

ROTATION

The Third Book of The Path Transcendent

(First Edition)

WEB SAMPLE CHAPTERS

© Paul D.E. Mitchell 2009

ISBN 0 9534667 5 2

Published in 2009 by: Paul D. E. Mitchell
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Printed by Abbey Bookbinders Ltd of Cardiff

Prophet and Loss

Carol Lewis carefully placed the papier-mâché model of a carousel and the posy of daisies upon the grave of her husband. She gazed down at the immaculately kept plot and sighed: it was three years to the day that Gregory had died after a long battle with emphysema. Gemma and Tamsin, her granddaughters, had asked her to bring these tributes as they were unable to leave their Aunt Claire's house down on Donald Street.

She looked at the adjoining grave where Gregory's brother, Dafydd Lewis, had been buried after succumbing to a stroke just before Christmas. There was a fresh wreath of flowers from his eldest son, Bob, along with several hand-made cards from the grandchildren. She smiled approvingly and made a mental note to visit Bob and his family soon. Dafydd may not have had the fierce passion of his brother but he had been adored by all his children and grandchildren.

The tributes on Gregory's plot were poignant and touching but completely overshadowed by those upon his brother's grave. Gregory may have been respected, even feared by his children, but he certainly was not adored. "It's more than you deserve, Greg," she said sadly. "You frightened Derek and Alicia too much for them to want to make you anything. Why couldn't you have been more like your brother, damn you."

She squinted up at the sky: it was a glorious Summer afternoon and the hot sunshine pricked at the skin on her face and hands. She paused to apply a little sun screen before sitting down on a nearby bench that gave her a good view of both her husband's grave and her parents' resting place: the imposing Dawes family crypt on the other side of the main cemetery path.

She idly inspected the memorial plaques set into the horizontal back-rest slats of the newly-restored bench. The topmost read: *'In memory of the Reverend Abraham Gates'* whilst the one beneath read: *'To Err is Human: To Forgive, Divine'*. On the third and final slat however, one of the local youths had carved his opinion - and that of many others in Pontybrenin - in deep and jagged gouges: *'MURDERER!'*

She was deep in melancholic thought when her friend, Edith Green, arrived after tidying up her own family plots on the far side of the Capel Cairn graveyard. Edith smiled as she sat down and placed her pink shopping bag on the ground. "It's so quiet here, isn't it?" she said cheerfully. "All I can hear is the traffic down on City Road, the farm noise from Cithis and those birds. Bill and I used to sit here for hours of a weekend."

Carol did not reply so Edith purposefully unwrapped their little packet of sandwiches and poured them both tea out of her thermos flask and delicately

laid out the food and the cups on the bench between them. “Carol?” she said finally. “Penny for your thoughts? You’re awful quiet.”

“Mmm? Oh, sorry, Edie. Miles away. I was looking at Dafydd’s grave and all the flowers and cards the family left yesterday.”

“I’m so glad Dafydd’s family insisted they were buried together,” Edith said. “I could never understand why two brothers, living so close to each other, could refuse to speak to each other all their adult lives. Tragic.”

“It was a lovely gesture,” Carol smiled. “Although Gregory banned the children from going over to Dafydd’s house, it didn’t stop them sneaking out to play with their cousins, thank goodness.”

“And Bob even helped to reset the headstone after Gates dug up Gregory’s coffin,” Edith pointed out. “That was so sweet of him.”

“It was,” Carol agreed, picking up her tea. “It would be even better if we could find out where Josiah and Rebecca were buried,” she said quietly, waving a hand at the neat rows of headstones. “We think the chapel committee dug up the original graves because they disapproved of the headstone that commemorated their fortune-telling days.”

“We *still* can’t work out where they were reburied. They may not even be in this cemetery! Gregory had no end of rows with the chapel committee who denied any responsibility for the desecration but in the end, the drink had him and he gave up in disgust. Dafydd was furious too, but as the police couldn’t find the culprits, he let it go because his family couldn’t bear to leave the chapel - they had too many friends there.”

“You see? Their parents had a gift like our two and look where it got them! That’s why I worry so much about Gemma! She should be at school, not on those TV shows. I don’t want her end up in an unmarked grave!”

“She won’t but it looks like she’s not going to be on any more shows for a while,” Edith noted sadly. “Your Thomas must be absolutely furious with her for getting involved in that awful business at Ridge Park.”

“He’s furious all right but then he hasn’t spoken to her for *months*. Hannah and Graham are beside themselves,” Carol sighed. “I think it’s finally brought Gemma to her senses because she’s *devastated*. I know George and Brian tried their best to talk her out of the idea but that damned woman convinced her to go to the hospital alone. She slipped out of the house and those... those *vermin* drove her over to the ICU. George is suing the channel but he can’t stop the rest of the media tearing into her.”

“Oh, Edie! You should *see* some of the things they say about my granddaughter!” she groaned. “If I ever see that Spriggs woman again, I’ll wring her neck! That blood is on *her* hands!”

Edith got the Pontybrenin Post out of her shopping bag and showed it to Carol. There was a large photograph of Gemma fleeing the hospital in tears on the front page under the screaming banner headline: ‘THE FALLEN

ANGEL'. She threw it back down on the bench in disgust. "That's an awful cruel thing to do to an eleven-year-old," she said angrily.

"It's terrible, Edie!" Carol despaired. "One second they can't get enough of Thomas and Gemma and the next they're talking about getting the authorities to take 'appropriate measures' to deal with *my* family! What they mean is arresting us or *worse*. Honestly, they're all as bad as the Nazis."

"They wouldn't arrest the whole family, surely?" Edith gasped. "Thomas and Gemma would stop them easily. They wouldn't *dare*."

Carol shook her head. "Thomas *could* stop them," she said grimly. "But that may mean hurting or even *killing* people. *Lots* of people. Thomas can't bring himself to do that and neither can Gemma."

"At least Gemma was brought back down to earth by the tragedy," Edith pointed out. "*What* a change in her! She'd gotten so full of herself over the last year, I was dreading something like this would happen."

Her face fell as a slim, Asian man in his late twenties entered the graveyard and approached them deferentially. He had an ear-piece in his left ear and a pin-mike on the lapel of his immaculate white suit which bore the blood red triangle and eye symbol of the House. He bowed and waited patiently with his hands respectfully clasped in front of him.

"Hello, Javid," she said resignedly after an uncomfortable silence.

"I prefer Vigil, Mrs Green. You know that," he admonished gently, smiling and glancing up at the whitewashed stonework of Capel Cairn. "I can see why you both like to come here. This place is so peaceful - as a true sanctuary should be. It's why we're thinking of buying the place. The local Circle has nowhere to worship and Saint Madoc's is getting too crowded."

"God forbid!" Carol said darkly. "It may be small but I like this chapel and its services - not this one-faith-fits-all rot of yours! Anyway, why are you here, Vigil? We wanted to take a break from the House *and* the press. How many reporters are down there now?"

"At least thirty or so including the three camera crews in Ayr Street and about twenty more in Donald Street," Vigil admitted quietly, wringing his hands. "I'm sorry but Gemma is very big news for all the wrong reasons. We've even got a crew from KJN in Japan! We're doing our best by filling the streets with members to make things difficult for them and we've petitioned the police to set up a cordon to protect the family. We did manage to completely block off this end of Ayr Street - which is why you've got this place all to yourselves - but it won't last long, I'm afraid."

"We've taken the children through the back gardens and lanes and got them up to the Brenin without being seen. It's fortunate that we now own so many houses in these streets! Oh, and we've let the Prophet know about the arrangements - if that's alright with you."

“You *know* Thomas doesn’t want to see Gemma,” Carol reminded him testily. She hated her son being referred to as the Prophet or the Blessed Thomas by the Brothers and Sisters of the House but there was nothing she could do about it. “He’s not spoken to her *once* during the last six months.”

“I know he wasn’t happy about Gemma being back in Pontybrenin,” he said with genuine concern. “We understand their pain.”

“I doubt that very much,” Carol snapped. “You lot have absolutely no *idea* of the damage your stupid shrines did to Gemma! She ended up believing all that prophet nonsense you lot keep spouting at her. No wonder she started to think she was above those around her, even her own family! She came a cropper when she tried that on with her uncle and we thought he’d managed to knock some sense into her but then that bloody Spriggs woman came along and look where we are now!” she added vehemently, brandishing the front page of the paper at him.

“We’re so sorry about what happened. We...” Vigil sympathised.

“I bet you are,” Edith interrupted sarcastically. “The House of All Faith can’t have their Blessed Gemma publicly falling prey to the very *human* sin of conceit, now can we?”

Vigil’s pleasant open face clouded with anger. “Mrs Green, please!” he protested. “We removed all the shrines in our centres and we cut down on the reverence as the family had requested but Gemma and Thomas are spiritually important to our movement. Really, we have done nothing worse than try to support the family! We’ve gone on all the networks to denounce KYTV and the actions of the two Apprentice Brothers at the ICU. They have had to leave the House to reflect on their role in this unhappy affair. Believe me, they are just as shocked as we are at the outcome.”

“I *bet* they’re shocked!” Edith muttered sarcastically. “What possessed them to do that to Gemma in the first place! She’s still a child, for God’s sake! They’ve probably scarred her for life.”

“We *will* be taking them to court along with KYTV, Vigil,” Carol sighed wearily, shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun. “I’m sorry but ‘reflection’ is not bloody good enough! Too many of your new converts are untrustworthy and there’s large sums of money involved. God knows what KYTV paid those two idiots.”

“I’m afraid they didn’t do it for money. They did it simply because they believed Gemma to be a *true* Prophet,” Vigil admitted sadly. “They wanted her to prove to the world that what they believe, what *we* believe, is the Truth. They were arrogant and they were wrong. We’re really, really sorry.”

“There’s the problem,” Carol said, jabbing a forefinger at him. “Everywhere she goes, everybody wants a damned miracle from her, even your lot who should know better! For God’s sake, Vigil, she needs bodyguards just to go *shopping!*” she grated, trembling with anger. “And

when Thomas or Gemma say they won't or can't jump through the hoops, the crowd turns on them. They can't win. I don't blame you personally because we've *all* been seduced by the money, even me," she added sadly, indicating her smart trouser suit, designer handbag and elegant gold necklace.

"Edie is right," she sighed. "Maybe this disaster *is* a blessing in disguise. Maybe everyone will move on and let Gemma have a *normal* childhood. God knows, she deserves it. I know it's stupid but I miss popping down to the corner shop in my slippers to get the milk and the papers – I can't imagine what it must be like for Graham and Hannah."

She rummaged around in Edith's shopping bag and found another cup. She moved their little picnic to one side and motioned the young man to sit down on the bench between them. Edith took the cup from Carol, slowly filled it with tea and pressed it into the Brother's unresisting hands.

"Thank you," he said awkwardly. "But we still need to talk about what more we can do to help the family. We will not abandon you just because of one error by Gemma and two of our members..."

"Shh!" Carol commanded sharply, putting a finger to her lips. "Three people *died* because of that error, Vigil, remember that! We don't want to talk about it at the moment. Now see up there? Just above the trees to the left of Red Wives' Ridge? There's a pair of buzzards shepherding a youngster. See how they use the thermals rising up the slopes to rein him in and teach him the skills he needs? We can learn a lot from them, you know."

"Yes, but I..."

"Javid?"

"Yes, Mrs Green?"

"What Carol means is: you're a lovely young man and we'd love you to sit with us but we don't want you to say another *word*. Switch off all your gizmos and whatnot and let us enjoy the view and a few minutes of peace. Can you manage to be quiet for two minutes?"

Vigil nodded and overtly switched his ring-tones to silent. He relaxed as he sipped at his tea and watched the birds wheeling and keening above the trees. He was uncomfortable sitting between such two formidable old women but, compared to his recent awkward meetings with Thomas and Gemma, this was a pleasant respite because his thoughts were his - and his alone.

Gemma's Ruin

There were three network TV cameras pointed at the front of the house but the curtains, as always, were drawn and no light entered or left the musty rooms. Thomas Lewis snored softly in one of the two huge leather armchairs in the front room while his girlfriend, Jillsy Stoker, sat cross-legged in the other. She was rummaging through a cardboard box of jumbled souvenirs and scraps of paper on which Thomas had written comments, lyrics and poetry over the many years of his turbulent life. There was one ragged sheet, torn from a note-book, that caught her eye and she read the title with a thrill of apprehension: *'Muskets and Catholics, Lungblack and Chapels. The World Turns - The Shadow Feeds.'*

There was a detailed description of the sensations Thomas experienced when he had pulled over to the kerb while driving down from North Wales to help with his father's funeral arrangements. His attention had been caught by three old men struggling up a flight of steep stone steps that cut up through several rows of terraced housing: *'They remind me of Incan priests,'* he had written, *'climbing the steps of their temple to make one last human sacrifice before the Spanish conquistadors could bring an end to the Incas.'*

The notes contained the thoughts and impressions he had 'taken' from those old men. He wrote how, despite his efforts to block out their thoughts, images and words had filtered into his consciousness until, as these notes intended for his psychiatrist had recorded: *'As usual, I can 'see' their bitterness and their anger walking beside them as some kind of living 'shadow' that feeds upon them as it magnifies their misery.'*

She shuddered and glanced at Thomas but couldn't help noticing the strands of white at the temples that reminded her that he was sixteen years older than her. It didn't matter to her, as she kept telling her friends, because their passionate love-making was literally... *actually* out of this world. She placed a hand to her stomach and sighed: she was definitely pregnant again but, after four painful miscarriages, she was not raising her hopes.

The pieces and scraps of paper in the box had poignantly recorded Thomas's lifelong struggle with his bizarre gifts: there were childhood sketches of the ghosts and demons that had plagued this house, frightening his younger brother, Graham, so much that he had wet the bed for weeks. She shuddered at one particularly graphic image of a demonic Santa Claus biting the head off an elf – the date put Thomas at six years old when he drew it.

She could not imagine the sheer loneliness and terror he must have endured as a child with only his mother believing in him and a drunken and aggressive father who had actually contemplated killing his son on several occasions to spare him the agony and despair of 'Evan's madness'.

"You have no idea," he yawned, keeping his eyes tightly closed. "What it was like living in this house as a child when all that was going on."

"How long have you been awake?" she demanded suspiciously. "You know I don't like you eavesdropping like that."

"I'm sorry," he smiled. "But your thoughts crept into my dreams and woke me up so I knew you were going through my stuff. It's sad really, how you can fit your whole life into a cardboard box like that."

She studied a creased photograph of a young miner, coal-black from the pit, clutching a bottle of stout and giving a thumbs-up to the camera with the pit helmet set back on his head.

"That's Dad," he smiled. "A week after he got married. Handsome devil back then, wasn't he?"

"I wish you wouldn't do that," she said archly.

"What's the point in opening my eyes?" he shrugged. "When I can 'see' what you're looking at. And I can 'see' the baby, your breakfast and the fact that you might need to break wind in a few minutes. Okay, okay," he conceded as she scowled at him. "I'll get up and make us a cup of tea."

She watched as a spectral purple light glittered from beneath his eyelids and, as he opened them, the space in front of his face *twisted* so that his eyes were obscured by shimmering ribbons and pulses of energy. She knew that this phenomena did not *physically* exist but rather, it was her own brain that was sensing and vainly trying to interpret his talents. It always made the back of her skull itch whenever she tried to focus upon it, but this was his curse, the *stigmata* that had set him apart from the rest of Humanity.

He sat up straight in the chair and yawned hugely and when he opened his eyes again they were his normal deep and natural brown. His control had improved immensely but the whites of his eyes still tended to turn various shades of mauve when he was agitated. "Gods, Jillsy, I needed that," he declared, luxuriously stretching his limbs. "No bad dreams again, just a real, honest-to-goodness kip! You have no idea what that means to me - or what you mean to me," he added gallantly.

She smiled at the compliment but the smile soon faded. "I'm not so lucky," she said, staring at Gregory's photograph. "I can't get that damned Edgar Ashcroft out of *my* dreams! Sometimes I think he didn't die at Saint Madoc's! I... *Ow!*"

She winced and placed the fingertips of her right hand to her temple. There it was again: the pain and the sensation of sunlight in the tree boughs, the soft flowing of a river, the sound of a playground full of excited children, the distant jingle of an ice-cream van, the image of a primary-school teacher with serrated teeth and red fingernails...

"Gemma wants to talk to you," he noted coldly. "She won't use full telepathy when I'm around. She knows better than that."

"She needs you," she said sharply. "I can't understand why you walked away from her. Three people *died* as a result, you know."

The stigmata flared in front of his eyes for a few seconds before he could bring the surge of anger that had released it under control. She shivered and not just because the temperature in the room had dropped several degrees. He concentrated and the wood set in the fire grate crackled noisily into flames. She knew he could warm the air in the room directly but he preferred this *indirect* method at times like this.

"Yes, I know," he acknowledged with a wry smile, 'taking' her thoughts effortlessly. "It keeps me happy with all those vultures hanging around out there in the street. At least they know better than to ring the doorbell again. Or climb over the garden wall... yes! I *know* you're annoyed with me!"

"I still haven't had a proper answer as to why you won't talk about Gemma," she persisted. "I don't know *why* you can't go to her. She's had a cruel, hard lesson and she's in real pain."

He pursed his lips and stared at the fire, his mind absorbing the complex patterns swirling within the dancing flames. "Gemma and I have no words in any human language for what we do," he said slowly. "Zhara and I have shown you a small part of Creation but you cannot *truly* be aware of all those higher dimensions that we perceive. It's not your fault: the human race is hard-wired into these dull, flat three dimensions that we trudge about in - or four if you want to count time as a physical dimension."

"Our talent stems from an instinctive *n*-dimensional awareness so that telepathy or channelling kinetic and gravitational energy is *natural* to us. But the trouble with a language rooted in three-dimensional structures is that we can never ascribe *words* to what we *do*," he laughed. "It's a bit like an orang-utan trying to describe a Da Vinci painting by screeching and some frantic armpit scratching."

She furrowed her brow and pouted like a chimp. "Ook! Ook! Monkey wants tea and biscuits! Monkey wants it *now!*" she grunted sarcastically as she picked at her scalp and pretended to search for fleas. Thomas laughed again as a custard cream rose off a plate on the coffee table, moved slowly through the air and settled gently in the palm of her hand.

"See? Gravitational energy," he explained. "It's *multi*-dimensional, and a good thing too, otherwise we'd all weigh a billion trillion tons each, but don't ask me to explain in English how I just did that. Oh, *please* stop the monkey impressions! You *know* I don't mean *you're* an orang-utan!"

"Ook-kay," she grinned brightly, relaxing in the chair. "But as we are trapped in this boring old house *again*, you can tell me what *really* happened between you and Gemma."

"I'll try but like I keep telling you," he sighed in exasperation. "I don't have the *words*! Basically, after dealing with Sheppard and the Ban and then

Ashcroft and the Beast and being touched by all those souls at Saint Madoc's, she's had some serious post-traumatic stress to deal with. And don't forget, she'd used her talent to *kill* two people: Sheppard *and* Gates. That's what left her vulnerable to that damned shrine movement. Allbright and Vigil mean well but they can't possibly monitor so many sites and members."

"But you couldn't possibly expect something like that to happen," she sympathised. "Don't forget, the House and the agency have made the family a *lot* of money. George and Brian have invested most of the family income properly, haven't they?"

"Yes, they have," he smiled gratefully. "And they're very well paid for their services! I have to admit though: they were fantastic. They helped Hannah and Graham restrict Gemma's interviews and appearances and arranged private tutoring for all the children. Brian got her some decent bodyguards and counsellors so she was okay for the first year. She was so happy that nobody around her thought she was a *freak* any more - but it was one extreme to the other," he sighed.

"Because we were constantly focussed on setting up *new* centres and foundations for the House, we didn't notice them setting up those shrines in the *established* centres, flouting the House ban on all forms of religious imagery. As you know, Vigil did try to stop it but he thought it was relatively harmless which only helped the practice to spread. I chewed his ears off when I found out he had a picture of her in his wallet!"

"I still can't believe they started to *pray* to her," she exclaimed angrily. "It must have been *awful* for her - but she's never talked about it."

"She won't because she *can't* put it into words," he explained, tapping his forehead with an index finger. "Human brains are such limited things, even yours," he added with a cheeky grin.

"Oh, ha, ha, very funny," she retorted, smiling. "But with Gemma," she pointed out. "Seeing her face everywhere, on buses, on TV and in pre-teen girl's magazines is what puffed up her ego in the first place."

"I'm not surprised. She's only a kid after all."

"Exactly! That's why that lovely kid became a spoiled *brat*," she sighed. "Ordering George and his staff about like that and bossing the House guards around! When they didn't jump fast enough, she *punished* them by revealing their innermost thoughts and secrets to others."

"I feel guilty because I was so wrapped up in the House and fighting for access in court," he confessed, his face clouding with anger and self-recrimination. "I left Hannah and Graham to deal with an *uber-brat* who can flatten buildings with her *mind*. She was so cruel to Tamsin and she made Alicia and Derek very, very unhappy."

"Thanks to Gemma, Alicia now believes she's a worthless 'bubble-head'" he continued sadly. "She's misbehaving at school and with her tutors and so is

Tamsin now. Claire is *furios* but she won't confront Gemma as she's terrified of her. The kids *hate* being anywhere near her."

"We missed it all, didn't we? We should have been there for her."

"You're not to blame either, Jillys!" he assured her. "And I'm not sorry we set up all those centres and took on Kathryn and her family for the sake of my kids. Admit it: it's been a real buzz being part of a world-wide religious renaissance and setting up that mediation office in the UN was the most amazing thing I've ever done – on a par with Bute Terrace and even Saint Madoc's. We were at the UN, Jillys!" he exclaimed incredulously.

"It was amazing and I wouldn't have missed it for the world," she agreed happily. "But we've been stuck in this house for months and I'm going stir-crazy! There's nothing left for us to do: the momentum is there and they don't need us anymore. But you can't change the subject," she insisted, folding her arms. "I want you to talk about *Gemma*."

"Alright!" he conceded, holding up his hands. "Six months ago there was that crisis when Gemma refused to do her schoolwork and Graham sent her to her room. Remember when she had that super-tantrum and wrecked the house? She was *spiteful*. She systematically destroyed all of Tamsin's things, even the little scrapbook she'd made of the cuttings of me and Gemma. Up until then, Tamsin had been so proud of her famous big sister."

"When I went round to the house to have a word with Gemma with her parents present, she had the bloody *cheek* to have a tantrum with *me*. She wouldn't talk or 'path when I came in and sat at the table with her nose in the air as if we were something the cat had dragged in. Hannah was fussing about trying to clear up the wreckage when Gemma said: '*Oh, for God's sake, Mother, go and get the House flunkeys to clean it up!*'"

"Hannah was in tears and I could see that Gemma was damn near out of control. The contempt she had for her mother and sister was unbelievable and she hardly bothered to acknowledge her father at all: Graham was totally heartbroken by it all."

"Surely, she could *sense* all this unhappiness?"

"She could but I think, at that point, she didn't give a *toss*. I had to forcibly 'take' her thoughts to see if something had got at her like Ashcroft but there was nothing left of the old Gemma except a nasty *brat* having a massive hissy-fit."

"It was all that bloody prayer! What you have to understand," he said, tapping at a temple with his index finger. "If someone thinks about me then that thought sort of jumps out of the static, like when George 'called' to me for help at the Stevenson's Rest. You see, we can 'take' the thought more easily when it's directed at us - even if the sender is miles and miles away."

"So while we were globe-trotting or going down to Essex for court hearings, Gemma was sitting in her room 'taking' all the pleas and prayers of

thousands of House members all across the *world*. Without telling anyone, she went projecting and 'pathing to these new 'disciples' and every time she did, the movement got stronger and more shrines were set up. Allbright and Vigil alerted me when they discovered the extent of the problem but, by then, she'd become completely *addicted* to it. She stopped studying and spent all day in her room talking to her 'disciples'."

"Didn't Allbright and Vigil stamp it out?"

"They did because that movement could've easily taken over the entire House! Since then they've made sure not a single shrine remains and they closed down any centre that objected to the removal. But the damage was done," he said with a shrug of the shoulders. "I 'took' Gemma thinking she was as powerful as Zhara and far above the lesser beings around her, even *me*. I kept forgetting that she's still a kid and for us, absolute adulation is as bad as any narcotic. She was a psychic *junkie*."

"I tried to project into her mind, showing her all the hurt she was causing her family but she did our version of 'slamming the door in my face' and she did it *hard* - so I took her down a peg or two. Well, several pegs actually. I think it worked and she calmed down once the shrines were removed and all the members told *never* to pray to her or her image like that again. It still goes on a little but she hasn't responded much since then as she's been too busy *sulking* for the last six months. The problem was that she still thought she was God's gift and that left her vulnerable to that KYTV stunt."

"Slamming the door? What does that mean?" she demanded. "Why was it so bad that you won't speak to her or talk to me about it?"

"I keep telling you I can't describe what we do in words and you can't stand me 'pathing to you.'"

"When you project your thoughts into me," she admitted ruefully. "I still find it extremely painful if we're not linked because of what Ashcroft did to me. But try anyway. I need to know. But not by linking - it's distracting *and* it keeps turning me on all the time!"

"Okay," he agreed doubtfully. "Just empty your mind, close your eyes and I'll try to keep the volume right down and do a sort of half-link. This is what she tried to do to me. Ready? Here goes."

"Jesus!" she yelped, leaping out of the chair and looking down at Thomas with abject horror. "God! What a little *bitch*!"

"Exactly," he sighed. "There was no excuse for her doing *that* to me! She had it back tenfold and I swatted her clean across the room. I don't believe in smacking children, but she got our version of a damn good spank on the backside. I forced her to apologise to her parents and poor old Tamsin. I tell you, Jillsy, it absolutely broke my heart to see Tams just sitting there in floods of tears with all her toys and her little scrapbook in bits all over her bedroom.

It looked like a bomb had gone off. She has such a heart of gold: she didn't deserve that."

"Okay, I can see why you didn't want to talk to Gemma or me about it but she really needs you now, I can *feel* it," she said meaningfully. "I think she's finally got the ego thing out of her system."

"Possibly. You see, when those patients died, she could have been *connected* to them," he explained, his face grim. "She will have *shared* their deaths as she did when she took out Sheppard and Gates. That's what that evil *bitch* from KYTV will never understand. Every scrap of their pain and decay and fear and loss as they died she would have *felt* - even if they were brain-damaged. We *can* fix simple things like a broken bone but brain damage? Tens of thousands of damaged ganglions and micro-capillaries in a stroke victim? Forget it! Gemma finally knows for certain that she *isn't* a goddess *or* a prophet. What she needs right now is an *empath* to talk to. Someone outside the immediate family."

She arched an eyebrow. "Huh! I didn't need telepathy or foresight to see *that* coming," she sniffed regally. "But don't worry, I'll do it. I'll sneak up to the Brenin in a minute and have a long chat with her."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it," he said gratefully. "But you need to be careful because forcing Sheppard to pull a trigger to save her father is one thing but Gates was something else because she killed him *directly* with kinetic energy. He died almost instantly but she felt his death *intimately* - as I would have - because we *connect* with our targets and our minds don't quite link but they do *overlap*. Do you know what I mean? We *become* part of them and we die *with* them. That's what bothers me: why did she carry on after the first patient died?"

"I'm worried that Gemma let her hatred of Gates overcome her revulsion at killing him and I blame Ashcroft for that, because I can see now that he *really* did a number on her," he growled. "She's convinced herself since then that it was an act of mercy but she could've just crippled him. I think she's in real moral danger and I should know: I killed *dozens* of prison guards when I was linked with Mena three years ago. I'm convinced that's why I picked up this stigmata - as a punishment from God. Not all the guards were monsters and often torturers are tortured themselves first."

He huffed a little and dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. "I think it's warm enough in here now, don't you?"

She watched in thrilled fascination as he raised his right hand with the palm facing the crackling flames. He slowly closed his hand in a crushing gesture and, with a grinding and splintering of tortured wood, the fire guttered and died. Again he could have simply drained off the kinetic energy and stilled the flames but he loved to practice these techniques.

"Why do think she'll listen to me and not you?" she asked.

Thomas gave a wry chuckle. With his unique gifts of perception, he could 'see' her essence, her *aura*, etched in a searing *white* against the whole of Creation. Unknown to her, her *being*, her *existence* impacted on all the myriad planes and higher realities through which she moved oblivious - for she was truly *beautiful*.

"Trust me. She'll listen to you - because she sees you as *I* see you," he assured her passionately. "And it'll give me an excuse to talk to her afterwards but she needs to open up first. You know how much I love you," he said, shaking his head. "But it just amazes me that you have absolutely no idea what you really *are* - and there are no words I can use to explain you to *you!* It's driving me crazy!"

"Good. As a woman, I'd like to keep it that way," she laughed.

The Contract Is Everything

Councillor Michael Sifford was pacing up and down his spacious office pausing every now and then to glare meaningfully at the pile of newspapers and print forming a pyramid on his desk. Brian Cardman and George Tully had been ushered into the room but they'd had no choice but to patiently sit and wait until the corpulent council leader could speak to them rationally.

He finally dropped his well-lunched frame into his grandiose leather chair and gazed with imperious wrath down upon the two media agents. The chairs were deliberately set low to make interviewees feel uncomfortable before that imposing desk - rather like naughty children sent to a headmaster's office. Even Cardman could not dismiss the intended effect as Sifford was ever the master at this type of Stalinesque psychology.

Sifford dramatically brandished one of the national papers with a picture of Gemma Lewis on the front page alongside photographs of the three dead patients. "How could you allow this to happen?" he demanded. "It's a miracle that the council hasn't been damaged by this mess but it's only a matter of time! And don't get me started on all the promotional material that now has to be *pulped*! Jesus Christ! I thought you two were *professionals*!" he raged, screwing the paper into a ball and hurling it against a nearby wall.

Tully consulted a palm-computer note-book and slowly scrolled through the pages whilst mentally counting to ten. "I've spoken to all my contacts in the heavies," he said in a deliberately calm voice. "They confirm my suspicion that the articles were all too *uniform* to be spontaneous. They were syndicated by none other than our good friends at Business Matters Limited. I'll lay good odds that the copy was ready for printing *before* KYTV whisked Gemma off to the ICU. The Department *has* to be involved, Mike, they're the only ones who know Gemma's limitations."

Sifford glared disparagingly at the wiry former journalist. "Come on, George," he fumed. "You can come up with better conspiracy theories than that! We've known for *years* that BML is a front for the Department. No one takes them seriously anymore and KYTV is internationally owned. It wouldn't lend itself to a scam like that. It has too much to lose - it's into the House for millions in advertising for one thing."

Cardman flicked an elegant blond dread-lock back over his collar and folded his arms to look his former political boss straight in the eye. "You're wrong, Mike," he said forcefully. "Even though some of the Security Act statutes were overturned, BML has carried on infiltrating boardrooms and committee rooms. Granted, they're a lot more covert now than they were two years ago, but that only makes them more dangerous. I think KYTV was locally infiltrated by BML or by the Department itself."

“The spooks have cracked the new government by doing it old school,” Tully added, tapping at his notebook. “They’re using the golden oldies of honey traps, blackmail, bribery and good old intimidation. No wonder the police and the armed forces are getting twitchy again. They’ve definitely flipped the Deputy Prime Minister – the rumour is she got videoed batting for the other team. Husband, kids, power – they got the silly cow on all three fronts. There’s a big press conference in Downing Street about it in an hour or so and it looks like she may be booted out of the Cabinet.”

“All very interesting,” Sifford said dismissively. “But *how* do you propose we deal with the fallout from this Ridge Park incident? Ayr Street and Donald Street have been jam-packed with paparazzi ever since. We’ve had dozens of residents complaining to us and the police about the roads being blocked. Whether BML or the Department are behind her fall from grace is irrelevant. You have to come with something to counter this nonsense or any hope you have of renewing your contract, gentlemen, is as good as dead.”

Tully sighed audibly as he knew this acrimonious debate was getting them nowhere. “Brian and I have already set up a press conference at one o’clock at the Brenin to relieve the pressure on the family,” he said impatiently. “But we needed to run it by you first. That’s why we’re here. But as for BML and KYTV: think about it, Mike! Gemma can *read* minds. Yes?”

“Yes, so what if she can? It’s a great parlour trick for the proles and until now, it’s done wonders for the local economy,” Sifford acknowledged. “But what’s that got to do with the mess she’s in now?”

“We’re convinced Karen Spriggs set her up!” Cardman interjected. “It’s obvious! The only way she could hoodwink a telepath is through *training* in masking her thoughts. That means...”

“The Department was involved,” Tully concluded excitedly. “Everyone knows they’re working on devices and techniques to prevent Thomas and Gemma scanning their agents. We knew they could do it two years ago but they must’ve got more sophisticated since then especially with the neuro-technology they stole from Doctor Smith’s team. Brian and I think Spriggs is working for the Department. She has to be.”

“Okay, okay, if the spooks *did* set this sting up to trap Gemma,” Sifford conceded irritably. “What’s the *point*? They could just roll into town and snatch the entire family if they wanted to, couldn’t they?”

“They’d like to but they can’t as we’ve kept the family smack in the middle of the media spotlight until now,” Tully said.

“There would be a massive outcry and the House would make the sure the whole world would know about it,” Cardman added, raising an index finger. “*Unless* they could portray the family as a threat to society. *That* angle has already been tried in the right-wing press but because they’ve been so crude, it’s been counter-productive so far. They’ve made it really easy for us to seed

conspiracy threads all over the internet. As a result, the latest editorials are now gunning for the House instead.”

“That’s true,” Sifford agreed reluctantly. “But don’t let your guard down because they’ll keep chipping away at the family. Did you see that cartoon in the Herald with Gemma handing in her wings at the gates of Heaven?”

“Yeah, *tasteful*, wasn’t it?” Cardman said angrily.

“The House is far too powerful for the Department’s liking and not just in this country,” Tully said thoughtfully. “Gemma and Thomas, they can largely ignore as long as they keep their noses out of Department business, but an internationally respected body with a million members and the income of a small country? That’s something else!”

Sifford was calming down and a healthy colour was returning to his cheeks. He ordered some tea on the intercom and gloomily scanned several more of the morning papers and reports on his desk. “We’ve had no choice but to pull our latest campaign,” he told them wistfully. “You know the one: Pontybrenin – Valley of the Prophets? The one with Gemma looking mysteriously into this crystal ball?”

“It was complete and absolute *shit*, Mike,” Cardman said bluntly. “You had a good two years with us but now your officers think they can do better. Like hell they can. The council should formally distance itself from the House but help to rebut any direct attacks on Gemma and Thomas. We could do a lot more if we had council support and proper access to your facilities. We need that contract back!”

Sifford reddened and he tapped a folder on his desk with a forefinger. “We couldn’t afford your fees,” he said dismissively. “You got greedy! After Saint Madoc’s, I had to get the campaign up and running quickly and you two were the only game in town - but that’s not the case anymore. I have a smaller majority and I don’t have control over my Group, so it’s difficult. I had to hand over the mayoral chain just to stay on as Leader! A ten per cent increase I could have sanctioned without debate, twenty percent maybe but *eighty* per cent? Dream on, boys! However, I’m still open to renegotiation.”

“So you need us, then?” Cardman said archly.

“Only in that you are still the sole agents for the Lewises,” Sifford countered shrewdly, his eyes narrowing. “And the name of the game is damage limitation - for us and for them. But what you have to remember, Brian, is that your only asset has been massively *devalued* by all this negative publicity. You are hereby invited to re-bid for the advertising tender - at the newly adjusted market rate, of course.”

“You’re all heart, Mike,” Tully said dryly.

“Naturally, especially as you just told me, rather rashly, that you have a press conference in less than two hours that depends upon you getting a

contract, *any* contract, from the council,” Sifford beamed. “Here’s the deal: same contract but at *sixty* percent of last year’s fees. Take it or leave it.”

Cardman laughed incredulously. “Emma would skin me alive if I came home with that!” he protested shrilly. “One hundred and *twenty* percent. Come on, you owe us big time. Some of that one thousand percent increase in visitors you reported *has* to be down to us!”

Sifford intertwined his fingers on the desk and leaned forward to stare candidly at Cardman with a predatory smile on his face. “After Ridge Park, those numbers might be right back down to zero by next year,” he said angrily. “Besides, we still have enough paranormal incidents going on to keep *some* of the punters happy. Seventy percent.”

Cardman folded his arms in disgust. “That’s outrageous!” he fumed. “Thomas sold the council for all its worth. Christ, he’s been talking this dump up all over the planet. He even got Pontybrenin mentioned in the Russian Parliament and I know for a *fact* that every conference room in the valley is booked solid for *ten* years. You’re having to build new hotels and tourism centres everywhere. One hundred and *ten*.”

Sifford blew out his cheeks in affected boredom and straightened up in his chair. “Look, Brian, I know for a *fact* that sponsors are dumping Gemma like shit off a shovel. She didn’t have that many in the first place and you know why: she frightens people. Eighty.”

“She’s successfully spear-headed your campaign for two years,” Cardman angrily reminded him. “She’s handed out prizes and awards at all your conferences and council events. This negative campaign could easily die down tomorrow. One hundred and *five*.”

“Maybe but your immediate problem is that you now have some stiff competition: Portland and Carter has tendered to do the campaign for far less than you guys,” Sifford said smugly. “Eighty-*two*.”

“They’re chancers, Mike, they don’t have our networks, you know that,” Cardman countered, glancing at Tully who nodded agreement and was more than content to let his colleague dicker with the domineering council leader. “One hundred and *two* percent.”

Sifford snorted in contempt. “Oh, come on, Brian! I’m doing you a favour here! You will still have a major contract on a plate and you can work on it even if your main asset keeps on getting hammered – which she will. Eighty-*five* - and that’s pushing my patience to the limit. Trust me, you’ve exhausted any favours I owe you.”

Cardman exhaled noisily and lowered his eyes in defeat. “Okay, you win, Mike. Jesus! Eighty-five it is.” he conceded with ill grace.

“Good man!” Sifford grinned, slapping his hand down on the desk. “Sold! I’ll have my CEO re-open your office straight away and the contract will be ready for you to sign by three o’clock. Now,” he said hastily, glancing at his

watch. “I’ve got a guest from the twinning delegation due now and I believe you two have less than an hour and half to organise a press conference. Good luck with that, you’ll need it.”

Tully and Cardman got to their feet, nodded at Sifford and left the office without another word.

“Christ,” Tully growled as they stalked down the corridor. “If he’d got any smuggler, he’d have *exploded*.”

Cardman clapped him on the back. “You’ve got him all wrong, George, he *wanted* us to have the campaign. The contract was ours from the off but he *has* to appear to be a ruthless negotiator with such a thin majority.”

“Of course he wanted us to win the contract! We’re on far less money than we were getting last year,” Tully said puzzled. “Eighty-five percent is hardly a success for Cardman, Cardman and Tully, now is it?”

“Last year is last year,” Cardman reminded him sombrely. “With the sponsorship deals gone and the TV appearances drying up we need a bedrock income to survive on and Mike has given us that.”

“But he ripped us apart,” Tully protested as they approached the door leading down to the car park. “We lost out on the deal.”

“Did you see the yellow piece of paper on the table next to my chair in his office?” Cardman asked, pausing as he held open the door.

“No,” said Tully, coming to a puzzled halt.

“He deliberately left a summary of the bids for me to read – which is totally illegal by the way. The Portland and Carter tender was for *sixty percent*. That means Mike really stuck his neck out for us but as he said, we can’t expect any more favours from him.”

“So he’s the good guy now?”

“Like hell he is.”

Channel Six

“God, it’s warm in here,” Geoff Tyler complained, mopping at the back of his neck with a red handkerchief. He was a large man, a former boxing hopeful who had run badly to fat over the years but, following a health scare a year ago, he’d been forced to diet mercilessly and looked gaunt and much older than his forty years. The sun was streaming down Ayr Street with no hint of a breeze and the Channel Six news van was now unbearably hot.

His companion, John McCarthy, was sprawled in the passenger seat and regarded his boss with professional and profound contempt. “Why are we here, Geoff?” he grumbled lethargically, gazing up at the bedroom windows of the Lewis family home. “Nothing’s going to happen here until the press conference. I wanted to watch the Prime Minister defend his Deputy even though she was in Sir John’s pocket.”

“It’ll be interesting. I bet Sir John didn’t expect her to come clean with the Prime Minister,” Geoff grunted sourly, detesting his dour and stocky technician even more than usual. “And now Jones has browned-nosed to get the on-the-spot at Downing Street. *We* broke the story. *We* should be there!”

“Word in the office is he’s giving Petersen a seeing-to,” McCarthy said nastily, making a suggestive and obscene gesture. “I always knew ‘Pretty Boy’ was a bit of a shirt-lifter.”

Tyler curled his lip in distaste. “Christ, John, I can’t believe I’ve shared this van with you for seven years!” he snapped. “Petersen is as straight as they come so I don’t believe any of that water-cooler bollocks any more than you do! Jones *must* have something on Petersen unless...” He paused for a moment and drummed his fingers on the wheel. “Unless it’s our old friend Charren making sure that we’re kept out of the loop on this.”

“We can’t be important enough for him and BML to have a go at us after all this time, surely?”

Tyler raised an eyebrow as he unscrewed the cap of his thermos and took a swig of iced tea but pointedly did not offer any to his colleague. “Charren made it clear after the Epiphany that he was not happy with us for all that coverage we gave him,” he sighed, dabbing at the beads of sweat forming on his forehead which were not entirely due to the heat in the van.

“We had him on camera fighting with his colleague in the church and then Dave caught a shot of them both sneaking off afterwards. As a result of what we did, the whole country and his dog knows that he wanted to recruit the Lewises for his far-seeing programs. He hates exposure and I’m told the bastard has a long memory. He’s a dangerous man to cross.”

“He’s in charge of all UK operations now, isn’t he?” McCarthy observed as he leant over to search the back seat for his own flask of iced tea. “We’ll have to watch our backs even more from now on.”

Their cameraman, Dave Lee, came over to Tyler’s window and tipped his baseball cap back to wipe the sweat off his forehead. “Nothing’s happening here!” he protested. “Except that the moron who rang his doorbell seems to have hypothermia. Let’s head over to the Brenin. I could *murder* a lager.”

“Okay, get your camera,” Tyler agreed reluctantly.

“Hang on, Allbright said he’d do an interview,” Lee pointed out. “He’s been working Donald Street. Shouldn’t we go and find him?”

“I’d rather shave my pubic hair with a rusty can lid than listen to that fat bastard yap,” McCarthy muttered under his breath.

Tyler rolled his eyes heavenwards and started the van engine. “You’re an eloquent soul, John, but you’re right: the House are all singing from the same song-sheet after Ridge Park so interviewing him would be pointless. He’ll probably be at the press conference anyway. I’m not going to try and phone their Blessed Prophet either, he’d vaporise my bloody mobile if I did.”

Lee quickly stowed the camera and climbed into the back seat. “Sod it, then!” he declared cheerfully. “Let’s go. Cold lager awaits!”

As Tyler pressed the accelerator the engine sputtered and died. “Aw, come *on!*” he fumed and turned the key again but no avail. After several foul-mouthed attempts and amused glances from nearby reporters and white-suited House members, he slammed his palms against the wheel in frustration. “I don’t believe it! What now, John? What do you want?” he said peevishly.

“I’ve been trying to tell you: your mobile’s ringing.”

“Oh, okay, sorry,” he apologised, opening the cover of his mobile. “Oh, it’s *you!*” he exclaimed, his eyes widening. “What did you want us to do? Okay, don’t worry, we’ll be there.” He pocketed the phone and turned the key in the ignition: the engine started immediately and turned over perfectly. He laughed incredulously as he put the van into reverse and began inching backwards through the crowds of curious onlookers. The stand-off between the House members and the media gathered outside the Prophet’s House was attracting a sizeable audience so it took them several minutes to get clear.

At the northern end of Ayr Street, he reversed out into Heath Rise, drove up the steep incline and turned into the narrow Cairn Terrace, the last line of houses above Ayr Street that backed onto the lower slopes of Cithis Farm. He stopped at a gap in the eastern terrace which was bricked up to a height of eight feet. It had once been the entrance to the small lane that allowed access to the back-yards of the former miners’ homes.

Lee and McCarthy looked at each other in puzzlement as he killed the engine. “The lane was closed off following a petition by residents,” he

explained. “They were pissed off with the people constantly using their back gardens to stake out the Lewis house.”

“Well, Geoff? Care to share?” Lee demanded irritably. “Was that him on the phone? Is he the reason why the engine wouldn’t start?”

“Hey, he’s a telepath!” McCarthy exclaimed suddenly. “Why would he use the phone in the first place? He could have just telepathed you.”

Tyler shrugged. “Doesn’t make sense,” he admitted. “But he said he didn’t want Gemma to eavesdrop. He’s promised us a one-to-one later if we sneak him and Jillsy up to the Brenin so I figured: what the hell.”

“Plus he’d melt the fucking engine block if we refused,” McCarthy observed with a grimace.

Tyler laughed nervously. “There is that,” he agreed. “We’re three years on and, largely thanks to us three, the world now knows that telekinetic people actually exist and they’re a force for good. We’ve been there all the way, haven’t we? Jones and Petersen can’t take that from us.”

“Yeah, but you’ve seen how people behave at those press conferences and in the audiences on those TV shows,” Lee pointed out. “It’s always the same pattern: they come in sceptical, then they believe and then they go home frightened. Thomas and Gemma can kill you with a thought and that’s *scary*. Nobody should have that kind of power. The world’s not ready.”

“It was a good job they were there at Saint Madoc’s or you would not be here right now,” McCarthy reminded him. “Hey, I think that’s him now. Check out the wall!” he gasped. “Telekinesis!”

One by one the bricks were pulling away from the top of the wall to hover in the air, rotating slowly. The three men clambered out of the van to watch transfixed as the last line of bricks ripped themselves up from the ground to reveal Thomas Lewis and Jillsy Stoker, both dressed in identical white T-shirts, designer jeans and sturdy walking boots.

They stepped out into the street and turned to face the cloud of hovering bricks. Thomas held out a hand and in a whirl of motion and crunching cement-work the wall reformed before the astonished eyes of the three newsmen until it looked as though no breach had ever existed. Hand-in-hand and grinning mischievously, the pair approached the astounded crew.

Thomas put on his pair of reflective dark glasses and shook Tyler vigorously by the hand. “Thanks, Geoff, I owe you one,” he said warmly. “Hi Dave, John! It’s good to see you here. You all know Jillsy?”

“Yeah,” said McCarthy with a strange half-smile on his normally sullen face. “We’ve met at a few of the House conferences. Hi, Miss Stoker.”

She laughed delightedly and gave the technician a peck on the cheek and then did the same to the cameraman. “Oh, please call me Jillsy! It’s great to see you guys again,” she said, smiling.

Tyler rubbed at the back of his neck in wonderment. “I don’t know what’s weirder,” he said ironically. “What you did to that wall just now or John cracking a smile. Both make my blood run cold.”

“She has that effect on everybody,” Thomas laughed. “She has that thing that Gandhi, Sister Teresa and Mandela had only a hundred times more so. I think she could stop a full-scale riot just by being there.”

“Or start one,” Tyler muttered, dragging his eyes reluctantly away from Jillsy’s breasts and shaking his head. “Come on, let’s go before John proposes marriage or Dave starts writing bad poetry again.”

“Why do you want us to sneak you into the Brenin?” he asked as they all got into the van with Thomas in the passenger seat and Jillsy seated between the delighted McCarthy and Lee in the back. “You could have just walked through that crowd. You could push them all out of the way, like those bricks in that wall, if you wanted to.”

“That would just be *arrogant*,” Thomas said firmly, his mouth setting into a thin line. “It also carries a real risk of injury and the family has had enough of that recently, thank you very much. Anyway, all their mental twittering gives me one hell of a headache. I’d rather avoid a crush for now.”

McCarthy shook himself free of Jillsy’s spell and resumed his usual morbid disposition. “Yeah, Ridge Park was a cock-up and no mistake! Must have been awful for your niece and I... I... I...” he stammered to a halt and reddened. “And I *really* shouldn’t lie to a telepath, should I?”

Thomas turned to look at the embarrassed technician and around the edges of his sun-glasses, McCarthy perceived tiny ribbons of purple light crawling and flickering, making his eyes itch and his flesh creep. “No you shouldn’t, John,” Thomas said over his shoulder as Tyler started the van. “I know we scare the crap out of you. Deal with it.”

“Go down to the bottom of the Rise, Geoff,” he instructed. “And then take a right, go past the Kings Head, carry on to the end of Llewellyn Road then up the Hook and back onto the Kingsway. We can avoid the crowd and get to the Brenin before the hyenas do.”

Tyler reversed the van onto the Rise and headed down the hill. “Hey, I’m one of those hyenas, Thomas,” he said archly. “Don’t forget we all help to keep Charren off your back! Trouble is, we’re competing with a big scandal in Westminster. You’ll need to come up with something special this afternoon if you want to make any impact on the news channels.”

“What’s the scandal, Geoff?” Jillsy demanded from the back seat as they turned right onto the Fairbanks. They came to a halt behind a lorry as two men finished unloading some parcels for one of the houses.

“We suspect BML – you know: the company that destroys your career if Sir John Fomault doesn’t like your face - blocked us from covering the big press conference in Downing Street this afternoon. The Department doesn’t

like us especially as we got the exclusive on how they turned the Deputy Prime Minister. She's confessed all and the PM is refusing to sack her, claiming that she's the innocent victim of an unsanctioned sting operation."

"So in effect," McCarthy intervened. "He's *directly* challenging Sir John to deny that his Department tried to entrap a senior Cabinet member in order to influence government policy. The idiot he assigned to be her handler fell on his sword this morning after we broadcast his identity."

"You mean he resigned?" she asked, puzzled. "Do they still do that?"

"Not quite. They need a scapegoat so he really *did* fall onto his sword," Tyler said over his shoulder as he put the van into gear and headed for the Kings Head. "But we think somebody committed his hara-kiri for him."

Thomas's face was grim. "Sounds like Ambrose's work," he sighed.

"Aye," Tyler agreed. "Matthews *was* a sword collector so it was an appropriate way to despatch him. And, you'll be pleased to know, most of the media believe that the Department set Gemma up at the ICU! Most, but not all. Spriggs is going to be there at the conference."

"What!" Thomas exploded. "How *dare* she!"

"Can't fault the brass neck of the woman," Lee laughed nervously, glancing over his shoulder several times as small sparks spat and crackled across the metal surfaces in the back of the van.

"Why has Charren suddenly moved against you?" McCarthy asked with some alarm as the static discharges subsided. The van was labouring up the steep twists and turns of the poorly-maintained Hook with the diesel engine straining so he had to raise his voice above the din. "We thought the Department would keep its distance with all the media exposure and that truce you had with him."

"We thought so too, but something must have changed," Thomas replied after some thought. "Maybe there's a power struggle going on in the Department and he's lost his authority, I just don't know."

"Was the truce really that formal?" Tyler demanded suspiciously. "I know you've been in contact with the Department since the Epiphany but I didn't realise you were *that* cosy with Charren."

"It wasn't *just* the media exposure that kept him at bay," Thomas admitted gloomily. "In return for keeping his distance, he used to send his far-seers against us to see how close *they* could get before we detected them. They're very easy to spot as their auras are so severely affected by the program that we 'see' their minds as a kind of *void*. All we had to do was tap them on the shoulder and send them home."

"But you can't possibly trust the man!" Tyler exclaimed.

"I know you'll think I'm wrong," Thomas grinned. "But I trust his word. He openly admits that they watch us and bug the phones but we expected that and he's told me that, if the Department *really* wanted us, then all the media

exposure in the world wouldn't stop them. This is confidential, mind you, but you need to know that I agreed to his offer because it allowed him to convince his superiors that we *were* cooperating covertly with the Department! Also, it allowed me to check if any of these far-seers could pose a threat to us - then I scared the poor buggers half to death to remove any notions they might have had about taking us on."

"I see," Tyler said. "Working covertly with Charren has helped to buy you some more time but I think you're right: he must have lost control because he would *never* have sanctioned something as stupid as that sting operation against the Deputy Prime Minister - or that KYTV stunt."

"You're right," Thomas agreed sadly. "It doesn't look good."

With a tortured grinding of gears the van struggled onto the Kingsway by the Libanus Cottages and pulled into the car-park of the Brenin. "Seems clear," Tyler noted thankfully as he parked the van as close as he could to the side entrance leading to the ground floor and the office.

"Don't forget, it's not just Department agents who watch us," Thomas pointed out. "See that car that just parked up on the Kingsway? The Green Audi? They followed us up from the Fairbanks. They're CIA."

"Why didn't you just fritz their engine?" McCarthy suggested as he and Lee unloaded their gear from the back of the van. Thomas and Jillys gave them a hand and within seconds they were gathered about the entrance door with the gear. Already there was an excited stream of reporters, guests and onlookers filing into the main entrance at the front of the Brenin.

"What would be the point?" Thomas explained patiently, placing a case gently on the ground. "They'd just get another car. The Americans, the Chinese and the Russians all think, and Charren lets them think, that he needs us to get an advantage over them so they all watch us like hawks. We used to find it amusing but since Black Ridge, the joke's worn off."

"Oh, I get it!" Lee exclaimed suddenly, his face slowly brightening as the various pennies dropped. "It's not one but a *series* of stand-offs! Charren keeps the high-visibility action going against you to throw the opposition off the scent while he tests out his far-seers..."

"Stop it, Dave, or you'll strip a gear wheel," McCarthy muttered irritably. "He said this already."

"So the foreign spies think that he *can't* recruit you and report back that his far-seers are no good either," Lee continued laboriously, much to the amusement of both Thomas and Tyler. "Which leads them to believe that the Department has no real advantage despite the new technology! Charren can't move against you while they're watching without starting a far-seeing arms race as well as a protest in the press. So what's gone wrong? Why did Spriggs set up Gemma and why has BML turned the press against her and the House?"

Do you think somebody in the Department plans to use all this bad publicity to override Charren and this truce of yours?”

Thomas shrugged. “That’s what I’d like to know, Dave,” he said wearily. “If you recall, we couldn’t detect the agents who took a shot at Hannah because their training protocols make it difficult for us to detect them. That’s another good reason why I agreed to that working truce with Charren. He could have sent dozens of assassins with this training and one of them would probably succeed in killing us. That’s what really worries me – they could be coming after us now. Ridge Park was just the beginning.”

Tyler tried the handle of the door but it was locked. “Hey, how are we going to get in...” he stopped short as Thomas gave him a reproachful look. “Ah, sorry,” he apologised as the door swung open. “Telekinesis. D’uh.”

McCarthy chuckled quietly at Tyler’s chagrin as they filed in with the gear. Thomas and Jillsy turned to go into the office behind the reception desk while the newsmen carried on into the lounge. “We’ll see you later,” Tyler added. “Oh, are George and Brian going to be at the conference?”

“They’re on their way, Geoff. We need to have a meeting before the conference. They’ll be here in exactly eight minutes.”

“How do you know that? Telepathy?”

“Nah,” Thomas laughed, waving his mobile phone. “Text!”

Thomas and Jillsy seated themselves on the sofa in the office behind the reception desk and waited for Elinor Smith, the owner of the Brenin, to finish dealing with some new guests. On the wall were detailed plans to extend the hotel into the garden and park to add another ten rooms and Jillsy got up to study them more closely. “Business must be going really well, if Elinor can afford to do all this work,” she approved. “It’ll look gorgeous with all this matching stone-work she’s planning.”

“Ah-hmm,” Thomas yawned as he stretched his limbs. “I must be getting old: I could do with another nap.”

“It has got a bit stuffy in here,” she agreed, opening a fanlight window. “There, that’s better. Oh, hi, Elinor!”

“Hi,” Elinor replied brightly, bustling in to place some paperwork on her desk. “Can I get you two a cup of tea or something stronger?”

“A cup of coffee would be really nice,” Jillsy suggested. “Just so we don’t fall asleep in another boring press conference.”

“No problem,” Elinor smiled and busied herself with the percolator and cups. “But after Ridge Park, this press conference won’t be boring,” she warned. “Because they’re baying for blood in there.”

Thomas felt nothing but affection for Elinor, ever the businesswoman in her tasteful blue skirt and jacket, but it hurt him that she would never look directly at him if she could help it. She was the one person in the world who most poignantly reminded him of how truly *alien* he must appear to others.

He could not help ‘taking’ that undercurrent of primal fear that she constantly battled against whenever she was in his presence. Jimmy had confided in him that she likened herself to a doomed Neanderthal helplessly watching the arrival of Homo Sapiens but it was her determination not to yield to this prejudice that so endeared her to him.

As she poured the coffee, he recalled how the three traumatised Tully children had been rescued from their deranged mother and fostered with the Lloyds before they converted the Brenin into a guest-house and then a hotel. She had married her foster-brother, Stephen Lloyd, and he smiled as Stephen’s image formed in his mind - he had been a truly gentle man and she was thinking of him even now. She’d been devastated by his death and had thrown herself into the running of the Brenin until she had met and married Doctor James Calvin Smith...

There was an angry clatter of crockery on the coffee table that startled him out of his reverie and he realised that Elinor was now glaring at him with tears in her eyes.

“Oh, Christ. I’m *so* sorry, Elinor!” he apologised hastily, jumping to his feet. “I was on auto-pilot for a second there. I didn’t mean to link...”

She poured their coffee out in frosty silence before sitting down at her desk. As the shame-faced Thomas sat back down in disarray, he received Jillys’s sharp elbow painfully in the ribs.

Elinor drew a deep, shuddering breath and forced herself to relax. She took a mouthful of coffee while she gathered enough courage to look directly at him. “The images of Stephen and Jimmy popped up in my mind when I knew I wasn’t thinking about them,” she said angrily. “Aaron described what happened on the Black Ridge path so I knew what you were doing just now - ‘taking’ my thoughts and memories without my permission.”

“God, I didn’t mean to, Elinor. I wouldn’t,” he apologised fulsomely. “It’s just it’s becoming a problem when I let my mind wander. You see, I was thinking *about* you and a part of my subconscious accidentally overlapped with yours and accessed your memory files. Damn, I’m sorry! You know I would never do it intentionally!”

“It’s okay,” she sighed. “But it’s such an awful invasion of privacy. I did get to see part of your mind, though. I saw images of Gregory, Kathryn, your daughter, Amy. I think I’m upset now because *you’re* upset, deep down, about the difficulties you face in your battle to get access to your kids. And you can’t lie in a link so I truly *know* that you do love me and Jimmy.”

“Touché, I do,” he conceded, laughing with relief. “It’s true: there are no lies even in a partial link like that. Without you and Jimmy there would have been no Awakening, no Epiphany,” he added passionately, raising his coffee cup in salute. “Without our friends, we would have *failed*.”

“Still, you know mind-reading makes me uncomfortable,” she said, adding some more milk to her coffee. “Especially since Gemma started doing it to everybody last year. I wasn’t thrilled to have her back in the Brenin, to be honest, but when she arrived earlier: I’ve never seen such a lost soul! She was all over the place, trying to hug me and say sorry but what could I do with her? It’s best that she stays hidden in the flat with Jimmy and the other children until this conference is over.”

“Thanks, Ellie,” Thomas said gratefully. “I need to see her soon but Jillsy’s going up to talk to her while this conference is going on. She’s been ‘calling’ to her over the last couple of days but today she really means it: she’s ready to face up to what she did. Ho! There she goes again!”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, *ow!*” Jillsy howled, pressing her fingertips to her temples. “I’ll be up in a minute, Gemma. *Please* don’t ‘path to me! It’s really *painful!* No, I’m not mad at you! Disappointed, yes. Mad, no. See you in a minute.” She massaged her eyes and temples vigorously. “God! That *hurt* but she’s gone now,” she sighed, sagging with relief. “Receiving a projected thought that powerful is like having a migraine in every part of my brain.”

“I didn’t know it was that bad,” Elinor sympathised. “It can’t be much fun for you to be living with a telepath, then.”

“Oh, we manage,” Jillsy grinned weakly. “Mind-to-mind linking and merging is different as the pain just diffuses away. It’s what Ashcroft did to me: he left a psychic scarring in my mind.”

“You poor dear,” Elinor said, repressing a shudder. “I keep forgetting that you were in the Secure Unit all that time with that monster inside you.”

Jillsy finished the last of her coffee and hauled herself to her feet. “I try to forget about him but he still worms his way into my dreams. Anyway, I’ll leave you to the conference, Tom. Thanks for the coffee, Ellie. I think I’d better see to Gemma now. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” they said in unison and she left with a cute little wave.

Elinor relaxed further into the swivel-char and took another appreciative sip of her coffee. “How does she do that?” she said dreamily. “When she’s in a room, any worry or problem you have just seems to fade away from you. She’s like a walking sedative - otherwise I might have brained you earlier! If I were a man, I think I’d fall in love with her on the spot.”

“You won’t believe how many heterosexual women tell me they want to sleep with her,” Thomas admitted ruefully. “Her *aura* overwhelms yours so your bodily functions fall into step with her perfect bio-rhythms. I’m largely immune, as is Gemma, but we are affected on a totally different level because we ‘see’ her as she truly *is*. The amazing thing is, she’s completely *oblivious* to her power which we call ‘empathy’ as it’s the closet word we can find - but it’s not accurate because she *imposes* empathy on everyone else! The spell fades after a few minutes as your own natural bio-rhythms are restored.”

She took a deep breath and placed a hand to her chest. “Yes, you’re right, I can feel myself returning to normal. She’s incredible!” she laughed. “You are one very lucky man.”

“Aren’t I just?” he grinned suggestively. “Oh, you need to make two more cups of coffee. George and Brian will be here in about thirty seconds. They’re just pushing their way through the crowd in the car-park.”

She had just enough time to pour the coffee and add the sugar before the two men burst through the door and dumped their brief-cases in the corner. She coughed as the over-bearing cologne that her brother used to mask his body-odour problem caught at her throat. Despite an expensive suit and red-rimmed designer glasses, she thought he looked tired and dishevelled.

Brian Cardman was a complete contrast to Tully: impeccably dressed, his dark skin smooth and his long blond dread-locks tied back with an expensive silk band. Several tasteful gold chains were draped over his immaculate silk shirt and his slim Rolex was clearly visible.

“Coffee! Elinor love! Don’t tell me you’ve become telepathic, too!” he beamed gratefully, sweeping up the coffee and gracefully seating himself next to Thomas who could not help smiling as Cardman *always* made an entrance. Meanwhile, George had lowered himself self-consciously into an armchair, spilling coffee onto his trousers in the process.

“How’d the meeting with Sifford go?” Thomas prompted.

“Sorry, I thought you’d have known by now,” Cardman said, genuinely puzzled and tapping his forehead.

“I try not to ‘take’ thoughts when I’m not invited, Brian,” Thomas sighed, glancing meaningfully at Elinor. “I keep telling you this. Minds are busy things and I have enough chatter in my head as it is.”

Cardman shrugged. “Sorry, it’s just that we got so used to Gemma just grabbing whatever she wanted in the past twelve months that we sometimes forgot to speak aloud when she wasn’t around.”

“I know about her tricks and I’m really sorry about what she did,” Thomas apologised. “But since Ridge Park, she’s changed.”

“I hope so, Thomas,” Tully said awkwardly. “Because both of us almost walked away from the whole deal seven months ago when you and Jillsy were in New York. She was a total *nightmare*! She even made the two of us *see* exactly what we thought of each other.”

Thomas sat upright with a shocked look on his face. A fierce purple glow began to seep around the edges of his glasses before he calmed down and regained control. “You didn’t tell me she’d been *linking* people against their will,” he fumed. “I didn’t know! I’m really sorry, guys.”

Elinor sighed: “She did it to *me* after Jimmy and I told her off for teasing Alicia when they were staying here just before Christmas.”

“Yeah, but it had the opposite effect of what she intended,” Cardman grinned. “As you say: you can’t lie in a link so she could see how much we trusted each other and she couldn’t handle it. She laid off after that.”

“I just don’t know what to say,” Thomas said, appalled. “Was she doing this to others?”

“A few of the more pushy shrine people copped it and we had two assistants resign when she revealed all their homosexual fantasies,” Tully admitted candidly. “But she also showed us how they had been fiddling their expenses so we didn’t miss them that much.”

“She still owes you an apology,” Thomas said grimly. “Jesus! I wish I’d been around more, especially for Graham and Hannah.”

“We need to focus, people,” Cardman declared, rising to help himself to more coffee. “What the hell are we going to *say* in that bloody conference? We can’t rely on the Westminster story to take the pressure off. Oh, thanks for setting up the room, Elinor. At least we can report some good news: we’ve got the council contract back!”

“Oh, well done!” she cried enthusiastically. “Your agency would have been *lost* without that core income.”

“Eighty-five is all we got, though,” Tully added, crestfallen.

Cardman drank a little more coffee. “Eighty-five of something is better than a hundred percent of nothing,” he said philosophically. “And, let’s be honest, George, we milked the council *dry*! The real prize is getting access to all the council resources again.”

“Okay, but we only have half an hour to decide what tack to take in the conference,” Tully stated in a business-like tone, consulting his computer note-book. “Will Gemma be with us or not?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Thomas decided firmly. “She’s a train-wreck so it would only make her worse. No, *I’ve* got to take it on the chin along with you two plus Graham and Hannah as back-up - if they can make it through that mob in Donald Street. I can ‘path between us if we need to field any awkward questions.”

Elinor got up and recharged the coffee-machine. “I’ve got to go and hold the fort in reception,” she said. She paused by the door to look candidly at Cardman and her brother. “Exactly how *are* you two going to tackle this mess?” she demanded with a knowing smile.

Cardman flashed her a set of gleaming, perfect teeth. “I have absolutely no idea,” he confessed.

Hannah Lewis

Hannah Lewis stopped typing to regard her husband with impatient disgust as he furtively peered through a gap in Claire's curtains. "For God's sake, Graham!" she snapped. "You're twitching the lace like some old biddy! There's nothing we can do about them and the kids are safe at the Brenin. We can't leave here until they're ready to start the press conference otherwise we'll be mobbed the second we step out of the front door."

He reluctantly closed the curtains with a sigh and carefully lowered his massive, muscular frame into an armchair which protested audibly. "Some of the reporters are starting to leave but it's still crazy out there," he muttered, glaring at the closed curtains. "It's okay for Thomas, Han, but I can't *stand* being cooped up like this and if any of those bastards rings the doorbell again, he or she will end up on life support."

She suddenly slammed down the cover of her slim lap-top computer. "I don't believe it!" she exploded. "They've hacked into my wireless connection *again!* No matter what encryption software I use, they always get through a backdoor somehow! How the *hell* am I supposed to get a career outside of this damned circus if they keep dragging me back into the ring? Do you know, I've had *nine* e-mails in the last hour asking us for an interview with Gemma and I only set up that e-mail address this morning! I'm contracted to do several articles and peer reviews and I'm going to miss all my deadlines again. I've had *enough!*"

"Is there any way you can block them out?" he asked hopefully.

"I've *got* to find a way," she said bluntly as she placed her lap-top into her briefcase and extracted a sheaf of papers. "I want to be able to earn a decent living once this nonsense is over and so do you," she declared, leafing angrily through the papers. "These are all the cancellations from the shows and Gemma's sponsors. Nobody wants her anymore, so all the money we've made so far has to build a future for the kids."

"I agree," he said, savouring his tea. "I don't care about the income, I just want them to leave her alone now. We just have to get her through this crisis and things should improve. Maybe the tabloids will ease up on her."

"I hope so, too," she sighed, stuffing the papers back into her briefcase. "They've been disgusting," she snarled, picking up a copy of the Sentinel. "There's a cartoon of me in here as this blood-thirsty pixie encouraging Gemma to kill more accident victims for the *publicity!*"

He suddenly recalled the first day they'd met. She was still slim and elegant with delicate features, high cheekbones and that slight almond shape to her deep-brown eyes that had so captivated him. She still kept her hair in a pony-tail and her ears rose almost to an elfin point, something the tabloids

delighted in highlighting. “Don’t let it get to you. Cartoonists always exaggerate people’s physical attributes,” he pointed out sympathetically. “I think your ears are beautiful.”

“But why do they have to be so *cruel!*” she fumed, screwing the newspaper into a ball. “I used to love the Sentinel but now they’re no better than the Herald!”

“The Herald cost me my last two jobs” he sighed. “I’ve no more favours left out there either. Don’t forget, Crown and Stevenson lost their contracts because they photographed me working on their sites. Apparently, the clients and the insurance companies don’t want a *mutant* as a site manager!” He rubbed at his forehead in frustration. “I still can’t believe that people are using that word! It’s not *my* fault my DNA is the way it is.”

Hannah left her chair briefly to give him a consoling kiss on the forehead. “I know,” she sighed, picking up her tea. “I’m sure you’ll be able to find some work once they stop hounding us. I know you find it hard not being the breadwinner, love, but something will turn up.”

“I’m glad we didn’t let all that money go to our heads,” he smiled. “We should be okay for at least a year now we haven’t got to pay Crawshays.”

“We still *need* private security,” she curtly reminded him, picking up a folder off the floor. “*And* we’ve had to pay towards the policing costs for the last two years,” she sighed, tapping the folder. “I was up half the night doing the accounts and you won’t believe what it’s cost us! And now we’re facing legal actions that could wipe out our savings and lose us the house. It’s a good job we’re happy wearing jeans and T-shirts,” she said bitterly. “Because that’s all we’ll be able to afford unless we get our careers back on track. We can’t wait until the money’s gone and we can’t rely on that council contract either - even if Brian and George do get it renewed.”

She smiled suddenly and held up the wedding band of white Welsh gold that he’d bought her. It had cost him a month’s wages and it was all the jewellery she had ever desired. “There’s no way I’m pawning this!” she declared as if reading his thoughts. “It’s a good job we’ve no desire for material things! What do you think, Claire?”

Graham’s sister, Claire, had been lost in thought for several minutes and had almost taken a bite out of a biscuit before she remembered she was on a diet and slapped it angrily back down upon the plate. “Hmm? Material things? I don’t know about that, Han,” she said in her broad Valleys accent. “I would like to earn a living too, but every time I start work, some *hack* turns up at Joanne’s hoping to make me lose my temper and get a cheap story. Even Dafydd’s side of the family is getting harassed now.”

“It’s not just the press, Han,” she sighed. “Last week, one of the local idiots have had a pop at me for the compensation. I’ve had *three* try it on this year. The police sort them out with the security camera footage but I’m sick

of having to go to court all the time. That's why I made sure the last prat got *hospitalised*," she said with grim satisfaction. "Joanne's keeping my job open but I can't go on causing trouble for her. I don't want to go free-lance either because I'll be taking business away from her and I can't do that."

"Still, I've paid the mortgage with the money you and Thomas have given me and Derek and Alicia will be alright. I've put forty grand apiece in their college accounts and there's still a few grand in the bank."

"You'll find something, Sis!" Graham assured her. "We paid off our mortgage and the business debts and Gemma and Tamsin have at least a hundred thousand in their accounts. We've set up our pension fund so we won't be a burden on them but it's come at a price: Gemma got damaged along the way and I'll never forgive myself for letting it happen."

"I know, but you'll sort her out now she's had this knock-back," Claire told him. "The trouble is, there wasn't anything left over for *my* pension fund so I really need to get back to work! The social won't let me sign on either so it looks like I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place."

"I thought Steve and Maureen had something in a back-office lined up for you?" Hannah asked then stopped short, putting a hand to her mouth. "Oh, God! Sorry! I forgot they did that 'kiss-and-tell' number on you."

Claire's broad and open face was a picture of bitter anger. "I still can't believe my two oldest friends would do that to me!" she fumed.

"But they made it all right in the end," Graham pointed out. "They donated all the money to charity, didn't they?"

"Only after they spent half an hour with *me*," she growled, shaking her formidable fist. "Hell will freeze over before I'll let those two back-stabbing free-loaders anywhere near me and the kids. They can apologise until they're blue in the bloody face, for all I care, because I will never, *ever* trust them again!". She sighed tearfully and opened her hand to indicate the drawn curtains. "And that bloody pantomime out there has cost me my social life as well - only Joanne and Jane Wilson have any time for me these days. They've been my two true friends in all this."

"Is Jane still based at the hospital?" Hannah asked, desperate to change the subject.

"Yes. She arranges the care packages for the elderly discharges. She wanted to keep the juvenile work going but they wouldn't let her and she's not a happy bunny! She rang me this morning to say those two clowns who let Gemma into the ICU have been sacked and the unions won't be supporting their appeals." She noted the tears in Hannah's eyes. "Not that it's much comfort, I know," she added quickly. "How is Gem?"

"Too quiet," Graham replied with a shake of his head. "She's had the stuffing knocked out of her and she's gone into a shell. She's not 'taking' thoughts anymore, thank God, but Hannah caught her staring at the medicine

cabinet last night. There's no point locking it with her powers so we flushed away all the aspirin and paracetamol just to be on the safe side. We've told George to cancel every appointment and TV booking - if there's any left. We thought we had it all under control but, boy, were we wrong."

"*You* made the mistake letting her go on TV in the first place," Hannah said accusingly. "You know I was dead set against it from the start."

Graham was stung to the core and his beard bristled as he thrust his lower jaw forward aggressively. "Look, I've had this 'selective memory' thing of yours up to here, Han," he seethed, making a chopping motion to his lower lip. "I would *never* have let her go on those shows without close supervision and *your* approval! We had our reservations, sure, but we had no choice: we could either play the media with Brian and George or we could deal with Charren and the Department. Snap at me all you want but don't you *dare* rewrite history and make it all *my* fault!"

"Please! Stop it! Both of you!" Claire begged as Hannah flushed crimson and was about to make a vicious comeback. "Come on! We *have* to think of the kids! The last thing they need is you two bickering! I suggested to Tom that Jillsy have a word with Gemma because if anyone can get through that shell, it's her. And it's not just Gemma we've got to worry about. Thanks to Gemma, I've got Alicia in bits and Derek being an attention-seeking swine again. And I'd pay more attention to Tamsin, if I were you."

"What do you mean by that?" Hannah demanded sharply, raising an eyebrow. "She's fine. She's the best adjusted of us all!"

"Is she hell!" Claire retorted hotly. "Gem deeply hurt that little girl! When I had them here yesterday, Tamsin wouldn't go anywhere near her and neither would Derek or Alicia. Whenever Gemma walks into a room, all three of them get up and leave without saying a word to her. Breaks my heart even though I can't stand Gemma at the moment. Yesterday, she just sat and stared at the TV all day hugging that big teddy-bear of hers. She wouldn't eat anything but she did come up and say sorry to me this morning which was something I never would have expected. It's a good sign."

"I wish she'd say sorry to me," Hannah sniffed. "I'll never forget what she did to us. She's my daughter and I'll always love her but what could I do? She'd changed so much and we missed all the danger signs. Hindsight is a wonderful thing but Thomas and Jillsy were away so much and I was so busy whizzing about looking for a career I didn't really need."

"Don't be hard on yourselves: she's a *very* clever girl," Claire reminded them. "She hid all that shrine nonsense from the both of you until it was too late. I think she could've handled the TV work as you rationed it well but Allbright and Vigil really let her down with that shrine business. And now Tamsin has me worried because she hasn't smiled *once* for me since her bedroom got trashed."

Graham nodded in agreement. “You’re right, Sis,” he conceded. “The tutors say she’s unresponsive and the school reports trouble too. One teacher had to go to hospital with a dislocated shoulder when he tried to grab her as she was having a tantrum. I’d have thought a private school would have been more sensible and it’s not as if we didn’t warn them about her abilities.”

“And another thing,” Claire interjected. “I want Derek and Alicia to go to the schools at Saint David’s. It’s one hell of a trip to your fancy private school and they’re not happy there. The rich kids pick on them because Alicia has no self-esteem and Derek is not strong enough to fight them off. When I asked her last week if they were still being called ‘woolly-backs’ all she said was ‘baaa!’ and ran up to her bedroom in tears. Besides, it’s nearly twenty miles each way and I’m tired of driving them there and back. I can’t afford the fuel either – it went up another twenty per cent yesterday.”

“I told you we’d take care of the fees and the taxi fares, Claire, you know that,” Graham said, a little hurt.

“Thanks, but with the sponsors and appearance fees drying up you’ll have no income to spare. I would still put them local in any case because if they get any hassle here, *I* can deal with it. Hands on. We’re not the Lewises for nothing, you know. People still cross the street when I walk down it and *that’s* the way I like it.”

“You may be right,” Graham relented. “The local schools won’t be a problem once the media stops making such a fuss about us.”

“Are you kidding?” Hannah said angrily. “What’s that out in the street? Who keeps hacking into my e-mails and my web postings? We’re trapped in our houses, Graham! This is going to go on for *months!*”

“Yes, okay, maybe it will,” he conceded, holding up his hands. “It’s a pain in the arse but I think it *will* decrease once the hospital story dies down. There’s more than enough international disasters to drown us out. I just hope Charren wasn’t behind KYTV because that means the little arrangement he had with Tom has broken down. I really don’t fancy another toe-to-toe with that psychopath, Ambrose.”

“I’m still worried about Tamsin,” Claire persisted. “I’m telling you: something *is* going on with your daughter! She’s been in pain the last few times she’s been here and she looks pale. Yesterday, when you were out, I looked in on her in the bathroom as she’d been in there over an hour. She said she was okay but she didn’t look right. Not right at all.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked with some concern. “I told you she’s been complaining of some pain in the joints but the doctors say she’s hurting herself by being hyper-active - which isn’t surprising given the raw power in her muscles. The cod liver oil and the creatine help.”

“Maybe, but I’m not so sure,” Claire said thoughtfully. “You see, as I entered the bathroom, I could swear I saw her *change shape*. There was this

weird crackling sound and her face didn't look quite right for a second," she shivered. "But she pushed past me with a '*can't you knock, Auntie? I could've been on the loo!*' and went to play with Alicia and Derek as if nothing had happened. There was this peculiar smell as well that reminded me of fur and musk oil. I think you should keep an eye on her."

Graham looked deeply worried. "She is getting faster and stronger," he admitted. "But now that you mention it, she *was* staring into space last week at the breakfast table and I could have sworn her pupils were like a cat's for a second... Nah! Not possible!" he laughed, dismissing the idea. "Tamsin morphing into some kind of animal?"

He stopped dead as Hannah glared daggers at him. "Look, if she *is* showing some kind of lycanthropy," she said icily. "Then it won't be any more unusual than us having a telepathic, telekinetic daughter, will it? I think we should get Jimmy and Harriet have a look at her. Maybe her DNA is mutating or one of those five-base genes is switching on."

"What about Doctor Ferris?" Claire suggested.

"Come on," Hannah said archly. "He may be our friend and seen more than most in Pontybrenin but he's still a country quack, bless the man. He can't possibly help Tamsin if what you suspect is true, especially if something *genetic* is happening. I hadn't noticed it but then I'm not very good at noticing things, am I?" she concluded tearfully.

There was an uncomfortable silence punctuated by some shouting and yelling in the street. Graham got up and peered through the curtains again. "It's Allbright!" he exclaimed. "He's got the Brothers to organise that cordon properly and the media guys don't look happy. Now two vanloads of police have just arrived and they're making the cordon official as far as I can see. Huh! You should see Allbright, hamming it up for the cameras! Hang on," he grinned hugely. "Better open the front door, Sis - it's your *beloved!*"

There was a heavy knocking on the door and Claire let in her fiancé, Sergeant Price. He had kept to the diet and looked lean and fit but still walked with a pronounced limp. He usually kept his walking stick to hand but he left it propped up in the hallway as he kissed Claire passionately. They sat themselves down in the lounge after Claire had poured him a huge mug of tea. Graham couldn't help smiling as his old friend gazed longingly at the plate of biscuits on the coffee table.

"How's it going, Pricey?" Graham asked with some concern. He saw that the sergeant's face was pale and there was a trembling to the right hand that had become quite noticeable over the last twelve months.

"Which? The diet or that riot outside?" he laughed. "The diet's fine. Claire and I are well on course to fit into our wedding clothes. And it's still pretty intense out there but some of them have started drifting up to the Brenin.

Some of the House people were setting up the tables and chairs for the press conference when I checked in there just now.”

“But *my* personal news is not good,” he sighed, removing his cap and running a hand through his short and thinning ginger hair. “That’s the main reason why I’ve come round to see Claire. The police surgeons say I might get pensioned off soon,” he said pensively, cradling his mug and staring into the tea. “The results confirm I’ve got a progressive form of nerve damage from that damned tazing I got at Saint Madoc’s. One of the contact spikes was over the spinal cord and the current was on maximum for a long time even when I was unconscious. It’s taken two years to work through but they reckon it’s not going to stabilise.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry Nathan! We just knew something was wrong,” Hannah sympathised, putting her hand to her mouth in shock. “From the shakes and the numbness you said you were feeling in your legs last week.”

Claire bit at her lower lip. “Nothing us *Prices* can’t handle,” she declared resolutely, reaching across to squeeze his hand.

“On the plus side, they’ve ruled out Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s,” he rallied, grinning gratefully at Claire. “*But* I could have real problems five or ten years down the road. They reckon my right arm won’t get any worse but I could end up in a wheelchair with the damage to the leg nerves. Naturally, I’m fighting their recommendations. I can’t retire! I’m a copper to my boots! Lucky for me, the force is so short of experienced officers that there will always be a job for me - even on wheels.”

“Good for you, Pricey,” Graham approved, raising his tea in salute. “But I can’t see you as an instructor. You’re a beat man.”

Sergeant Price shrugged. “That’s life: I have to adapt or die,” he said wearily. “We’ll be married so we have to take whatever comes along, I suppose. I’ve got my house on Fairwells Road which we’ll rent out, so we should be okay when I move in here. I’ve also been thinking about setting up a security consultancy. Would you consider going into business with me, Graham? Your building skills would be useful.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll certainly give it some thought,” Graham agreed, glancing at Hannah for a tacit nod of approval. “By then, this media nightmare should be over and we can get back to working for a living.”

“Hey! Where are the kids?” Sergeant Price asked suddenly, looking around. “I was expecting to see them here as there was no-one at Ayr Street or Edith’s when I knocked just now.”

“Vigil spirited them away through the lanes and backyards and got them all up to the Brenin,” Hannah told him. “Jimmy and Ellie are hiding them in their flat until Brian and George can sort out the press conference. Like it or not, the media are not going away until they get an interview from us about the Ridge Park incident and Gemma is not ready for that.”

“Hmm, that’s as maybe,” Sergeant Price shrugged. “Even with the London news and the press going for Allbright’s mob, Geoff Tyler says you will lose what little media sympathy you have left if you keep putting them off. Those bogus ‘interviews’ appearing in the tabloids and the e-zines are causing a hell of a lot of damage to your reputations.”

“And there’s more bad news,” he said slowly, taking Claire’s hand and squeezing it. “I’ve just heard that the relatives of those three dead patients are definitely pressing the CPS to speed up the decision to press charges and their lawyers are already preparing civil cases. I’m sorry but Gemma will be facing legal action on several fronts and it will get *messy*: the House, the hospital and KYTV will all be dragged into it – maybe even the council. Hell, it could last *years*.”

“I know. We’ve been trying not to think about it,” Graham said despondently. “We’ve already laid out thousands on legal advice but, so far, only Bonham and Reece want to represent us locally.”

“Pontybrenin’s finest! Not!” Sergeant Price laughed sarcastically. “You’ll have to go to the cities to get anyone decent to defend Gemma. The local firms are scared of you. I should know: I’ve made some discrete enquiries over the last couple of days myself. I’m sorry, but the decent ones in the Valleys won’t touch you with a radioactive *barge-pole*.”

“Thanks, but don’t worry,” Graham said warmly. “My old lawyer, Derek Slee, said he’d represent her and he’s *good*. He sorted that Jawlings case out for me three years ago. Remember when I lost one of my guys on that crap scaffolding? He reckons this’ll put his practice on the map.”

“That’s foolish of him, considering you got him beat up for winning that case!” Claire commented sourly. “Any idea how we’re going to get up to the Brenin, Nathan?” she asked.

“Already sorted,” he smiled, glancing at his watch and replacing his cap. “The van will pull up to the door when George and Brian are ready at the Brenin and we’ll bustle you in.”

“Why do I feel like we’re prisoners being transported to court?” Hannah grumbled but relented at the policeman’s raised eyebrow. “Sorry to be ungrateful, Nathan, but I’ve got cabin-fever after two years of this rubbish. No wonder so many pop-stars do drugs and destroy themselves.”

Sergeant Price drained his tea with relish and went over to peck Claire on the cheek. “Always a cracking cup of tea, hon!” he said. “Now, when I rap twice on the window you two be ready to move, okay? Straight in the back and no hanging around for autographs!”

He straightened up then adjusted his uniform and did a quick check of his belt and attachments. “Okay, I’m ready. I’ll see you all later. Good luck at the Brenin but be *careful*. I don’t have a good feeling about this after talking to

those reporters out there just now. After Ridge Park, they want Gemma crucified – even the serious papers.”

As Claire saw her future husband to the door, Hannah joined her present husband at the curtains and put her arms around his waist. As ever, it felt like she was embracing a warm, but very solid, tree trunk.

He smiled down at her and placed his muscular arm about her shoulders. “We’ve come a long way haven’t we, Han?” he sighed nostalgically. “Ever since I was working on the campus site and saw you staring at me. You had one *sexy* wolf-whistle!”

“What else did you expect?” she grinned, nuzzling him. “You had your shirt off and I just couldn’t help myself.”

“I’m sorry I snapped at you earlier,” she added in a more serious tone. “We *have* to be stronger for Gemma: she really needs us! And what if Claire is right about Tamsin? She’s got the same five-base genes in her DNA as Gemma and Thomas. What if one of these genes *is* switching on and she *can* change her physical shape? What if she *can* mimic animals or other forms? What the hell do we do?”

“Buy some kibble? Ow!”

“I’m serious, Graham.”

“So am I,” he said ruefully, rubbing at his ribs. “All I’m saying is let’s see what’s really going on before we panic. Let Jillys work her mojo on Gemma first, *then* we need to tell our superstar daughter that we love her and forgive her, *then* we’ll ask Tamsin whether she really can change shape. And if she can, God help her, then we need to be on top of it.”

Hannah wrapped her arms around him and stood on tiptoe to plant a kiss on his lips. “Okay,” she agreed. “Gemma knows she has our love but she has to understand that she’s got a long way to go to earn our trust again.”

He returned the kiss and gently touched his forehead to hers. “I agree,” he said. “I just hope we can keep the furniture intact when we tell her.”

Freak

In the cramped bedroom of the Smith's private flat at the Brenin, a slim and graceful eleven-year-old girl, so alike her mother in appearance and dress, was sitting cross-legged on the double-bed with her face buried in the fur of a huge and gormless-looking teddy-bear. She was laughing and sobbing at the same time and her tears were steadily dampening the stuffed toy. There was a faint metallic tang to the air for smouldering in an ashtray on the chest of drawers by the window there was a large mass of twisted gold and silver – the melted remains of all her expensive jewellery.

"I'm so sorry, Mum, I'm so sorry, Dad, I'm so sorry," she was saying over and over again, as she rocked gently back and forth, lost in abject misery. Occasionally a huge sob wracked her body and she lifted her head to curse her reflection in the dresser mirror. "You stupid *freak!*" she hissed. "You messed *everything* up! How could you! You stupid, bloody *freak!*"

There was a gentle but insistent tapping and she turned to regard the bedroom door which, to her, appeared to be translucent. A bright white spectral light shone through the wood and seemed to fill the room with a pervasive sense of harmony and peace. She turned away from the unwelcome astral glare but made an intricate twisting gesture and the door unlocked and slowly opened to admit her visitor.

Jillsy was beautiful and wore a smile that would have melted permafrost as she sat down upon the bed. Gemma kept her face buried in the fur of her teddy-bear but that immense aura penetrated behind her eyes and into her mind and she could not help but yield to the empathic pressure of a gentle soul who had endured so much yet hated no-one, desiring nothing but the unconditional love of Thomas Lewis and his family.

It had always amazed her that Jillsy was so oblivious of the influence she exerted over others: people just did as she asked out of an unquestioning love for this supremely serene young woman.

Gemma raised her tear-streaked face to regard her visitor and saw, at the edges of her white aura, a subtle tinge of neutron blue. She became instantly alert: she had not one visitor, but *two*.

"Zhara?" she whispered longingly. "Is that you?"

"Yes, I'm here. I cannot manifest at the moment as the alignments do not permit it. I am therefore merged with Jillsy so that we both may speak to you. We've both been so worried, Gemma. Are you ready to talk?"

"I think so," Gemma sniffed.

There came that immense 'voice' in Gemma's head as Jillsy closed her eyes in rapture. It was a voice of relentless nature: a voice composed of an ocean swell crashing upon alien shorelines, of pebbles chattering in the ebb

and flow of those breaking waves punctuated by the cries of unknown seabirds. It thrilled along every fibre of her being for here was her 'angel' of old: a creature with a mind and essence so massive that she felt small and naked before that remorseless and intelligent scrutiny.

All the arrogance and meanness of the last twelve months was laid bare before her and she was truly ashamed. Jillsy nodded and smiled in approval: the incisive diamond glint within the questioning sapphire.

'Good' approved Zhara's 'voice' within and Jillsy's voice without. *'It is a beginning, little Leanan. You have shut me out for so long.'*

"I didn't mean to. I've missed you," Gemma cried aloud, wiping at the tears with the sleeve of her T-shirt. "I'm so sorry, Zhara!"

The sensation of blue within her mind became intense, almost unbearable: *'You do not need to speak aloud for we are linked.'*

"I don't ever want to use my powers again, Zhara. Jillsy knows that."

'You became arrogant but you have regained your humility and your compassion. Unfortunately, pain is often the wellspring of wisdom! I once made the same mistake as you. I drove away those I loved until all that remained were worshippers and disciples. I learnt too late that fear is a poor substitute for friendship.'

"But they died Zhara," she sobbed, wringing the stuffed toy. "I tried and I tried and I tried to heal them but I couldn't stop the bleeding! I was within each one of them as they died!"

'I know, little Leanan. Many have also died that I have tried to save and we live each death. It is the price we pay. Those three were already on the path and would have succumbed within days even if you had been successful. Their time was come. We cannot defeat Death no matter how hard we try. It is enough that you mourn their passing and question the death of the lost preacher whom, in your heart of hearts, you know you could have spared. We are not gods, Gemma, and we are not monsters - but we often tread a grey and perilous path between the two.'

"But you merged and healed Alan and Peter two years ago!" she protested. "And I've healed injuries myself. I..."

'Gemma! It was not their time and their injuries were not as complex as those men you tried to help! The merging corrupts, little Leanan, you know this! I am strong enough not to merge fully with Jillsy and the others, but, given time, even I would be seduced by the ecstasy of it and we would all be lost. The price of a few hours of life for one individual would be the birth of a new darkness to walk the Earth.'

"Wow! You're not kidding, Zhara!" Jillsy laughed aloud, her eyes shining with joy as she wrapped her arms about herself. "It's like every possible orgasm you could ever hope to experience happening every single second inside your mind!" she shivered. "It's incredible."

‘This remarkable valley is the key,’ Zhara continued as Jillsy closed her eyes again and echoed her words. ‘But I can only get through the veils as part of a merging unless certain conjunctions happen amongst the planes that intersect here, which is not often. When the stones were out of alignment it made everything so much easier.’

“Yes, but it made it easier for other things like those sprites to cross over, remember?” Gemma reminded her angrily. “We could have done with you then! Uncle Thomas suffered all his life and he almost died at Saint Madoc’s until that cube thing worked. I forgot to take it because you didn’t tell me it was a weapon I could use against the Beast!”

‘It was not originally intended as a weapon, Gemma. It was you who changed its function from that of a simple teaching device to a trap for the Ancient One. I knew you could do this but you had to be in a life-or-death situation to focus your power and effect the transformation. I am sorry I could not be more explicit when I bequeathed it to you.’

Gemma glared at Jillsy who was still sitting on the edge of the bed with a gentle smile on her lips and her hands resting in her lap. She opened her eyes to return the gaze. “She could not help us directly, Gemma, you know that. She is so tired. She’s been fighting so much for so long.”

“See? Saint Madoc’s proves that Doctor Smith was right. She’s been using us! All of us!” Gemma said petulantly. “We could have all been killed by the Beast just as her Five Disciples were at the stones were when they destroyed Ahriman. Why didn’t she save them? I don’t care what she says. I am *not* using my powers to fight her battles for her! Ever!”

Jillsy arched her back as lines of blue light emerged from her body and from the walls of the room to coalesce into the form Gemma knew so well – that of a flawless young woman in a simple white dress and sandals with a butterfly tattoo on her left cheek. She looked much smaller and frailer than when she had appeared in the upstairs corridor of the Brenin three years ago. Gemma felt a surge of betrayal in her heart for Zhara had always been with her as a child, soaring with her when she astral-projected, secretly guiding her, gently nurturing her, quietly *manipulating* her.

The temperature in the room fell like a stone and Gemma and Jillsy’s breath could be clearly seen. The apparition’s mouth formed the words but they still resounded in Gemma’s mind and she knew her ‘guardian angel’ was furious with her: *‘I have shown you all yet you do not or will not understand! Your uncle knows what I face alone. You need to speak to him about it. I am sorry if you feel I have deceived you. I am merely trying to help for you have always been the child denied to me by my Destiny.’*

“Liar!” Gemma yelled, scrambling off the bed to stare into the face of her enigmatic former mentor with her hands on her hips. “You used us to fight your battles for you, didn’t you? I think it was *you* who guided the Beast here!

We know *you* and your Disciples have manipulated our genes for generations. What's your game, Zhara? What *are* you, really?"

Zhara looked deeply hurt and passed a hand in front of her eyes as if to wipe away a tear. She took a deep breath before replying: '*Gemma, believe me: I did not create the evils that you and your uncle have faced just as I did not create the Aberration that forced me to abandon my Disciples in their hour of need. What you must set against the three and the two you have killed is the billions you set free at Saint Madoc's. It was you who ended their Hell. You must set that against the misery and anger that consumes you.*'

"I know, but the Epiphany doesn't seem real anymore, Zhara," Gemma sighed, her anger subsiding. "I *know* you really love me and looked after me when I was little, but what *are* you, really? Are you human? Did you have a real human name once?"

'I am Zhara. All I can remember is that I have always been Zhara. Those I once loved are dust and nothing remains of their memory within me except the remorse I bear for the pain and suffering I caused them. All I know is that I am alone, that I exist to fight something worse than the Beast, darker than Ahriman, something relentless, without boundary and without end.'

"The Aberration?"

'Yes.'

"Have you been manipulating us?"

'Yes. As others forces, no doubt, have manipulated me.'

Gemma was stung to silence by this frank admission and even Jillsy looked shocked as she stood up and instinctively put her arm around Gemma's trembling shoulders. Zhara bowed her head wearily and they could see that she was crying and their hearts were moved.

"Why?" Gemma sobbed finally.

"Because I am so *alone* and so *tired*, Gemma!" Zhara said and Gemma opened her mouth in awe: instead of the voice projecting inside her head it was that of a young woman, sounding as if it issued from a real human throat. It was unmistakably English but it carried a strange and indefinable accent. "Like you, there is no other like me that I can find in my world. I *have* manipulated your family and I was with Thomas as a child but he knew it not. I was with you and for the most part but you knew it not. I even tried to help Evan and Gregory but they denied me and they were lost to us. Even Josiah and Rebecca could not fully accept me as you do."

Gemma's voice trembled with rage but she suppressed her emotions and placed a hand upon Zhara's cheek and was surprised at the warmth and pressure that she felt. "You crossed over? That's impossible," she gasped.

Zhara swayed, pressing a hand to her forehead. "This is a *physical* illusion," she said wearily. "Force and light mimicking matter when certain

conjunctions allow. It is very tiring but you need to see me thus because you must believe that I mean you all no harm.”

“I and my five disciples brought your family lines together over the centuries as did Ahriman with the Ashcroft bloodline but we did *not* create the original genes you bear but something about this remarkable valley has sustained them. Had I not acted then this Ahriman or the Ancient One would have been unchallenged and everything would have been lost and the Balance disrupted. I am sorry,” Zhara said, raising her head and staring frankly into Gemma’s eyes. “But I serve the Design and I would not do otherwise. I have no choice. I *am* Zhara and there is no other.”

The image suddenly expanded so that only an enormous head remained, surrounded by a vast blue aura and the eyes a steely, relentless blue. The sensuous mouth was set in a determined line and when she spoke inside Gemma it was with a power of a world-shattering tsunami: *‘THERE! I have said all I will! I have done what needed to be done. Never forget that I love you both! What I do is for the good of all sentience.’*

“You made me a *freak!*” Gemma sobbed, frightened at the sudden transformation that revealed Zhara in all her power and majesty.

‘I had no choice in what happened to me! I may have been human once but all I know now is that I am Zhara – one name amongst so many - as you are the Leanan. What happened to you is necessary. It is ordained that you must use your powers. It is ordained that you must grow.’

“Why should I?” Gemma demanded angrily, clenching her fists.

‘I have lived so long and fought so hard yet I am dying, Gemma! I am not immortal. I am dying and there is no-one like me in all these planes who can take my place - except for you.’

“Y-you’re *dying?*” Gemma stammered, her voice choked with mixed emotions. *‘You can’t die! You’re an angel, you are Ahura Mazda, Ormuzd, the God of Light, you can’t die!’* she projected fiercely.

The face began to fade, unspectacularly this time until there was nothing left but a faint blue glow. *‘That’s better,’* came the ‘voice’, no more than a whisper of windblown dune sand, within her mind: *‘I am not a god, Gemma, I am Zhara. My name was chosen to be accepted by your modern world as all my ancient names are now forgotten. I like this name because my powers are fading and all I desire is to lie in someone’s arms at the ending of my days - not as a goddess but as a woman, Zhara.’*

Gemma placed a hand to her cheek in shock. There had been the gentlest sensation of a kiss - like the fluttering of a butterfly’s wings – a favourite trick of Zhara’s. Mystified, she turned to look up at Jillsy who was staring, her eyes brimming with tears, at the space where Zhara had been. She had seen, heard and *felt* everything.

She was pale and shaken. “She says she’s not a god, Gem, but when we were joined I felt so tiny, so powerless beside her,” she gasped in wonder, clutching at her throat. “I saw things I think she has not shared with you or Thomas or *anyone*. She is ashamed and desperate and so *lonely*! She has existed for centuries but I felt all her pain and sadness. She opened up to me, Gem! She has given so much to so many for so long while the Aberration has been at her all her conscious life. You must forgive her for what she’s done to you. I know I would.”

“Huh!” Gemma snorted, ducking from under Jillsy’s protective arm and flouncing back onto the bed. She sat cross-legged and drew the huge cuddly toy to her and rested her chin on its head. “Forgive her? She’s just admitted that she was the one who made me a *freak*!” she shouted. “She could even be lying about dying just to make me feel sorry for her!”

“There are no lies in merging, Gemma. She *is* dying.”

“Pah! She’s powerful enough to protect her secrets,” Gemma retorted angrily. “She’s done it before but at least she’s finally admitted the truth. She’s manipulated me all my life! All... my... life!”

“It’s not manipulation, Gemma.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s *training*. That’s what I saw in her memories and in her mind.”

“What do you mean by *training*?”

“She’s training you to replace her.”

“*What*?”

“You will *be* Zhara. You will *be* the next Ormuzd!”

Gemma sighed miserably and buried her face in the bear’s fur. “Oh, no, Jillsy. It’s not going to happen! I’m only eleven years old,” she wailed. “I can’t be *her*! She’s so powerful! I’m nothing! I can’t even handle what I *am*. Look what happened when I tried to heal those three men.”

“Everything happens for a reason, Gem,” Jillsy assured her, taking her hand and squeezing it. “Had you succeeded at Park Ridge, your arrogance would have made you a *monster*. Instead of Ormuzd, you could have easily become the new Ahriman.”

“I don’t want to be either!” she said adamantly. “I just want to be a *normal* kid - not some ancient goddess!”

“Come on, it’s too beautiful a day to be stuck in here,” Jillsy said brightly. “Let’s go up to Cithis Farm. Harriet says those two foals have just been born and the farmer wants us to name them.”

“Pff! You just made that up to distract me!” Gemma pouted.

“Maybe I did but there’s no harm in finding out is there? I’m *not* having you moping around all day!”

“Okay,” Gemma conceded, drying her eyes. “You’re incorrigible! Even I can’t say no to you, Jillsy! You have no idea how powerful *you* are.”