly. “Routine torture? Surely it’s not as bad as that?”

“Don’t be so bloody *naïve!*” Bill countered angrily, his face reddening further. “It’s already widespread! What security services in the world have *not* resorted to torture? The world is changing, my old mucker, and if Orwell was with us now he’d have this bloody great ‘told ya so’ grin all over his chops. China, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia and India are all aligned in that new trade and mutual defence agreement out there. The US has completely screwed the Americas while Europe is finally merging with Russia and could take in the whole of the Middle East - which scares the poop out of the States and China. The three power blocs Orwell predicted are in place and now we have our very own Ministry of Truth.”

“That’s nonsense,” George retorted desperately. “These are treaties not single countries and the UN and NATO are still in place.”

“The UN and NATO are irrelevant,” Bill sighed. “All I know is the level of co-operation of the security services in those blocs matches ours. Paranoia is growing. Look at cable and the net-streams, George! Nothing but wank-

and-reality shows, bingo, bid-sites and mucky videos. Some decent photographers I know spend all their time just waiting for pussy-shots of minor celebrities rather than the front-line stuff they used to do. Orwell was right: modern media is all about porn and lotteries for the proles.”

Bill looked at his watch and finished his drink hurriedly. “Got to rush, George. Got a three-hundred word editorial to dash off by five. My advice, my old mucker, is to go back to the bloody sticks and keep your head down as much as you can and *pray*.”

After Bill had gone, Tully had stared gloomily into his drink and proceeded to do the only thing a seasoned reporter like him could do under these circumstances: he got completely and absolutely pissed.

The hangover was brutal but being drunk had been an act of personal defiance: one of the few things he truly had some control over. He looked at the grubby little heap of banknotes on the bed and wished he had invested in a house years ago but now the London property bubble had burst yet again, it didn't rankle so much.

He was just about to close the suit-case when the door opened and two men in dark grey expensive suits entered. He had half-expected them but still experienced a strong urge to snatch up a pillow to cover his groin area as he felt completely naked and defenceless in their presence. There was no mistaking Charren, whom he'd first seen at the siege in Bute Terrace last year, nor his hulking associate.

“Ah, how are you, Mister Ambrose?” Tully said, recovering quickly. “I'd forgotten to ask your colleague if you'd fully recovered from that unfortunate incident last year.”

Ambrose smiled coldly at the reminder but said nothing. He ambled across the little room and rummaged through the few remaining books on the shelf above the bed. He selected one and settled himself down in the one serviceable arm-chair and began to idly flick through the pages. Tully knew that his choice of book was intentional: 1984 by George Orwell.

There were two chairs by the small dining table set against the wall and after a brief inspection for dust, Charren sat down and gestured for Tully to do likewise. Tully obeyed, knowing that it would be futile to do otherwise: Ambrose was a man who clearly enjoyed his vocation.

“Oh, do relax, Mister Tully,” Charren said gently. “We are not here to question you today, though you have been a little – um - obtuse, during my past visits. This time, I have a little proposition to help you in your somewhat straightened circumstances. That is, if I read that sad little pile of currency on the bed correctly.”

Tully later likened that smile to a fissure opening up on a volcanic slope and venting a suffocating gas. Charren was a slightly built man who held

himself very stiffly as if in continual pain. His skin was an unhealthy grey and the face was thin and drawn with small rimless glasses perched on a sharp nose. His short hair was a dull, colourless grey as were his eyes but it was the stare that was truly unsettling as Charren never seemed to blink nor did his gaze leave Tully's face for a moment.

Charren opened his slim briefcase and with precise movements of his delicate hands, he laid out four pages neatly side by side on the table.

"I am a busy man, Mister Tully, so I won't beat about the bush," he said. "We know that times are hard for you and that you have closed all your accounts and now intend to go back home to Wales."

"Yes," said Tully, repressing a shudder of pure hatred. "Some of your associates in BML have *somehow* decided that I'm a bad egg. I intend to sue them using the Data Protection Acts."

"Very understandable," Charren said smoothly, the reptilian smile fading. "However, you may find certain clauses of the new Security Act rather unhelpful in that endeavour but, as I said earlier, I came here today with a proposal for you."

Tully's heart sank. '*Here it comes*', he thought. '*The hook*'. "Go on, Mister Charren. I'm listening," he said as neutrally as possible. It took a supreme effort to stop a leg twitching but, to his horror, patches of nervous sweat were already darkening his polo shirt and he knew that he smelt awful due to his enzyme deficiency.

Charren glanced briefly at the papers. "Ah, yes. Last year, you aided a Mister Lewis to enter a siege situation but, oddly, the police did not press charges against you. You were very fortunate, Mister Tully."

Ambrose shifted his huge bulk in the armchair. "You know my opinion about the current lack of professionalism in the police force, Mister Charren," he observed dryly. "I was *very* disappointed with their attitude that day."

"Indeed," Charren agreed amiably. "Mister Tully, you originally secured a contract to cover the 'paranormal' situation in Pontybrenin but in the end, you filed very little copy as I recall. You *chose* not to mention documented incidents such as the ice in the river, the huge number of windows destroyed on two occasions, a woman *levitating* off the floor at the Brenin hotel nor that corpse that apparently went walkabout from a funeral parlour."

"I only filed facts I could corroborate. I was trying to get back to some *serious* journalism," Tully said angrily. "I was actually doing work for a serious newspaper, *if* you recall."

Ambrose guffawed and muttered an apology. Charren's expression became even grimmer and he seemed to loom over Tully as his voice became an impatient hiss: "Don't you *dare* take the moral high ground with me, my dear Mister Tully! Your articles drove a Liberal Democrat MP to commit

suicide over certain unsavoury allegations which did not, I regret to say, have a shred of truth to them.”

“I disagree!” Tully retorted hotly. “But, gentlemen, if you don’t mind, I have a train to catch. So if I can help you with your enquiries, I am only too willing. Within reason, of course.”

“Oh, it’s a simple task,” Charren said in a more neutral tone. “You see, I acquired copies of the research carried out by a Doctor Smith who studied the rather intriguing talents of one Thomas Lewis. I am convinced, in the light of those – um - events last year, that he and his family *may* be of use to the Department. I was not going to pursue matters despite the – um – unpleasantness of last year but priorities have changed. The Chinese have restarted their far-seeing project, as have the Americans, and we and our European partners do *not* want to be left behind. The Americans were very successful in the Cold War and will have the advantage.”

“Alas, there is still a lot of work to be done in our new organisation. Policies and protocols to be bedded in. The bureaucratic hoo-hah has rather sapped my energies of late. However, I have *not* forgotten the unusual events of last year: the kidnaps, the murders at the public house where one man was buried *into* a wall and the other had his heart and lungs torn from his chest. Most distasteful but *very* intriguing, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Those crimes were carried out by Sheppard and his friends on keta. You should know,” Tully said desperately. “You stole the bodies!”

“Hmm. Yes. Keta. Indeed. Now listen carefully,” Charren said coldly. “I arranged for the inquests and investigations into all those deaths to draw certain conclusions that protected our interests in the Lewises - *not* the resourceful but amusing antics of Sergeant Price! Remember this: I am a very ambitious man, Mister Tully, I intend to rise high in the new order where I will be in a position to reward my friends and *punish* my enemies. You need to decide quickly: are you my friend or are you my enemy?” he asked, gently tapping a paper with an index finger.

“I’m pragmatic,” Tully said finally with some disgust.

“Good answer!” Charren approved, smiling. “The deal is simple: I cannot afford the time to fully investigate the potential of our mutual friends so I want *you* to keep a watching brief on them for me. All I require of you is that you provide regular reports on the family to the e-mail address on this slip of paper. Obviously,” he added in a quiet and menacing voice. “If they intend to leave the country, I will need to know *immediately*.”

He gathered his papers together into the folder. “I admit there may be nothing to this but smoke and mirrors but I cannot afford to ignore the possibility,” he said smoothly. “I can only spare one or two men to keep in touch with you from time to time. In return, I’m sure your demonstration of public spirit will be noted in certain quarters and lead to you finding gainful



employment again.” He placed the folder delicately into his briefcase and got up to leave. “I will be rather *vexed* if you fail to grasp this opportunity, Mister Tully,” he concluded coldly. “Because we *will* meet again. Good day.”

Charren left but Ambrose paused by the bed and picked up several banknotes. “I’ll ensure your landlord receives your rent arrears first thing in the morning,” he stated flatly. “Oh, and Mister Palmerson sends you his regards. Why, only this morning, Mister Charren and I had the opportunity to tell him how much we admired his work but, sadly, he did not seem very appreciative for some reason.”

He laid his right hand gently on Tully’s soldier with the thumb digging deeply behind the collar bone. Tully felt like a sacks of potatoes were pressing down on him and he sagged to his knees as the thumb bored deeply into the flesh. “I’m so glad you’ve agreed to assist us in this important work, Mister Tully,” Ambrose said pleasantly. “Alas, Mister Charren has become a little *testy* of late and the consequences of upsetting him simply do not bear thinking about. I must also remind you that you are now bound by all the provisions of the new Security Act.”

The reaction set in some ninety minutes later as the train was pulling into Reading. Tully began to tremble and tears rolled down his cheeks as he gazed through his reflection in the train window at the drear scenery rolling past. Images tormented him: the demonic face of the possessed Paul Sheppard and the ghost of his own sick, sadistic mother on that hillside, in the dark, in Pontybrenin. That night had been the making of him and he had witnessed so many things he would never fully explain. Yet here he was: running home, scared witless and shitless by a thin grey man in a grey suit.

He was vaguely aware that a young woman had got on the train at the last stop and had sat next to him. As they pulled away, he stared blankly at the platforms and all the people waiting for their trains, oblivious or uncaring of the horror now being carried out in their name, all across the world. He rested his head against the cool glass in despair: there could even be a civil war if Charren and his like were allowed any more power.

Ambrose terrified him just as much as Charren but in a different way altogether. The hulking agent had the same vicious, urbane insanity that had engulfed his mother. The memory flared up from the pit of his stomach: he was a child again, powerless, defenceless, as his mother brought the vase down upon his head. ‘*No,*’ he thought savagely, shaking his head. ‘*I’ve laid her ghost forever! Damn her. Damn them.*’

He was startled by a strong scent of lavender and a pressure on the back of his hand. In the window he could see the reflection of a young woman as she whispered into his ear: “Sometimes, we are *all* naked in the dark, George, but it strengthens us and makes us appreciate the light.”

There was a gentle pressure against his cheek as if a butterfly's wings had fluttered against it. He turned to look at the woman but he was not in the least surprised to find she had vanished and that no-one in the carriage had noticed anything unusual. He looked down at his hand where a faint, tingling, blue glow was already fading and he smiled incredulously: he'd give *anything* to know how she did that.

He dried his eyes and went to buy a huge mug of coffee from the restaurant car to help him think. Having somebody hold your hand on a spiritual plane was one thing, he reasoned, but how the hell do you deal with creatures like Charren and Ambrose on the purely *physical* plane? How did that old Chinese curse go? That was it: may you live in interesting times! "*Interesting times, my arse,*" he muttered under his breath.

He was convinced that Charren was going to reel in the Lewises unless he could find some way to protect them. He knew that he should discuss this with the family first but he feared that they would not approve of what he was about to do. He had to act quickly and the only way he could protect the family was to expose them to the full glare of publicity while the Department was still nervous about drawing attention to itself. He prayed that it would buy them enough time to come up with some sort of plan.

He took out his two mobile phones, his contacts book, a handful of SIM cards and a small fortune in pay-as-you-go charge cards. Better to die on your feet than live on your knees, as his foster-father used to say. Besides, Ambrose would be highly unlikely to leave you with any serviceable knees, no matter what you did.

The journey went by quickly now that he had made up his mind to fight back, whatever the consequences. The SIM cards he was using would make it hard for them to trace the dozens of calls he was making. He could not help looking nervously over his shoulder down the carriage but it was nearly empty. He obviously wasn't important enough to tail at the moment but he knew, in his heart and deep down in his soul, that Mister Charren and Mister Ambrose would be coming for him.

That's if Lewises didn't kill him first.

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## Corridors of Power

As Councillor Michael Sifford, the leader of the council, gazed about the cabinet meeting room, his heart sank like a stone. The few free spirits in his ruling party group had been systematically crushed and their attendance was now minimal. This was now a problem as he needed their critical presence to unite his caucus of loyal jellyfish. The senior council officers at the other end of the table were equally spineless, only putting forward suggestions they thought he would approve of and then only if asked. He rubbed at his eyes and focused on the meeting he was chairing with great difficulty.

“We have brought three key conferences here and generated fifty new jobs in the tourist industry in the past year alone,” his fiercely loyal deputy, Councillor Noreen Hand, was saying, her voice rising to a well-rehearsed falsetto of outrage. “Yet we always fail to receive proper credit for it! I regret to report that the local media, as usual, have failed to play their part. Always quick to condemn. Always slow to congratulate. They will *have* to do better if Pontybrenin is to succeed. Thank you, Chair.”

Flushed with her exertions she dropped her plump frame back into her seat and glanced at her colleagues for approval before resuming her trademark glowering at the local press and the few senior opposition councillors who had been invited to the meeting.

There was a silence as Sifford collected his thoughts. He even had to glance at the agenda to remind him what the meeting was about: *Putting Pontybrenin Back to Work – Council, Commerce and the Media: Partners in Prosperity*. Hand’s shrill voice had given him a headache, he realised, but he allowed the pause to say what needed to be said: he was in charge and woe betide anyone who thought differently. At moments like this, he often held an internal debate about which historical figure would be most impressed with his political style: Stalin, Robespierre or *Pavlov*.

“I would like to thank Doctor Roxworth for all this research on the town’s rather... *ectoplasmic* history,” he said finally, after glancing at his briefing notes. “As we all know, the valley is blessed with an unfortunate but very rich history of desecrated churches, ghosts, poltergeists, suicide pacts, mysterious ball lightnings and so on. We can all be grateful that we appear to be the most haunted town in the country, if not in Europe, as our hotels and guest houses have recorded a doubling of business in the last five years...”

He was stopped in mid-sentence by the door crashing open and two men pushing past the outraged but ineffectual security guard. The intruders had come from the small but vociferous religious demonstration picketing the front of the building during the meeting and they seemed very, very angry. Sifford was an old hand at this: his smile never wavered as he indicated two

empty chairs next to the local press representatives who were Derek Williams and the editor of the Post. He noted, with private glee, that they both immediately flipped over to a new page in their note-books and held their pens at the ready.

“Even though this meeting is supposed to be private,” he continued smoothly. “We are *always* ready to welcome the Reverend Gates and the Chair of the Chapel Committee, Mister Cullivan, who is currently one of our school caretakers, I believe.”

Few in the room missed the implied threat of redundancy but no-one dared challenge it. Sifford fixed Gates with a beaming smile and issued a challenge: “Reverend, let me introduce you to our friends from the press, John Sykes, the editor of the Post and his lead reporter, Derek Williams, who covers the town’s more *exotic* events. The ladies and gentlemen behind you are from the Chamber of Commerce and they are here to represent our tourist, hotel and service sector businesses. I’m sure they will all be *fascinated* to hear your objections to the increase in the economic activity of Pontybrenin that’s now benefiting their businesses.”

Dave Cullivan was enraged and was about to retort but Gates laid a restraining hand on his arm as they took their seats. Gates was an old hand at this as well and he was equally determined not to let Sifford get away with such urbane sophistry.

He stood up again and cut an imposing figure with his stylish black suit, broad shoulders and leonine mane of white hair. He had a presence honed by decades of perfecting his craft at the pulpit-face and rained fire and brimstone down upon his flock in a voice brimming with righteous wrath in the best traditions of the Bible-Belt evangelists - but he was also astute:

“Thank you, Michael. I regret I have not seen you in Chapel recently but I do welcome your decision to let us speak as part of your belated but *very* welcome drive for open and accountable local government,” he said sweetly. “I’d like all of you to bear in mind that Pontybrenin also has a proud tradition of chapels and churches and a broad tolerance of all faiths and denominations. Why, only last week we welcomed our Muslim brethren to their new Mosque in Treganna Street despite the opposition by some of Councillor Sifford’s less... *enlightened* constituents.”

Gates allowed himself a wry smile as Sifford stiffened momentarily at the layers of insult and reproach but he had to hand it to the council leader: the man was quick on his feet and always well briefed. The new mosque in his ward had indeed placed him in a very awkward position and it was rumoured that a local, extreme right-wing candidate was going to stand against Sifford in the next council elections.

“Let me assure those present who have already invested in improving the town’s economic prospects that we, the local clergy, have no objection to new

jobs and prosperity. However,” he said firmly, raising an index finger. “We do, however, have a *democratic* right to complain about the methods you choose and in particular, your ill-advised encouragement of these pagan groups and other so-called religions to congregate here. We now have no less than four shops - *four shops!* - dealing in séance equipment, tarot cards and the whole revolting spectrum of black magic paraphernalia.”

“I put it to you, Councillor Sifford,” he said, his voice slowly swelling in volume and timbre. “That this, on top of the pole-dancing club *your* council sanctioned and the dozens of drinks licences *you* granted last year, does not sit well with public concerns about youth nuisance and this keta epidemic you all seem to be ignoring. You *have* to listen to the voice of our congregations and the voice of your electorate.”

“For goodness’ sake, Councillors!” he thundered, his voice now bristling with ecumenical outrage. “Any *child* can now walk in off the street and buy Ouija boards and black candles! What sort of message are we sending out to the *normal* tourists who come here? We are attracting the curious, the strange and the outright bizarre when we should be attracting *families*.”

Taking his cue from Sifford’s stony smile and steepled fingers, Councillor John Irish, the cabinet member for economic development, theatrically slapped a great sheaf of papers onto the table. “This, Reverend Gates, as my colleagues were pointing out earlier, is *exactly* the good news you want for the ‘voice of the electorate’, as you condescendingly put it,” he announced grandly, the effect somewhat marred by his peculiar, adenoidal voice. “This is no more dangerous than trick-or-treating on Halloween yet we have created *fifty* new jobs in tourism and many more in the hotel sector this year. Many hotels and boarding houses are at full capacity for eight months a year and some now plan to expand, thanks to our efforts.”

“These people are not the binge-drinkers on stag nights we have had to put up with in the past,” he gloated. “In fact, we have removed more licences than we have granted – so you should get your facts right, Reverend, before barging in here and flinging accusations at the Leader like this. These visitors are well behaved even if *you* find them to be a little eccentric. They injected a massive *ten* million extra into the local economy in the last financial year alone and we could double that again this year.”

Irish sneered at the fuming Gates as he hammered home his coup de grace: “I hope the local media take note of your attitude, Reverend. As for ‘normal’ tourists: what could we show them if you get your way? Hills full of asthmatic sheep, three large supermarkets, two abandoned pits, twenty mediocre pubs, three run-down night-clubs and rows and rows of boarded-up shops. It’s a good job your chapel isn’t in charge of our business strategy otherwise you’d have bankrupted the town years ago!”

Gates controlled himself with a supreme effort of will as Irish smiled smugly at Sifford, like a dog expecting a treat from its master. “Councillor Irish,” he rumbled. “I knew you years ago when you were a reasonable soul but, by God, power *does* corrupt. I can see whatever we say is going to fall on deaf ears but we *are* serving notice, ladies and gentlemen, that the religious communities in this valley will not go gentle into your dark goodnight. We will protest and rally support against your proposal to commercialise the Devil and all His works.”

Sifford could not believe his luck. Having Gates and his followers up in arms would give the town valuable publicity and attract national media interest. Outwardly, he forced his voice into a conciliatory tone while noting the dark glances that the hotel owners were directing at Gates.

“I fully understand your concerns, Reverend,” he said. “Councillor Irish has already met with these... novelty shop-keepers and agreed an age code which we *will* enforce using our new powers. But to suggest we are going to be sacrificing virgins on pagan altars to improve the town’s economy is patronising to say the least and does great discredit to your argument. Perhaps, to show support, we should consider giving the chapel committee a capital grant to buy a ducking stool and some firewood?”

Gates brow clouded at the insult and jabbed a finger at Sifford. “We are grateful for you allowing us to speak but you are a master at twisting a situation,” he accused. “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions or, in your case, with the part-ownership of land where an application for a new hotel is currently being considered by the planning committee.”

Sifford rose from his seat, shaking with carefully-controlled anger. “As you well know, I do part-own a field that *may* be developed but, as the minutes *clearly* show, I have declared this at all the relevant council meetings. *You* are sailing very close to the wind, Reverend,” he warned, indicating the door. “As I said earlier, this is a *private* fact-finding meeting. I can assure you that we have all taken full note of your objections but now I must ask you both to leave. Thank you for your invaluable contribution.”

Gates and Cullivan stood up as three more security men came in through the door. Gates strode out imperiously but Cullivan remained behind to hand Derek Williams their contact details before following him.

Williams raised his hand and Sifford nodded distractedly at him to speak. “My editor and I have also gone through Doctor Roxworth’s research on the paranormal occurrences. They appear to concentrate very roughly on two pentagram patterns etched over the town which is enough for all these supernatural buffs to want to come to Pontybrenin. They even camp out on the top of Mynydd Ci to wait for flying saucers!” he added, laughing.

“But we have a real ace in the hole right here in Pontybrenin,” he continued heatedly. “It’s mostly circumstantial, but we have concrete

evidence that there is at least one bona fide family of psychics, right here in the Old Town! If you followed my articles, you would know that they were right at the centre of last year's extraordinary paranormal events. Even if they aren't talented, I'm sure you could persuade them to ham it up for the cable networks who are always on the look-out for haunted-house 'reality' stories. Hell, we could give them an entire haunted *town!*"

"Now we're talking!" Sifford beamed happily. "With Gates on the warpath and a couple of programs on the town and this family of 'mediums', we'll have all the publicity we need! Thank you, Derek! I'm glad to see the local press is entering into the... *spirit* of things, as it were."

There was a polite ripple of laughter at the dreadful pun as Williams gingerly rubbed at the bridge of his nose which Claire Lewis had broken in the Old Town Tea Rooms only last year. '*My damned brother's right about one thing,*' he thought savagely to himself as the councillors and local business representatives eagerly debated his idea. '*There's definitely more than one way to skin a bitch.*'

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## The Brenin Hotel

The Brenin Hotel had been much loved by its regulars ever since the Lloyd family had opened for business some twenty-five years ago. Its origins were unknown but by the early seventeenth century it had become a thriving coaching inn, servicing the grandly-named Kingsway which, in those days, was the only serviceable road into the valley. The Victorians had finally forced a new road and a railway line through the once troublesome marshes of the Meanders below and the Brenin had fallen into serious disrepair by the time the Lloyds had purchased it.

The Lloyds had renovated the place as a large family home to begin with but as their three children and three foster-children began to leave. They retired from their jobs and, taking a huge gamble, they built a huge lounge-bar upon the ruins of the old stables and extended the house back into the spacious gardens, adding thirty ensuite rooms of varying sizes.

They moved into high quality food and real ale and eventually the Brenin flourished and the Lloyds eventually fulfilled a lifelong dream and retired to France. After ten blissful years in Lyons they passed away, leaving their pride and joy to their foster-daughter, Elinor Smith, who was now washing up the breakfast dishes in one of the large kitchen sinks, pausing to gaze contentedly through the window at the gardens and the ancient oaks and chestnuts at the far end of the well-kept lawns and vegetable patches.

She had made it her business to buy the dense woods that rose up from the Brenin gardens to the feet of the imposing crags of Red Wives Ridge which formed the sprawling southern flank of Mynydd Ci. These woods, *her* woods, made the rear of the hotel feel green and arboreally gloomy on winter afternoons but now the sun was climbing above the ridge and the treetops, sending a welcome Spring warmth through the windows.

She remembered being brought here as a child by the social services, bewildered and miserable, with her brother and sister. Her real father had died when she was five and their mother had descended into a horrible, cunning madness that had allowed her to convince everybody for years that her children's numerous injuries were accidental. Finally, Old Doctor Ferris had realised the truth when all three were brought in with cuts and scalds after she'd thrown a kettle and an iron at them.

The children were deeply traumatised yet the Lloyds, with their own three children and an infinite supply of patience, had worked miracles. The woods had become a place of magic and healing and the dreadful memories were never truly forgotten but placed alongside newer, happier ones. Their foster parents had rocked them and cried with them as they screamed away those long nights. Elinor recalled how grateful they had been when their foster



parents refused to scold them for wetting their beds when all they had expected was a savage beating - or worse.

And, amongst those blessed woods, her love for her foster brother, Stephen Lloyd, had blossomed and they were married at eighteen and four years later, they found themselves running the Brenin. Stephen, wonderful Stephen and his parents were dead now and there was an emptiness in her heart that had almost destroyed her as she carried on the business alone. Stephen's brother and sister had both married professional partners and had emigrated to Canada. She missed her foster-siblings terribly and, to add to her unhappiness, they rarely responded to her letters and e-mails.

There were times when she, Annie and George would fall deathly silent and hold themselves rigid at the dinner table while the Lloyds' own children chattered on – unaware of the traumatic memories triggered by a simple word or gesture. It had been a sadistic game their mother used to play: the first child to move or make a sound after grace...

She shivered and her shoulders sagged: she *had* to let these visceral memories of her mother surface and face them - for the simple reason that they would destroy her if she did not. She tensed as a gentle pair of hands gripped her shoulders and a kiss was planted on her cheek. Without a word, her new husband wrapped his arms about her firm waist and stared up at the trees alongside her with his chin resting on her shoulder.

“Beautiful, aren't they?” he murmured in her ear.

Doctor James Calvin Smith was a rangy six foot but only a little taller than she was and, as his cheek brushed against hers, she noted he had forgotten to shave again. His sharp blue eyes were bright behind his round red-rimmed glasses but, despite her best efforts, his shirt was partly unbuttoned and crumpled but she wouldn't change him for the world. At least his worn corduroy jacket and trousers had long gone.

She turned to kissed him tenderly on the lips and nuzzled the nape of his neck. “I thought you had gone into work,” she said.

“I had, but Henderson has now put the whole lab on hold for two weeks. He says our radical little paper on quantum mechanics annoyed our funders. Cynet wants to know where our priorities lie.”

“That's not fair!” she said angrily. “You finished their neural chip ahead of schedule and you said the prototype trials were going well.”

“That's the problem,” he sighed. “They're going *too* well. In our latest paper on neural bridging, we mentioned that three paraplegic volunteers can move their fingers again. The lawyers went berserk when they found out and we got brutally reminded that they own the copyright and the patents on our work. Unless we can guarantee success, they want to keep the results under wraps to avoid creating false expectations and possible litigation.”

She was puzzled and looked her husband straight in the eye. “I can’t see why they’re so upset,” she declared. “Your neural bridging chips will not be commercially available for years and you said your competitors are not interested in curing people.”

Doctor Smith watched the tree tops waving gently in the breeze. “The chips could be out in *months*,” he sighed. “But Cynet say that they’re not ready to manufacture and market commercial versions until all the ramifications are thought through and covered. I don’t believe them for a second. I think something big is going on. Maybe they’re looking at military or cyborg applications for the technology.”

“Unfortunately for us, Cynet have been inundated with enquiries from all over the world. We’ve been suspended from campus until the brouhaha dies down a little, but we can keep up the field trials. So you have me around for two whole days a week! Aren’t you the lucky one, Mrs Smith!”

She disengaged his arms and filled the kettle as the kitchen staff came in with the last of the dirty crockery from the dining rooms. He noticed that she was regarding him that same calculating way that had so impressed and daunted him when they had first met and she had corralled him in the corridor, demanding to know all about the Lewis family.

“Well, we are short behind the bar, love, so I suppose you could earn your keep while you’re here,” she said half-seriously then smiled as he put on a martyred expression and narrowed his eyes.

“But you’re a hard woman, Elinor Smith! But I shall do my best in this hour of doom!” he pledged, comically exaggerating his Scottish accent.

She laughed and poked him playfully in the ribs. “You know every room is booked solid with all these conferences,” she reminded him. “The council reckon nearly three thousand visitors are in town this week. My lounge is packed with people checking out the crushed armchair and the distortion marks in the wall. Unfortunately, the King’s Head is doing better than us as their damn wall is more spectacular than ours.”

“It is, I’m afraid,” he conceded as he rolled up his shirt sleeves to help with the washing-up. “The chairs and pictures are all warped into the wall along with the light fittings. Even the new manager at the Pixie is capitalising on the murders up there. Apparently, he’s painted in the police chalk marks around the manager’s body and...”

“That’s just sick!” she exclaimed. “I’m surprised they haven’t left the poor barman... no! You’re not *serious!*”

He raised an eyebrow as he started on his pile of dirty crockery and plates. “They have,” he confirmed sadly. “They’ve had a dummy placed into the new wall and charge people two quid each to go upstairs and see it. Pretty life-like, I’m told. They based it on the pictures that ended up on the internet. Bute

Terrace is now on the guided tours as well. It seems Paul Sheppard's house has become a tourist attraction."

"Good riddance to Paul and his Dad," she growled as she filled up the adjacent sink with hot water. "Oh, and you won't be surprised to know our old friend Tanya Hooper has been in a couple of times. She's been causing trouble in the lounge so I've had to ban the little bitch again. She really has it in for Thomas and I've seen her talking to Gates a lot at the chapel. She really worries me, Jimmy."

One of the staff came in looking flustered. "We're going to start on the top rooms now, Elinor," she reported. "And one of the guests had an 'accident' last night. It's going to take us *ages* to clean it up. Room ten."

Elinor sighed and dried her hands to make a note in the ledger on the kitchen table. "Okay, Jane. You make a start. I'll check the bar stocks and pumps after the dishes and I'll catch up with you all later."

As Jane bustled out, Elinor gave the broken commercial dish-washer a heartfelt kick. "Brand new that is!" she muttered. "Never worked for more than two days at a time! I've got to go out and buy a new one as I haven't got time to keep chasing their *useless* customer services department. Stephen would have played hell with them."

He reddened slightly but said nothing and carried on with the dishes.

She sighed and took his hands in hers. "I'm sorry, but it's six years to the day that Stephen died," she admitted candidly. "And I would be lying to you if I said I didn't miss him - for all that I love you now."

"I understand. I've had my loves and losses too, though Clarissa didn't so much pass on as never pass up a chance," he said bitterly. "I'll never forgive her for that. She almost destroyed my trust in women."

She kissed him on the cheek and returned to the mountains of dishes in her own sink. "I know, you know," she said quietly. "Your Dad was a drunk and so was my mother - only she also went insane after Dad died. We've both lost our innocence along the road but up there in those trees, there was a kind of magic where it was okay for us to be children again. George, being the boy, suffered much more than me and Annie did and he had a terrible time at school as well with that enzyme problem. He's never really healed and we almost lost him to her again last year."

He stacked a few more plates on the draining board and paused. "We've never come to terms with what happened last year," he said absently. "When I saw those poor creatures trapped in that living hell at Cwmciffach, I so wanted to believe that I was in the presence of legends but they certainly *did* do something to Harriet and me and they 'prepared' Thomas to face Ahriman. I still don't know *what* they were but they were *not* angels or Sidhe or any other mythical race. Their faces were all too familiar as well. In fact, one looked like Hannah and another looked exactly like me."

“Why *can't* we believe in Phoukas, Jimmy?” she demanded earnestly. “Why do we deny our heritage? These ancestors of Thomas and Gemma you met clearly had the same talents that they have so they could have easily created the folk myths and oral traditions that were handed down for centuries. Or are you going to tell me there is nothing wrong with that poor man rotting away in his front room in Ayr Street?”

“No, of course not,” he said hastily. “We have witnessed events that revealed Thomas and Gemma for what they really *are*. That creature, Zhara Amaid, we saw in the corridor was also real and beautiful - and very frightening. Maybe she *is* Ormuzd but can we trust her? The five we met at the stones claimed to be her disciples yet she abandoned them to centuries of torment and death. Why? Even though Harriet and I linked with her, I still don't know what the hell she actually *is* but she has *power*, I'll give her that. All those symbols and equations she burned into my mind are still there - every damned one of them - and they *hurt*.”

“Hmph! It's a bit rich to claim credit for them in these papers, then!” she teased gently.

“True,” he admitted. “But we have to be careful. One small step at a time. One thread of equations in here hints at a method to contain fusion. I don't think the world is ready for fusion generators just yet!” he laughed and then winced. “Ow! They shifted again! Anyway, nothing will come of it - my mathematics is not good enough and most of the assumptions are unproven.”

“We may need fusion power sooner than you think with global warming the way it is. If we could patent it, it would make us very rich indeed,” she pointed out. “But don't forget what happened last year, Jimmy. You almost lost everything to an ‘illusion’ yourself, remember?”

He shuddered and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he recalled the alternative-world nightmare in which he had gained that coveted professorship. He had faced a willing female student in his Oxford study only to discover she was possessed by a Formori, a daeva, a wretched and depraved servant of that ancient and manifest evil, Ahriman, or the Ban-Sidhe as they called it. He steadied himself against the edge of the sink.

“The Ban and the Formori were more than just illusions, especially when they used Gregory's corpse at the stones,” he grimaced. “I still get nightmares about it but it was worth it just to be one of the first people ever to experience the *merging* of five minds.”

“When we healed those two men out there. Ellie,” he said with tears in his eyes. “*That* was when it became real for me! For one moment, I *knew* what it was to be a *god* - I got that much from Zhara. She may be a foretaste of what mankind will evolve into a thousand or more years from now. I don't know. I'm just glad it's all over.”

“Me too,” she agreed before kissing him again, passionately this time.

In Room 17 of the Ridge Park Hospital Secure Unit, four male nurses were struggling with a young woman who had screamed constantly for several months. Seated on a bench in the corridor were her brothers: Paul and Aaron Stoker. Paul was a gangly, powerful youth of nineteen with dark hair and bad skin. Dressed in a denim shirt and trendy jeans that did not quite match, he toyed nervously with several thick gold chains around his neck and ignored his younger brother. Aaron was only thirteen and he detested his brother, hiding his face beneath his baseball cap and hood.

After what seemed like an eternity a red-faced and sweating nurse came out to see them. "I'm sorry, boys," he sympathised. "But there's no change yet. We've given her enough sedative to trunk a rhino but we've still had to strap her to the chair. She took a bite out of one of the night shift last week so we can't take chances."

Aaron peered up from under his cap. "Why can't you keep her sedated all the time? Why does she have to *scream* like that?" he asked, ashen-faced and plainly on the verge of tears.

"These dose levels would kill her in a matter of days, Aaron," the nurse explained carefully. "You can visit her now but Jeff will have to stay in the room in case she breaks the restraints again. As for the screaming: the doctors think that her old boyfriend pumped her so full of keta that she can't metabolise it and there is still no way to neutralise it in the body tissues. I'm just glad Sheppard shot himself as it saves us the bother of killing the bastard. I'm so sorry, lads. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Aaron's jaw set as he glanced up at his surly, expressionless, older brother. "I agree with you," he said pointedly. "Anyone who deals keta is nothing more than a worthless piece of *dog-shit*."

Paul did not meet Aaron's eye but pulled himself slowly to his feet. "Let's do this, bro," he said quietly.

"Aaron, what's in your carrier bag?" the nurse demanded suspiciously.

Aaron brought out a small, soft teddy bear. "This is Jilly's favourite," he said. "I was hoping it might help."

Aaron allowed the nurse to lay a consoling hand on his shoulder and followed Paul into the room. The other two nurses left the room leaving the massive Jeff to stand guard by the door. Aaron noticed that their faces were cut and scratched and they looked grim and shaken.

He wrinkled his nose. The room stank of shit and piss mixed with disinfectants from the determined attempts to scrub it clean. A padded chair was clamped against the far wall and in it sat a slim and pretty young woman of twenty with matted brown hair and dull, unseeing brown eyes. She was secured by dozens of straps and her head lolled forward onto her chest. Her white gown was already soiled, smeared with blood and drenched from the saliva trailing from her open mouth.

Aaron stepped up to her while Paul remained close to Jeff by the door and averted his eyes in disgust.

“Hi. Jillsy,” Aaron said in a cheerful tone. “We’ve been allowed to see you once a week and Mam and Dad send their love. Oh, and I’ve brought Mister Snubs with me.”

Her head lolled and a low animal moaning came from her ravaged throat. It almost sounded like: “*Snubsy?*”

Aaron’s face brightened and he got out his sister’s old teddy bear from the carrier bag and held it close to her face. For one moment there was a sane light in her eyes as she looked at the bear, then her face contorted, her head shot forward and her teeth snapped shut on the bear’s head and she tore it from Aaron’s hand. She snarled and shook the little bear to and fro like a dog before dropping it into her lap.

“For Chrissakes be careful, lad,” Jeff warned him as Paul staggered out into the corridor, retching, to slump back onto the bench and bury his head in his hands. “Don’t get your hands too close to her mouth!”

Tears streamed down Aaron’s face as he stared at his sister for what seemed like an eternity. As she gazed down at the bear in her lap, a thin stream of spittle landed on its upturned face and she began moaning and thrashing about.

Jeff came forward with a light in his eyes. “Hey, she’s using real words!” he exclaimed. “That’s...”

He jumped back a pace as Jillsy’s head snapped up and she spoke in alien tongues with a deep, snarling male voice, sated with grating overtones that made their skin crawl and their teeth itch.

A darkness blasted out of her chest, an absence of light that knocked Aaron and Jeff to the floor. It had no substance but it was full of a numbing, insensate malice that tore the heat from their bones. It was free and the room became as cold as ice as it orbited the young woman as she writhed in agony, pulling at her restraints. Jeff instinctively crawled over to where Aaron lay stunned and dragged him from the room.

He pressed the alarm button in the corridor as soon he had helped Aaron get to his feet. Suddenly, there was a sighing implosion and air rushed past them and into the room. They peered in but the darkness had gone. Jillsy was still seated in the chair but all the formidable restraints had been snapped and she was cradling the bear to her shoulder, crooning, rocking backwards and forwards as tears ran down her cheeks.

“Mister Snubs, Mister Snubs, Mister Snubs,” she murmured repeatedly as nurses ran up the corridor to join Jeff, Paul and Aaron at the door and gaze at her in wonder. Aaron pushed back into the room before Jeff could grab him and, ignoring the stench and the stains on her gown, he threw himself into his sister’s arms.