



**SIDDHARTHA**

**3.2**

**ALL THE WORLDS AT ONCE**

**PART 3**

## 12. Shadow Hunting in the Mean Streets of Old London Town.

Rachel and I were on a roll. Everything that could go right did go right. The signing of our civil partnership contract (or ‘wedding’ in legalese-free English) and the celebration afterwards went well despite the relatively short notice and the dramatically varying characters of the guests which held great potential for conflict (we all have horror stories about wedding receptions, don’t we?) but was actually very relaxed and good-humoured and a good time was had by all (several of them in the ladies loo by all second-hand accounts) which I accept as a tribute to the affection Rachel and I were held in by our respective relatives, friends, and colleagues.

Lanzarote with its compact size, austere volcanic scenery, perfect weather, and good facilities proved an inspired if, for us, unusual (in judgmental English: downmarket) choice for our post-civil partnership signing holiday (‘honeymoon’). We even made two new friends. A pity about watching, from an almost-safe distance, over two thousand people die when a town was crushed and dragged under the sea, but you can’t have everything.

No, that isn’t true. You can have the guilt that knowing something awful was about to happen and all you could do was think of your own safety and survival and only wonder later if there was anything you might have been able to do to warn people.

It was all right for Rachel, as far as she’s concerned we did what we had to do, it happened so quickly we couldn’t have done anything anyway, and if we had tried we probably, certainly, would have died. All true, but what hurts is that I didn’t even think of trying. I reacted exactly as Rachel did and wanted to get the fuck out of there as fast as possible.

And I’m not happy because that isn’t who I am. For all Rachel’s drooling emotional drivel in the last chapter, she did get the important thing right: I am a protector. Despite any impression to the contrary that this narrative may have given, I don’t regard myself as unduly aggressive but what I do do is to react when I feel someone else is threatened unduly –it may be by body language, word, or physical violence. My aggression is reactive not proactive and then I’ll do what it takes.

That’s always been my way ever since I was a kid. And, damn it, I still don’t know if it’s the right thing to do.

Except at Tenerife when I not only could do nothing I didn’t even think of doing something and that’s what really hurts me. I feel I betrayed my fundamental sense of self.

Rachel regards this as nothing more than survivor’s guilt with me trying to over intellectualise it. Well, fuck her, the insensitive bitch. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.

Very few people who witnessed the destruction of Puerto De Santiago survived and we were among them and I had no doubt we be would prize candidates for interviews with the media and scientists researching the event. I could just imagine the tabloid Sun newspaper’s headline, “Four Dykes On A Date With Disaster.” Nah, too long. It would be “Dykes Date With Disaster”. Or, “Lanzarote Lesbos Live.”?

We kept quiet and swore our families to secrecy. Helena called us shortly after we arrived home and told us that she and Maureen had been doing the same. They didn’t want to be involved in a media circus either. Rachel and I had slightly different reasons for avoiding it. We wanted to keep as low a profile as possible because I had become convinced that what had happened was not a natural occurrence but some kind of Shadow incursion and I did not want us brought to the attention of any Shadows, especially if either of the other two women mentioned Rachel’s imaginary psychic premonitions.

Rachel went back to work and I had nothing to do for another couple of weeks when I’d be off to Nottingham University for a fortnight’s lecturing at the Open University summer school. I had some preparing to do but not much more than a day’s work as this would be my third stint and the content remained the same, so all I had to do was relax and enjoy myself with either physical pursuits (swimming, jogging, more swimming) or intellectual pursuits (reading, surfing the Internet, and watching daytime television). Or I could just stay in the flat and brood.

So mostly I brooded, or swam or read, but mostly the brooding.

I grew quickly bored with feeling guilty and became pre-occupied with the Man of Power's gift and then started feeling guilty again because I'd stopped feeling guilty. Soon after that I began to investigate the possibility of vanishing up my own arse.

Then I did some serious thinking about what really concerned me. The Man of Power hadn't given us this gift on a whim. Far from stupid, he probably had the combined intellectual resources of his five human components which meant he had a very good reason for what he did. Somehow I doubted it was just a puckish sense of humour, more likely that our using this gift would advance his aims in some way. How? What were his aims?

As no answers were likely to be forthcoming to those questions as a result of any cogitative process of mine, another question took precedence, indeed it was the fundamental question and everything else would proceed from that. It's a complicated question but I've tried to make it as simple as possible.

Just what the fuck was the nature of this gift?

What was it?

If I answered that I could then proceed to the next step of asking the following logical question:

What the fuck should we do with it?

(Listen, I'm sorry but this version of Word™ appears to have a bug in it as it insists on inserting the word 'fuck' every so often. I want you to know that this is language I'm not known for using in such a frequent fashion. I leave that to Rachel.)

So I went for walks and looked around for those golden showers. (Sorry, that's Word™ being, if not crude, shoving in a double entendre. I meant to say 'golden particles', which actually sounds rather twee but happens to be accurate and if you don't like it you know where you can stuff it).

I suspected that now we were attuned, or at least knew what to look for, they would become more visible. Before, they had been infrequent and elusive, as Rachel has said, seen out of the corner of the eye. But Los Gigantes had been shrouded in them.

When I said I went for walks, more specifically I became a tourist wandering around the historic parts of London. I did this for three days in a row and enjoyed myself as the weather was warm and sunny and there is so much of interest to see. I did the Tower of London, the British Museum, wandered up Charing Cross Road, popping into several of the many bookshops there but buying nothing, checked out the Tate Modern and the National Gallery for a healthy fix of culture and kept wondering why Rachel and I didn't do this together. I suppose it's like people who live in a coastal town never bothering to actually go and see the sea; you tend to take such things for granted. But what I didn't see were those golden particles, at least not in any significant number. Maybe they'd gone on holiday for the summer.

To Los Gigantes.

As for the insignificant number which I did see they mostly seemed to involve people. Occasional individuals I saw, usually fleeting glimpses on the other side of the road or ahead of me in busy crowds, possessed that slight golden haze which, when I concentrated enough to see it, shrouded them like the faintest of mists. But I did nothing, I didn't follow them or try and take a photograph with my mobile phone, because I wasn't ready and because I wasn't sure what it signified. I also saw the particles hazing aspects of old buildings in Whitehall. It had significance I just didn't know what and I wasn't really in any hurry or position to find out. Rachel and I still had our lives to lead. We'd discuss it but now wasn't the time for any form of direct action.

The rest of the summer went by. I did my two weeks at Nottingham and thoroughly enjoyed myself. Open University students are always highly motivated and, tending to be older, lack the instinctive deference college students show, respect yes, but not deference. The other lecturers on the whole tend to be a good bunch and if, during the day, it's all serious work, the evenings are a good intellectual piss-up where intelligent conversation flows as freely as the wine and beer (not that the latter items were free, you understand). An attractive young woman in her early twenties

flirted outrageously with me but I wasn't having any of that and made a point of prominently displaying my wedding ring (which we exchanged when we said our vows and which Rachel didn't deem worthy of mentioning) to the point of nearly punching the student in the eye with it.

I had a good time but was glad to get home so I could have lots of sex with Rachel and after two weeks apart I was horny as all hell for her and judging by her exuberant co-operation the feeling was entirely mutual. I got back Friday evening and, apart from trips to the kitchen and bathroom, we didn't really leave the bedroom until two o'clock on Sunday afternoon when her parents called round.

September knocked on the door bringing with it university staff meetings as timetables were planned, divisions of labour allocated, warnings were given ("Debra, it would be appreciated if you please wouldn't scare the shit out of the freshers this year." Who, me?), and we gently (though some would use the non-existent word 'panickingly') started getting into gear for the new academic year.

For Rachel, of course, it was simply another month. At work, when not buried in contracts, she would be using her undoubted charm to argue the best case for her clients and earn her firm incredibly large sums in fees and I tried not to feel guilty when, at home, she upgraded to the most sophisticated home computer system available and bought an incredibly large HD-ready television which virtually filled one wall of the living room—we did nothing but watch DVDs for a week. Her rats died within three weeks of each other which was upsetting as we were both fond of the friendly little things but she decided not to replace them. We were still talking about, and had begun looking for, somewhere else to live, a permanent home, but it wasn't easy not when it would involve some considerable time commuting which neither of us were used to. By London standards, our thirty minute (forty-five on a really bad day) travelling time was just about on your doorstep.

Although the weather remained fine, summer was undoubtedly fading and things seemed to be taken more seriously.

"Whatever it is," I said, "it signifies some kind of magical activity."

Rachel sat cross legged in an armchair staring at me sprawled across the crouch, head resting against my left hand with glass of wine clutched in the right.

"Brilliant, Holmes!" she said. "Deuced clever! I, however, don't really believe in magic. We live in an ordered rational universe which, okay, may have some wobbles, but..."

I cut her off. "Shadow activity," I said. As far as I was concerned that still meant magic but Rachel could take it to mean science if she wanted. Either way it was something extra-normal, an intrusion into the real world.

"Okay," she said. "So it has significance. We knew that two months ago. What's changed?"

"The Man of Power didn't give it to us just so we could admire the golden particles, Rachel. We're meant to do something with it. We should at least try and investigate it even if with don't actually do anything about what we find."

"Like?" she said. So articulate, my darling.

I said, "We've both seen people who appear to attract these particles. I think it's time we started finding out who some of these people are."

"But we know who they are!" Rachel shouted. "They're magic users."

"Aha!" I said. "Gotcha."

"I'm using the term out of convenience," she replied calmly. Taking the piss, actually.

I said, "That was what not who. We knew the what, now we find out the who and then maybe the why."

"My head hurts. Wanna fuck a sexy black chick?"

"Love to. Where is she and what's her na..."

I couldn't finish the question because a sexy black chick had jumped on top of me and slipped her sexy pink tongue into my mouth.

For all its problems, life wasn't without certain pleasurable compensations.

Ten days later and everything had changed.

We were tooled up and ready for action. In a few minutes time we were about to enter a den of magic users, confront them, come out alive and, hopefully, with our minds intact.

We'd discovered the place by accident. I'd gone into town (town being the centre of London), specifically the City, the banking area, to meet Rachel, whose offices were on the fringe, from work to go for a drink and a meal in a pub and then head up to Leicester Square to visit the cinema and see the new Peter Jackson movie. We had no particular preference as regards to the pub and were just walking leisurely along arm in arm chatting and keeping our eyes open for somewhere suitable, preferably one we hadn't been to before but we were flexible.

We'd got about as far as St. Paul's when we noticed a small group of four individuals with the golden quantum particles shrouding them. As we watched, covertly, they took a sharp left down a side street. Rachel and I walked over nonchalantly to where they'd turned off and stood on the corner as if deep in conversation. A man and a woman in their early thirties, smartly dressed, and holding hands and also shrouded by particles walked past us, went down the side street and at the bottom took a right. We followed. It opened up into a small square. A man, again smartly dressed, again thirty-ish came from the opposite direction and then went inside a building.

(Rachel has a theory that maps of London are incomplete. Deliberately. We're verging on the paranoid theorist territory here, so be warned. She thinks that the government deliberately hides places. On a map where you see a small street or lane that isn't closed off at the end, this is where the hidden places are. Some of them may be innocuous, some of them, she insists, certainly are not. Personally I'm sceptical but I should also say that, when we got home and checked our up to date A-Z of London, this square wasn't on it.)

We walked down into the square and passed the doorway. Enough sound leaked out for us to realise it was a pub. Not large but the stained glass windows were a bit of a giveaway as was the small sign which stated the name –The Britannia. All very innocuous, all very normal.

We skipped the movie and the pub though not the meal. Instead we went to a trattoria near where we lived and where we were well-known. Rachel and I had always had pretty similar taste in food and the longer we were together the more our eating preferences converged so that, when out, we would frequently have the same dishes. Some couples deliberately select different items and split them but Rachel and I tended to be of a mind and that evening it was garlic mushrooms followed by fried swordfish steak accompanied by plenty of chianti. Which I do like, with Italian food, despite what Rachel stated earlier. Maybe that was a windup. Even I still can't always tell with her.

We were in high humour because we felt we'd made progress. Clearly there was a group of –and this grated- Shadow (not magic) users who frequented a particular pub.

"Before we do anything stupid," I started to say but was interrupted.

"We contact Jake," Rachel finished, adding, "Well, you do."

We'd begun to think too much alike.

We could do the reconnaissance ourselves but we'd stand out like the proverbial sore thumbs. Stealth, however, was Jake's middle name. Actually it's ... No, sorry, that's an old joke. Let's not go there.

I called up Jake from a public phone as I didn't trust our house phone or either of our mobiles and left a message saying that I'd be at a particular pub at a certain time tomorrow. Jake would then turn up at a different pub, one next alphabetically down our private list, the day after, and an hour later. We met, I told him the score, he agreed to do it, I went home.

A week later and here we are, all tooled up (you'll see what I mean shortly but it doesn't involve having guns this time) and ready to go.

Parked close to the pub, too close for it to be coincidence, was a top of the range beige Volvo, a shiny new silver Ferrari, and a bilious green four by four. I fucking hate fucking petrol guzzling fucking four by fucking fours! Anyone who owns one and doesn't live in the country should be hung. I decided I disliked these people already.

Just before we went inside I placed a small discrete explosive device near the door's hinges. I nearly put it under the car.

Deep breath and in we go.

Right.

Old building, square room, bar turning the drinking area into an L-shape, larger than it looked from the outside. Maybe about thirty people inside. Typical old London pub, lots of old ornate bric-a-brac, large mirror above the bar, wine list in chalk with a better than average selection and cheaper than usual prices, no sign of a food menu, fruit machine in a corner, adjacent juke box, music relatively quiet. Could have been any pub in the area.

Except conversation in normal pubs don't stop dead when someone comes in. It may happen in really local country pubs where everyone's related to each other or East End villains pubs (so I'm led to believe), but not pubs on the edge of the City where the clientele is intensely fluid.

We walked in, strode really, all bluff and bravado, two sexy chicks out on the town, and Rachel said, "Two white wine spritzers, please."

The barman who could have come from Eastenders central casting, late thirties, six feet tall, short sleeves, dragon forearm tattoos, and shaven head, said, in a low voice just a little too middle class to convincingly fit the image he attempted to present, "This really isn't the sort of pub for young ladies. I honestly feel you'd be better off having a drink somewhere else."

I lay back against the bar and scanned the room pointedly noting that that many of the drinkers wore suits, winking at one attractive woman who blushed and looked away. There seemed to be as many women here as men, equal opportunity Shadow magic users. The ethnic balance seemed to match British society's too.

To be honest," I said, "your clientele reminds me of places we usually do have a drink in."

"Appearances can be deceptive, madam," he said leaning over the bar to whisper the words in my ear.

I turned round, locked eyes with him close up, and said gruffly, "Now there we agree. I look like a harmless ditzzy blonde but do you want to bet that I am? Get us the drinks, darling, and keep your fucking advice to yourself."

Rachel blew me a small appreciative kiss at that one. I deserved it too, copied the attitude from several butches I knew.

"Don't say I didn't try to warn you." He got us our drinks and we paid.

"They look like a bunch of middle class pussies," I said, none too quietly, to Rachel as we looked around the room. "Why do you think he was trying to warn us off?"

"Probably because you aren't as clever as you think," said a woman who'd just emerged from the ladies and who came quickly up to us.

She was Asian, possibly mixed race, again in her thirties, lean and nearly my height, thick black hair was tied into a plait behind her head emphasising her bony facial structure. There was a curious sense of stillness about her, no hand gestures, no facial movement, head erect, unblinking brown eyes staring directly at us. Stillness and control. Whoever she was, she was the mistress of this place and we had intruded, uninvited.

Getting straight to the point, she said, "You're here for a reason. What is it?"

"Do the window," I said. "Just to get their attention." (Tooled up equals tiny cameras and microphones linked to Jake who was in a room in a building opposite with a ... Well, what do you think?)

There was a tinkle, a hole appeared high up in the main window and a bullet buried itself near the top of a spiral-carved wooden pillar on the bar. Wood chips flew.

"Anyone," I said slowly, "who attempts to use magic and the next time it will be soft targets."

The woman snapped her fingers and said, "Secure."

"Already secured, Munyeen," said the barman, "since about thirty seconds after they arrived."

I saw a man stare at two other men who'd were sitting in a corner, catching their gaze. He said, "Forget the last five minutes, now sleep," and they immediately slumped back, eyes closed,

mouths open.

The woman he'd called Munyeen turned to us and said, "What the hell do you two stupid bitches think you're doing?" Her mouth twisted in anger but again every other part of her remained totally controlled.

I said, "Four by four. The engine."

We heard the impact inside.

"Munyeen!" shouted a woman.

"The Ferrari, tyres."

"Hey!" shouted a man. "Muny, that's my fucking car."

I said, "Can you see the woman?" After a pause, I said, "Good. Now the mirror above the bar."

"Oh fuck!" groaned the barman and ducked down covering his head with his hands as the glass shattered above him. Being Ms Cool, I didn't move and then casually brushed fragments of glass from my hair. Rachel looked a little pissed off at me as she'd copped far more of the fragments than I had and was shaking her head and brushing herself as if live coals had landed on her. Maybe we should have thought that one through a bit more.

I said, "I'm in charge, not you. No more playing around. Next time, if I have to, it really is soft targets. And remember this: I know when you are using magic."

The woman, Munyeen, turned away and started laughing softly to herself. "Girl," she said, "have you got the wrong bar."

"Are you Jewish?" Rachel asked.

"No," she said, "but thank you for the compliment. Let's sit down and talk. You have the upper hand. You are safe. No-one will try anything." She looked around the room. "Isn't that right, my babies?" she said and received muttered agreement.

I said, "Chelsea tractor, bodywork and windows." As the bullets impacted on the four by four, I turned to the woman who owned it who looked like she was ready to strangle me and said, "I don't like your car. Get a Prius."

"Screw you, bitch!" she snapped, all red-faced and angry. Couldn't blame her really.

The three of us sat down at a table not far from the bar and where Jake could see us even through the stained glass window.

Munyeen picked up a mobile phone and said, "Have you identified them yet? Mmmhm." She looked up at me. "Debra Affleck, lecturer in Social Sciences at the University of Westminster, known to the PDF, killed one werewolf and two witches. Wild card, unpredictable, potentially dangerous, acts first thinks later. You *have* impressed them. I think they like you. In fact I'm sure they do as you're still running around. What else? Congratulations, recently married and sharing interesting pursuits together like jumping into a vat of shit from a great height. Will that do for now?" she asked me.

"You're government," I said.

"Yes," she replied. "What? Did you think you'd discovered a coven or a conspiracy of magic-users? Affleck, you don't know what you've done by coming here."

"Should I leave?" asked Rachel.

"Oh do stay, Ms Green," Munyeen said. "I'm sure it's not that often that your partner gets shown up to be a complete and utter idiot. Enjoy the experience; a little *schadenfreude* can be very therapeutic."

"I think you need some fresh air in here," I said, pressed a button and blew the door off its hinges.

A man got to his feet and shouted, "For Christ's sake, Munyeen, be civil to the woman! Show her some respect before she destroys the bloody place."

Munyeen lowered her head and said in a completely different tone and vocal mannerism, "Perhaps I should have known better. I dislike arrogance in others and it can be chastening to realise it is a quality one also possesses. I have been extremely patronising towards you and I apologise." She glanced round the room and said, "Why has no-one pointed this out to me before?"



“Because you scare the fuck out of us,” came back the reply.

“The question was rhetorical,” she said. “I know I do.” She glanced over in the direction of the barman. “Fred, a glass of the house red, please.” He carefully chose a glass free of mirror splinters, poured the wine and set it down on the bar top.

Munyeen held out her hand and turned to me.

“No more games,” she said.

As she spoke the wine glass floated towards her. Rachel intervened and yelled at the person responsible, “Stop it! Now!”

The glass fell to the carpet spilling red wine.

“How curious,” Munyeen murmured.

At the bar Fred was pouring another glass. This time Munyeen stood and went for it. “Oh sod it, Fred,” she muttered. “Just give me the bloody bottle.”

From the bar, she said, “What a curious couple you are. I confess I’m unsure if you’re totally brave or utterly stupid. Or both, the two aren’t mutually exclusive you know. But I really can’t decide which and if you knew me you’d realise just how unique that is. You walk into a bar you believe to be inhabited by magic users of whom you have no idea if they are friendly or not, armed only with cheap spy technology and a solitary semi-psychotic paranoid mercenary and ex-member of the Special Boat Squadron as your backup.”

“Jake does excellent backup and it seemed like a good idea at the time,” Rachel said brightly.

“Ah yes, humour. You’re getting scared now, Ms Green.”

“Your ability,” Rachel said, “it’s not proactive. You aren’t reaching out to me, it’s inherent.”

“And so it is. Are you the less dogmatic of the partnership, Ms Green? Tell me what you think.”

She said, “I don’t think you’re magic users. But then I never really did.”

“I’m so glad that one of you shows some sign of intelligence,” she said. “Indeed we are not magic users. We’re paranormals.”

Munyeen leaned across the table, looking deeply in turn into each of our eyes and her gaze was quite formidable. She said, “You really really should not have come here. The government owns us and we do what we are told. We are also one of the world’s greatest secrets.”

I said, perhaps dogmatically, “You’re still part of the Shadows.”

“If that’s what you want to call it,” she sighed. “Yes, we are a part of the Shadows of the world that no-one wants light cast upon, however feeble we are.”

“Feeble?” said Rachel.

“I know of the werewolves,” Munyeen said. “A little more testosterone, more hair, sharper teeth and nails that can turn into claws, still a long way from the werewolves of legend, the humans who can transform into a wolf shape, that only silver can kill, and so on. Paranormals are a long way from the super beings of science fiction and comics. We can do extra little tricks with our minds. Nothing more. And I have already said far too much.”

“That’s it. Go home. Shoo. I have to wake up the security agents and pretend nothing has happened. We can fix it so they won’t even notice the damage you’ve caused. They may own us but we still manage to have our own little secrets.”

“And if we want to stay?” I said.

“Don’t push your luck. You’ve gotten away with more than anyone has with me in over fifteen years and it’s only my innate compassion which is preventing me from handing you over to Security and having you vanish off the face of the earth. I’m not your friend, Debra Affleck, but I am damned close to being your enemy and I don’t lose.”

We got up and went for the door. A woman leaned over to Rachel and said, “If you aren’t exclusive, here’s my number.”

“Laura!”

“Oh well, maybe not. Sorry, Munyeen.”

Two days later we disappeared off the face of the earth.

### 13. The Paranormal Quick Step.

I still don't remember what happened. The last thing I knew was leaving work to head home and then I found myself somewhere else.

Somewhere else was a grey walled cell with bleak strip lighting overhead. My feet were chained to the floor, my hands to a table. Across from me were a man and a woman. Come on, you've seen the movies.

"You okay, babe?"

And next to me, seated and chained as I was, was Debra.

Our captors wore grey tunics but bearing insignia and, ironically considering they were security services, plastic identifying badges clipped to their lapels, faces but no names.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You just had to go that step too far," said the woman. "I warned your lover the last time we met." So I knew who she was if not her name. She shook her head. "I don't understand you, I really do not understand you. Debra, you said you were giving it up. Instead you've involved Ms Green and then you really went where you shouldn't. Killing a couple of psychotic witches is one thing. But to go to *that* pub. That *pub* in the whole of London."

"Where's Jake?" Debra asked.

"I can't be bothered to play psychological games with you so I'll tell you the truth. He didn't know what you were doing. Like you, he thought it involved putting the squeeze on the some arrogant magic users who could do party tricks and think they were great. When he found out the truth, the moment he heard the word *paranormal*, he did a runner. We don't know where he is but I doubt very much if he's in the country. Probably somewhere safer like Somalia or Afghanistan. Should he turn up anywhere in the next couple of years he's looking at a double kneecapping, and that's if he's lucky and we're in a forgiving mood. You're such a good friend to him, Debra."

"So, what are you going to do to us?" Debra asked. "It's not like we possess any information you need."

The man spoke for the first time. "Not quite true. You have some, enough to justify me turning your faces into a bloody pulp. Then I might even let you answer." He spoke quietly but not softly, his voice was too harsh for that. His complexion was grey, his expression grim, and I believed every word he uttered. I believed he'd do anything he wanted to us without hesitation.

The woman said, "This is a good cop/bad cop scenario. Unfortunately for you, I'm the good cop. My colleague here, whom I have no hesitation in saying I completely despise, is the bad cop."

He said, "Susan, you talk too much." Then he reached diagonally across the table and backhanded me, cracking me across my right cheekbone, cutting it with a diamond ring he wore on his index finger. I felt the skin part and the blood begin to flow. I wondered if I'd need stitches and if it would leave a scar. Then the tears welled up and I started shaking.

"You fucker!" Debra screamed, "You lousy gutless fucker!"

He punched her in the nose, breaking it, sending blood spattering across the side of my face, though I barely noticed it at the time.

A moment later his fist cracked into Debra's left cheekbone.

She grunted something that might have been, "Kill you, fucker," but she slurred her words and her eyes were unfocussed as she slumped in her seat, held in place by the chains.

"You look like you've got a good body, Affleck," he said. "Shame you waste it on women like your little Jewish slut." He stood up. "Why don't I have a look at your tits, see what turns Green on?"

The woman he'd called Susan said, "Carson, you're crossing the line."

"I decide where the line is," he answered. "You're only here as a gesture. You proved just how effective you were the last time you had this useless lesbian cunt here."

She said to us, "How did you know to go to the Britannia?"

I answered before Debra could say anything. "The Man of Power, he gave us a gift. We can see Shadow activity, magic or whatever you want to call it. We only came into it properly at

Tenerife. Los Gigantes collapse was Shadow activity. Don't touch her, please."

Carson caught my gaze and I felt like as if I was hypnotised, unable to break away. He said, "But I like humiliating strong women. You wouldn't be nearly as much fun. Too easy to break. No, I think I'll play with your lover for a while."

"Touch her again and I'm walking out," said the woman.

"Please yourself. Then I really will have no constraints. With you here I just might not fuck her up the arse."

"We have what we need."

"We haven't started. You let her off too lightly the last time, Susan. I'm not going to make that mistake. Rachel, does Debra like golden showers? Not that it matters if she does or she doesn't."

At that point the cell door slammed open.

"Carson, it's over," said a familiar voice. "They are remanded into my custody."

"On whose authority, Lieutenant Ohrmuz?" he asked.

"That's Lieutenant Ohrmuz-Morgan to you, limpdick," said Munyeen as she handed him a piece of paper.

He barely glanced at it. "Fuck you, Ohrmuz."

"You did once, though I barely noticed," she said. "But it was over so quickly I'm not surprised you've forgotten. As I recall, it was the most tedious five seconds of my life. Now get out of here before I have you up on a charge of sexual harassment."

"They don't count and I haven't touched you!"

"I'm sure at least two witnesses would say otherwise."

Carson got up and stalked out of the room, muttering obscenities under his breath.

"Susan, I'm very disappointed you let things get this far."

"The rule of law doesn't apply here as you very well know, Ohrmuz," she said angrily. "We do what we need to do."

"Including brutalising two women who'd tell you what you want to know anyway? Talk about the proverbial nut and sledgehammer. You know what a shit Carson is. He's a pathological misogynist and sadist."

"He has his uses."

"Which doesn't say very much for us, does it? Now unlock them."

The woman called Susan did as she was told and left the room.

A few moments later we were given medical attention and pain killers. Our faces were gently cleaned up, antiseptic ointment applied, Debra's nose was packed and bandaged and she was promised further treatment when the swelling went down.

"You're still being detained," Munyeen said, "but in my custody which is going to be more comfortable than this. If all men were like Carson I'd probably become a lesbian myself. Fortunately, I have a very kind and loving husband who is everything that Carson is not. Everything," she added for emphasis as if it was of some deep significance for her.

Neither of us spoke, we were still too shocked and shaken.

Munyeen passed a hip flask over to me. I took a swig and a good single malt burned a track down my throat. I handed it over to Debra who did the same only her face twisted into a grimace. "I hate fucking whiskey," she said, then added, "Still, it's the thought that counts."

"Come along," Munyeen said, "I'll take you to the guest wing."

Five minutes later we were ensconced in what could have been a middle of the road hotel room –fridge, coffee maker, mini-bar, even a double bed, but no windows, white paint on the walls, no television.

I sat in a chair. "What now?" I asked.

Munyeen sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm going to leave you alone for about an hour so you can get yourselves pulled together. A light meal will be brought in a little while. The room is of course wired for sound and video including, I'm afraid, the bathroom. When I get back I'll interrogate you and, perhaps, tell you what the Shadows really are."

“Interrogate?” Debra said.

“I’ll ask you questions and you will answer truthfully. It’s the only way in which you’ll begin to stand a chance of getting out of here. One more thing, I am impossible to lie to and trying it won’t count in your favour.”

“You’re the good cop,” I said, believing I’d sussed it out.

“Oh no,” Munyeen said softly, eyes lowered, “I’m the *really* bad cop. I’m the one who can find out all the painful secrets you’re ashamed of and wanted to bury forever, even from yourself. I’m the person that everyone here is scared of. In the pub, when Oliver shouted out that I scare the fuck out them.” She paused then before saying, “That wasn’t a joke, no joke at all.”

It was only after she’d gone that I realised we were both dressed in plain brown overalls. Even the underwear wasn’t ours and our watches, unsurprisingly, had been taken. Debra tried to smile but then ran to the bathroom to be sick. I went to her and wiped her mouth and forehead, kissing her lightly.

“I hate being helpless,” she said.

“Who doesn’t?” I answered.

“I am a fucking amateur, and a fucking fuckup.”

“You’re my love,” I said, “and that is all that matters to me.”

“And look where it’s got you.”

“Don’t care. I’m with you. Whatever has happened to us now, you are still the best thing that’s happened to me and I don’t regret a moment of it.”

“Go on, trot out the clichés.”

“Truths, Debra. I’m here because I love you.”

She buried her head in my neck, kissing my throat almost like a tender vampire.

The food arrived, a decent lasagne with salad, vanilla ice cream, two glasses of wine, and a pot of coffee (instant, but considering where we were I didn’t feel inclined to complain, and it was good quality instant). Pampered prisoners.

Shortly before Munyeen returned, a doctor arrived to check out Debra’s nose. He unplugged it, pulling out what looked like yards of mucus and blood-soaked dressing, then gave her a small injection into her left nostril. I looked away the moment I realised what he was going to do or I’d have been sick.

And then, Lieutenant Munyeen Ohrmuz-Morgan, to give her her full name and title, came in and sat down on a chair facing us. With her quality of stillness, came grace. Her movements flowed like water. They were economical, always just enough. If her face in repose seemed stern, perhaps that was just her nature.

“How can you tell when what you perceive as magic is being used?” she asked.

I explained to her about the Man of Power and why he gave us this supposed gift, how we’d discovered it, and why we’d decided to do something about it which was, it sounded stupid coming out of my mouth, because we wanted to do the right thing.

She listened patiently, then said, “Can you see it on me now?”

“Yes,” I said, “if I concentrate it appears as if you’re surrounded by a very thin veil of golden particles but, unlike other people, it stays with you.”

“Possibly because my particular talent is intrinsic as you noticed at the Britannia,” she replied. “You’ve seen others reach out with theirs.”

“When that drink was levitated in the pub, I saw the line directly back to the person doing it.”

“Whom you then shouted at, causing him to lose concentration. Amusing, in hindsight. Little else was that evening. You’re very quiet, Debra.”

Debra said thickly, “Thad’s because Rae’s covering everythig quide well. I have a bastard of a pain in my forehead and id’s difficult to concentrade.”

For no apparent reason, Munyeen nodded then muttered, “Yes, I’d go along with that.” Then I realised she was wearing an earpiece which had, until she deliberately passed a hand over her hair, been hidden.

"I have a lot to say to you," she said. "The first is that you've been conscripted, not on a full time basis but as and when needed and you will be paid for your time."

"You're making us join the PDF," Debra said.

Munyeen laughed sharply as if she'd said something ironic. "The Preternatural Defence Force doesn't exist and never has. It is, and always has been, Internal Security and if you don't know what that is, and you shouldn't, imagine it as a super-secret British version of the old Soviet KGB. The PDF was invented when Security realised that something which could only be described as 'magic' actually worked, which was some time after the existence of paranormals had been discovered. It had been thought that paranormal activity lay behind most so-called magical occurrences such as poltergeist manifestations. Wrong, as it turned out. So the PDF was a front Internal Security officers put on when dealing with so-called magic users, a kind of red herring and an extra barrier to prevent them realising who they were dealing with."

"And what kind of mask do you wear, Ms Ohrmuz?" I asked. "You lied to us at the pub."

"I wish that I did but alas I didn't. It appears that Security has a level of monitoring of which I was hitherto ignorant. They have been most amused by our occasional dissembling such the hypnotic control of the security officers and electronic fake feeds. They've known what we've been doing for months now and I have to say that I'm somewhat discomfited by it."

"Doesn't seem to have done you any harm," I said.

"They are realists and expected it of us. I told you that I am ... that we are paranormals. Despite being members of Internal Security we are at the same time their prisoners. We are well paid and somewhat pampered, but our prison is very much as real as the one you're currently in. I will come back to this shortly, but let me explain some more things to you.

"What you are seeing is, as you told me earlier, a representation of something unseeable. We'll call them, as you did, quantum particles until some scientist comes up with a better name. It's not of any real importance. What you are seeing is energy that is being leaked from one, we believe, of a dozen or more different parallel universes, though the word 'parallel' is a convenience for something we can't comprehend.

"Our paranormal abilities puzzled scientists for many years because they appear to break the inverse square law. We output more energy than we should possess. This is physically impossible unless the energy is coming from another place. Paranormals and magic users have the ability to tap into this leaked energy and use it. Presumably our world leaks into another universe as well. There is much that is not understood, indeed, our knowledge is like the small tip of an iceberg and it's quite possible we may not even have the intellect to understand it. If you have any questions on this subject, please keep them to yourselves because I don't have any more answers to give you.

"What I'm now going to do is to tell you about myself and by doing this I will be able to make clear exactly what your position is and tell you about the great secrets of our society. Consider my story a paradigm or even a metaphor."

*Three years earlier.*

It had been a whim on Munyeen's part, nothing more. She wanted to do something out of character, to act on impulse rather than as a result of meticulous consideration.

Pouring over her brother's road atlas of Great Britain, she found her eyes drawn to the Lake District and a line of that, she considered, mawkish Wordsworth poem about daffodils came to mind. He lived in, or near, Grasmere, she remembered. She would go and visit his cottage, assuming it was open in February. Visiting the home of a dead poet she disliked, what a perverse thing to do. How amusing. How out of character.

Five minutes on the Internet found her a suitable hotel and within another five had booked a room for a week. Little more than the same amount of time produced a route for Ashok, her brother who had offered her a lift, to follow. Munyeen had always been a great and meticulous planner. Her brother smiled, said, "M6, turn left when the sign says Kendal. Follow the signs to Grasmere. Sometimes you don't need a map, Munny."

“One always needs a map, brother dear,” she replied. A pity, she mused, that we were not supplied with detailed maps of life.

The decision made, the planning completed, the packing performed, they set off for Grasmere arriving in less than two hours and only three after first considering the idea. How impulsive! Ashok carried her bags inside then left immediately as the weather was worsening and he didn't want to get stuck.

As she bent over the desk to sign the register, Munyeen felt something, perhaps she'd caught something subliminal out of the corner of an eye, either that or there was a disturbance in the Force. Completing her signature, she stood upright and turned slightly to find a man staring at her.

In the five long seconds before he turned away in embarrassment at being caught in such a gauche display, Munyeen registered a number of things. He was tall, well built, dark, in a European rather than African or Asian way, and handsome. He stared out of curiosity, wondering about her, and also with a degree, only as yet a hint, of finding her sexually attractive. Not the same as being considered beautiful, which Munyeen knew she was not, or pretty, for she was not that either. But striking, her angular features and Eurasian skin held, for some men at least, a certain allure and this man was one of them. Good, for she was certainly attracted to him. He was just her type.

Now she registered the next layer. He was haunted, he had secrets which made him a driven and, possibly, scared man. Even better. For her this made him completely irresistible. She wanted to walk over to him and say, “Hello, can I have your baby?” Instead, she smiled demurely and turned away.

There, that would get him really wondering. She had a feeling that after she'd unpacked he wouldn't be far away. Eating lunch in the bar, possibly. That wasn't without its own attraction for her, irrespective of tall dark handsome men with secrets. Not impossible that he might be a criminal or a psychopath but she would find that out easily and safely within a few minutes of conversation and if he proved a threat then she would, reluctantly, make a phone call and have him dealt with.

Before unpacking, she turned to the porter and said, “In the lobby, I saw someone, someone I possibly might know, I'm not sure. Leather jacket, tall, dark, thirties, male, good looking I suppose if you like that type. Would you know if he's a resident here?”

“I believe so, madam,” the porter said politely.

Without enquiring further, Munyeen slipped him a note. That should ensure good service. She unpacked quickly but didn't change from her warm clothing; she might decide to go out later. For the moment, food took priority.

The bar was pleasant and old fashioned, genuinely so she assumed, with a roaring log fire in one corner and hiding in an alcove her mysterious starrer. She ordered a pint of Jennings and received a raised eyebrow from the barmaid as well as the sandwich. I may look delicate, Munyeen thought, but I have large appetites.

Mystery man didn't notice her as she sat down opposite being too busy with a paper. Well, he'd see her soon enough and she got down to the serious business of eating and drinking.

It wasn't long before he realised who was sitting opposite and had begun to stare covertly in her direction. Munyeen found this amusing. He was wondering why she was here, a youngish Asian woman apparently on her own in the small Lakeland village of Grasmere. Dear me, but he is so gorgeous, she thought and wondered what he'd be like in bed. She hadn't had sex for nearly a year and hadn't wanted to have sex. Now the old appetite was stirring.

He had manners, she could tell that, which was a pity as she suspected he'd be too polite and probably too politically correct to intrude. Which meant that she would have to do it. She finished off her sandwich, went to the bar, got two pints and made her move.

Christ, he was lonely she quickly realised. He also wasn't mentally ill, pretty disturbed about something, but not a, to use a technical phrase, loony. In fact he was enchanting and fascinating and, most oddly, quite shy. He was in desperate need of someone to trust and quite fascinated in turn by her.

They went for a walk and talked a lot more. Lots of hints from both of them but nothing explicit. And the more they talked the more Munyeen realised that they were both totally absorbed

in each other. Munyeen also felt so horny that she could have fucked him on the cold church bench in the open air. She also realised that he was a rogue paranormal. She could fill in some of the missing gaps in his story. He'd been seen using his power and some group were after him. Most likely it was Security but it could also be a foreign cadre.

What an interesting day this was proving to be. And all I wanted was a winter break on my own, she thought.

Rather than push matters too much and to give herself some breathing space, she feigned a weariness she didn't feel and suggested they might wish to return to the hotel. He was so nice, like a puppy, he agreed immediately. Back in her room, Munyeen masturbated for the first time in months as she imagined what it would be like being fucked by him.

She couldn't believe this was happening. She hadn't felt like this since... It wasn't just the physical attraction. He wasn't just tall dark and handsome, he was tall, dark, and handsome, and melancholy with a gentle humour.

Since Jim. Since her first and only real love half her life away.

Dinner was wonderful, being with him was wonderful, she hoped sex –and that definitely was going to happen if she was reading him correctly- wouldn't be disappointing. But first she needed to know his real secret. He had to trust her with that.

And there that evening, alone together in the lane, in the moon-lit dark, he showed her and, impressed, she laughed as he raised them both up into the air surrounded by flurries of fast moving flakes of snow. My flying man, she thought as she embraced him in the cold winter air, my wonderful lonely flying man.

And the sex was even better than she'd hoped. In love, each wanted to please the other, and they did. All of it was wonderful but best with her arms around him as his penis penetrated her, thrusting deep inside her, fucking her fucking her fucking her, loving her.

It was madness. It was joy. It was the great mystery that happens so rarely. For once Munyeen delighted in her paranormal talent for it had allowed her to see Daniel for what he was and to know that she could trust him absolutely, that he would never betray her. Every tiny muscle in his face, the set of his shoulders, and more, all screamed to her of his integrity with signs no-one else could see.

In the morning, with Grasmere cut off, they had no other option but to spend it in bed. How awful, how delightful, how, eventually, quite sore.

In the afternoon they went for a walk and she began to consider how best to deal with the situation. Daniel had to be brought in and under her protection. But there were strange circumstances involving his background that she didn't understand. She made a call to someone outside the magic circle but it proved a waste of time.

They walked along by the cold lake shore and then the trees came alive as four Security agents clad in white erupted around them.

Daniel had no chance whatsoever. Two of them grabbed him, wrenching arms behind his back, another put a pistol against his temple.

Munyeen recognised their leader immediately and had time to scream, "Carson, you shit, this isn't necessary!"

"Munyeen," he said, "don't you know who you've been fucking?" and he shot Daniel in the chest.

Munyeen went berserk and somehow managed to fling off a glove and rake nails down the side of Carson's face. "You fuck!" she screamed, "you fucking fuck shit bastard. I should have ripped your cock off that time."

"I didn't enjoy it very much either, Munyeen," Carson said casually as he wiped blood off his face. "I thought we'd agreed never to mention it. And do that again and I'll break every one of your fingers. What the hell has gotten into you? You don't usually get worked up about your sleeping partners."

"Fuck yourself, Carson. His dick's twice as long as yours."

"I know. I have pictures."



“He can keep it up a hell of a lot longer as well.”

“Well,” Carson glanced over to his men strapping an unconscious Daniel onto a stretcher, “he’s not going to be keeping anything up for a while. The bastard’s led us a right merry dance these last few months. You’ve really no idea, have you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, you motherfucking prick.”

“You either talk like some unbearable intellectual savant or like someone from the gutter.”

“You can’t understand the first and the second reminds you of your family,” she sneered.

Carson blew on his fingers as if they’d been burned. “Good one, Muny.”

“Why don’t you go suck a diseased cock. I’m sure any of your three goons would oblige.”

“You are going to have to be debriefed and interrogated about this, you know.”

“Why, Carson? Sure he’s paranormal with a strong talent. So what? What’s special about Daniel Morgan?”

“Because,” he replied, “he was christened Nick Shannon.”

“You’re lying, you motherfucker.” And knew he wasn’t.

“Poor Muny. You’re actually in love with him. Daniel Morgan, the ghost of Nick Shannon.” Then he laughed and walked away from her.

Two days later she sat in a room with a man she hated. A man who was her superior in every way but for, perhaps, intellectual rigour. Physically, well that could be taken for granted. Shorter, more slender than Daniel, not in the least as handsome, but still a fit and strong man. She hated him because he was her moral superior. He had courage she lacked. He made the world accept him on his terms. He would only have taken this job, her job, on his terms. He would compromise of course, but only from strength, after consideration, not through pressure. He was also the most dangerous paranormal on the planet and probably the most sane. Sometimes she thought he might be the only truly sane paranormal. His sanity and his absolute sense of morality had kept him alive and free, though she wouldn’t have been surprised if he had a few safeguards up his sleeve to make sure he stayed that way.

How could she not hate him when his very existence held up a mirror to her weakness? He stayed true to himself while she became exactly what her masters wanted of her. And it cost Munyeen her self respect. She had always been inclined to drink and as the years wore on and the pressures increased and some friends died she began to drink more and the drink affected her libido so, when not at work, she became lost in a haze of alcohol and lust.

Then came a crisis and she couldn’t cope. The Institute, the base for paranormals in London, had been penetrated. Not literally, but someone –a woman- knew who the paranormals were and had begun preying on them. She lured them with sex and then robbed them, leaving them without any memories of the incident. Six had been targeted –including two women- before Munyeen was requested to stand down as director and her enemy was brought in.

“Give me your assessment of Daniel Morgan and what happened between you both, please Munyeen,” he said.

“You’ve got my report.”

“Carson could have written that. I want your feelings.”

“Get Daniel back for me.”

“I can’t. I don’t know enough to ask and I don’t know even if I could if I wanted. But I certainly can’t if you don’t give me a reason to try.”

“I love him. I don’t care what he’s been. I do know that Daniel Morgan is one of the most gentle loving souls I have ever met. He was put under a vast amount of stress and he didn’t break.”

“I know about stress, Munyeen.” Yes, he did. He had lived alone for ten years, isolated from all paranormal contact, and still made a success of his life. Even if it had been dominated by his dreams of what had been.

“He’s not a ghost. I know false personas.”

“Tell me about him. Tell me what he told you. Give me your observations.”

“Am I doing this because you’re making me?”

“I’d never do that to you. If you think that then you’re free to go.”

She said, “I’d never know really, would I? That’s how it worked with Alex. Our own minds build rationalisations. But, I suppose, if I don’t talk to you then it would have to be Shit Carson or someone else.”

“Yes. They consider Morgan to be potentially dangerous and they need to know everything they can before they can make a decision. But knowing the way they think it would be unkind of me to raise your hopes, Muny.”

“Don’t call me ‘Muny’, John. You forfeited that right long ago.”

“Poor Munyeeen, so much guilt.”

“And damn you to hell, Director. Damn you to fucking hell. This is what he told me.”

So much for her holiday. Back where she started, and in love with someone forbidden to her. Munyeeen retreated to her Mayfair flat where she stayed for a week to read and watch television and feel sorry for herself, emerging only to go shopping or the women’s club she had joined years ago to go swimming. Believing, wanting to believe, that somehow she would see Daniel again, she cut back on the drinking and smoking but overindulged in self-pity and tears as she constantly wondered what was happening to him and constantly reliving the twenty four hours they had had together. Sometimes she couldn’t believe that was all it had been, feeling like weeks compressed into hours packed with tiny moments like crystalline jewels each one so precious. She wrote it all down, for herself, on paper not trusting her pc. She didn’t even have a photograph of him, though she might be able to obtain one if she called in a favour or two.

After a week she called a girlfriend, not a close friend. She had no close friends just old friends or dead friends. They went to a pub. Down a narrow alley to a square, with only a tiny sign above the door. Inside it looked no different from countless others in the city. Mostly young affluent things working in the financial heart of London. Except that none were bankers, stockbrokers, or accountants. Here gathered those associated with the hidden worlds of Security and the paranormals. Any mundanes wandering in accidentally would find the place cold and unwelcoming, not one to be recommended to their friends. Once a gang of yardies tried to start selling drugs there. They were never seen again. It was a safe place. The hidden world. You wouldn’t want to go there, would you?

Munyeeen had a mediocre time. She kept the drinking under control which was good. People were polite, quietly friendly. But keeping their distance. Unsure. Few knew the truth, only that Munyeeen had been involved in a deep operation and come away burned. Some heard that she’d clawed open Carson’s face though fewer believed it. He was too tough a bastard and she’d never been known to be remotely violent. Munyeeen was a drunk but not a vicious one. And she was out of favour. They didn’t know, they didn’t dare ask, they didn’t want to be tainted with her failure, with her problems. And they couldn’t hide it from her.

She made her excuses and left early to return to her very comfortable cage.

She made her full report to the new director. He said he’d try to help. He said he’d failed. He said he’d try and keep her up to date if he heard any news. One day he said that Daniel Morgan was to be integrated into Hampton Parva, the country village which could be seen on no map, surrounded by deep woods, and in the middle of an army testing ground.

By this time Munyeeen was deep in depression and taking tranquillisers. She did some work intermittently for Security but was, on her own admission, unreliable. Eventually they left her alone. She didn’t care.

The Director told her that Daniel Morgan appeared to be adapting well to life in Hampton Parva and was starting to teach at the village school.

Then she said, “Let me join him. Please.”

“You’d give up your freedom to be with him?” said the Director sounding, for once, astonished.

“Was that meant as a joke?” she asked. “What freedom do I have? What freedom do any of us have?”

He scribbled down a number. "Call him. Now. There's not much I can't access from here. But make it quick, they might be monitoring and cut you off."

She tapped in the number and Daniel answered. For a moment she didn't know what to say, then she gabbled out words and then she heard him say he loved her.

"Please," she said, "let me be with him. If you would do one thing for me, John. If you feel you owe me anything, then do that for me."

"If that's what you truly want, Munyeen," he said, "then I'll do everything I can. Everything."

She closed her eyes and said. "Thank you."

And began to cry.

Two weeks later they came for her.

They took her to the last place she expected and offered her a job.

Munyeen said, "Life isn't easy being a paranormal, though it's never dull. I fell in love with someone's whose mind had been destroyed by another paranormal, regressed to a *tabula rasa* and whose mind then had to be rebuilt. The new person tested negative for any signs of paranormal ability and was released into the world to make his own way. The woman he married, unknown to him, was a security agent. They were happy, then she left him and the resulting breakdown triggered a different latent paranormal ability. He went on the run, met me, got caught but was able to rehabilitate himself and, in turn, he became my salvation, allowing me to become the whole person I should always have been. Now we live happily in the suburbs with our two young children. It could be worse.

"The moral of this story, girls, is that the government will never let you go. Try to escape and you will disappear. When it says, jump, you say, how high sir. Your quite unique power will be tested while you are here. They may even classify you, and oh how deliciously ironic that would be, as paranormal. You will be *of* the Shadows yourselves. You will be given an induction into Internal Security and then you will be released. Don't worry about your employers, they have been convinced your absences from work are in the national interest.

"And just remember, you brought this all on yourselves."

## 14. Prelude To The End Of The World As We Knew It.

We'd been away for two weeks. Ill as far as work was concerned, with flu. Ohrmuz who, I decided, had a very warped sense of humour, had been winding us up about the government business; there was no chance they would have admitted that to our employers because it opened the way to too many questions.

We got on with things, earning our daily bread, doing what we both did best. We'd got off lightly. No question. Lucky to be walking around breathing freedom's air, apart from the invisible choke chain which could jerk at any moment and cut off our breath.

Well, we now knew what the Shadows were, indeed we knew more than we wanted to know and would rather have not found out. The paranormals weren't, of course, prisoners. They were slaves, enslaved by our wonderful democratic freedom-loving government, and enslaved by their own fears of being uncovered and treated pretty much like witches used to be. I shuddered to think what might happen to them in places like Iran or other fundamentalist-minded communities of whatever faith. But then I just hated organised religion with its unbreakable dogma and unalterable truths and all born out of ignorance, prejudice, fear, and sheer fucking stupidity.

I also realised how illusory freedom was. Debra had always been a touch cynical on the subject but I honestly believed that, more than any other country in the world perhaps, here we were genuinely free. As a black female Jew surely I knew that more than anyone.

Such a fool.

The truth is this: we are only as free as any government allows us to be and it will ignore any law, ignore any rule, ignore any judgment if it deems it to be necessary.

Ach, enough of political realities, I have a story to tell and its climax is coming.

Crisis. Lull. Crisis. Lull.

That had seemed to be the pattern of our lives over the last few months which had been, I decided just a little too eventful. I could have done without it all except for the lovely day when Debra and I had made our formal and public commitment to each other. I cherished that memory now like a solitary bright ember in the darkness.

For the moment, however, lull. Back to doing what we did. The exception being that we kept our eyes open for unusual quantum particle activity. We realised that there was always some going on but almost always at a very low level. We saw it around individuals but these were more likely to be paranormals. We became used to what we decided was normal activity, reporting this to Internal Security which they accepted as a baseline and gave us instructions to report anything noticeably above this.

For two months, nothing. Security mostly left us alone and we heard nothing from Munyeen Ohrmuz either. No bad thing as Debra did not like her one bit, despite her rescuing us from Carson –Debra thought it was a setup but I wasn't so sure. I saw something vulnerable about Munyeen, as if she couldn't believe she deserved the happiness she was currently enjoying and felt secretly terrified it would all abruptly come to an end. Or maybe I was thinking about myself.

When nothing happened for several weeks, Debra and I began to relax which, in our case, meant indulging in physical activity and I'm not talking about sex, though neither of us had any complaints on that score. Our physical feelings for each other matched our emotional attraction and dependency and after two years it remained as strong as when it first happened.

No, I'm talking about exercise. I'd finally managed to persuade Debra to join my sports club –the long established King Edward Sports Club- in north London. It took about fifty minutes to get there on the tube but it was worth it. Expensive, yes that too, but also superbly equipped and much better than the dumps Debra preferred (and, yes I am being snobbish again; get over it).

I convinced Debra to try kickboxing and took great pleasure, when she stopped being a total novice (after all of two lessons), to be able to kick the crap out of her for, oh, all of a further four sessions before her natural speed, agility, superior strength began to match my experience and the result became a hard-fought draw. In time she would have eventually kicked the crap out of me but,

in the event, that time we didn't have.

Fencing interested me more than kickboxing simply because I happened to be better, much better at it and it didn't depend on brute strength. Debra declined to share this with me, declaring it to be effete but really because she knew she could never catch up with my years of experience and I simply was very good –women's club champion for three years in a row –the last one two years earlier. I lost my competitive edge for it around the time Debra and I became lovers. Few clubs actually had fencing facilities but the chairman of this one had been an Olympic bronze medal winner in the sport about thirty years ago. I had met him on several occasions but not for some months now. This didn't bother me because he came over as a self-inflated fart, all full of himself.

So, a chill Saturday afternoon in late November hinting at an early snow fall when we arrived, following a light lunch of coffee and a prawn salad baguette, full of enthusiasm and ready for a good workout. We arrived at the old Victorian edifice with its high curved arch framing the double doorway and stopped dead.

Quantum particles shrouded the building. The last time we'd seen anything like this had been off the coast of Los Gigantes.

"I think this is what Security meant by an unusual occurrence," I said.

"No shit. I'm already on it, babe," Debra answered as she fiddled with her mobile. After speaking into it briefly, she looked at me and said, "They said to stay outside."

"Okay," I said.

So, curiosity overruling common sense, we went in.

Inside everything seemed as normal. We flashed our membership badges at reception and headed for the stairs.

Particles were in the air here but as we looked up from the base of the central stairwell we could see them thickening into a hazy mist the higher they went.

"You got a knife on you?" I whispered, suspecting we might need some kind of extra protection.

Debra shook her head. "Nail file?"

"I think I'll see if I can borrow a foil," I said.

Up we went. Although Victorian from the outside, inside the place was bright and airy from a combination of wide cream-painted hallways, plenty of natural light from windows, and a mixture of fluorescent and traditional lighting inside.

Fencing foils are kept upright in several racks and, as actual weapons, are pretty much worse than useless unless you want to poke someone's eye out, because they have a weld on their tip, therefore, no point making them completely pointless as a weapon (that's a pun, feel free to groan). The club did, however, have several unaltered antique foils for show on the walls. While Debra made a mild distraction I simply removed one and discretely left the room. I figured that most people go around with their eyes shut and wouldn't notice for a while.

Debra was with me a moment later and we went on again upstairs following the thickening swirling quantum particles until we came to a door which happened to that of the secretary (or head honcho in simpler terms) of the sports club, one James Hannison MBE.

"Shall we knock?" I asked.

"Oh let it be a surprise," Debra said and kissed me on the mouth.

Our last kiss.

We opened the door and Debra barged in. Taking the lead as always. Too quickly, too impatient, too protective.

Hannison had been standing behind the door and he smashed an enormous sharp edged blue glass ash tray into the back of Debra's skull.

She fell without a sound and I stared down disbelievingly at the bloody mess of my lover's head.

Hannison closed the door then stepped in front of me, keeping several paces distance between us. He too carried a foil. A tall man, a couple of inches over six feet, stylishly cut grey hair, a wiry build, smart hand-made navy suit, and handsome but with a look like a fucking demented

psychopath.

“You didn’t think you could surprise me, surely Ms Green?” he said, all patrician vowels and wealthy Home Counties upbringing. “The security system here is excellent and I can tap into it from this room. In fact I can tap into many things. I’m quite a genius with computers, you know. Of course you do, that’s how I make my living.”

Actually I didn’t know, or if I ever did I’d forgotten, as I’d never been that interested in him to find out. It would have been nice if I could have found a reason to mention him earlier so as to foreshadow this meeting but I had no reason to do so. Until this moment he’d never impinged on my life in any meaningful way, even though he is the real villain of the piece. I know it lacks dramatic resonance but there you go. Sorry, but that’s the way it worked out.

He continued prattling away like an idiot, like the egomaniac he was, assuming I found everything he said to be fascinating. “So I watched you come in, steal that foil and come here. To foil me. Ha ha.”

Ha ha. Ha fucking ha.

I hate people who laugh at their own jokes, especially not very clever ones.

He said, “You did surprise me a little there. I expected it would be you coming in first. You had the weapon after all. I bash your brains out and then skewer your unarmed girlfriend. Bash and slash. All over. Oh well, I suppose we do have time for a little chat before you die.”

He perched himself on the edge of his desk, the point of his foil touching my throat.

“I know you’ve recently been seconded by Internal Security,” he said. “I have a line into their computers- but couldn’t discover why. Now I know. You’ve come to stop me from freeing the world from the tyranny of Order.”

Good to know. I had been wondering about that myself. .

If I looked the wrong way, the golden quantum particles swirled round the room like a snowstorm, thickening particularly around him and around the pc on his desk. When I didn’t look at him, the room appeared absolutely normal. It was large and full of bookshelves, leather chairs, cupboards with mementoes of his illustrious past –his Olympic bronze medal took pride of place in a glass case.

Then I noticed a foot sticking out of a cupboard. It wore a man’s black shoe, a inch of ankle was exposed, and I could see another couple of inches of one leg of a pair of blue jeans.

“Oh yes,” he said. “You’re not the first visitors I’ve had this afternoon. Married couple, never seen them before, very polite, very concerned. But I didn’t have enough time. Busy putting the final touches to the destruction of Order. So slish slash, stab stab, and into the cupboard with them. I know it looks untidy with the foot where it is but there isn’t a lot of space in there.”

Nothing made sense. I was still thinking about what he said about freeing the world from the tyranny of order. Sorry, *Order*. I could hear the capital ‘O’ when he spoke the word.

“What...?” I didn’t know what to say except that Debra was bleeding to death with a massive head wound, that’s if she wasn’t dead already. I couldn’t tell.

“It’s all one thing -numbers,” he said. “Numbers and chaos theory. Two things. Numbers and chaos theory and paranormal powers. Three things.” Then he stopped and giggled. I don’t know why.

He said, “I’m going to punch a hole in the multiverse. You wouldn’t believe how many computers are linked in an array by that simple-looking desktop, which is anything but a simple looking desktop pc by the way. Right now it’s the most powerful computer on the planet.

“And in a few minutes time it will have completed calculating the mathematical foundation of our universe which algorithm it will then use to punch a hole so large in our reality it will cause a ... Think of it like this, my dear, an expanding sphere that expands not in our world but bores through into a dozen or more parallel universes, permitting the different mathematics of each universe to simultaneously co-exist and cause chaos to rule in all of them. Which is jolly good fun, don’t you think? It’s a very Dischordian concept. I am a Dischordian, you understand. A million impossible things will happen before teatime. Actually they’ll happen almost instantaneously, so no tea for us today. Or ever again.” And, yes, he went ‘ha ha’, again.

I suppose you're wondering why I was standing listening to him rant when I should have been doing something. It isn't, however, that easy when the very sharp point of a foil is digging so very sharply into your throat that blood is ruining your nice new clean blouse and you feel like you're about to choke.

"But," he said, "that isn't enough. I'm going to do more, far more than that. I am, as you may have, guessed a paranormal."

I hadn't. The thought had never occurred to me. I thought he was a magician, or thought he thought he was, a quantum magus.

"Knowing the paranormals as you do, you will be aware of a drug they invented which boosts their powers by an exponential factor of ten. Unfortunately it also burns them up and they die within minutes. The ministry wasn't very keen on that so they stopped the testing but not before I managed to get my hands on a sample of it."

No, actually I hadn't been aware of the drug and knew far less than he assumed, but he clearly wasn't interested in anything I had to say, not when he could hear the sound of his own voice. But, golly gosh, I was learning so many fascinating things.

He said, "I am a projective telepath and I am going to take this drug and, at the moment the algorithm activates the program, I will send all my power into the sphere it creates and will boost it by, I estimate conservatively, an exponential factor of over a thousand. It will bring chaos to millions of universes by making all things possible at once. Sadly I shall miss all but the first few minutes but that is price of chaos. Now we've a couple of minutes to kill, so let's kill them."

And with that he stabbed me in fleshy upper part of my left arm.

"Just a minor wound to get the adrenalin going. *En garde!*"

He raised his foil in a fencer's salute and I, not being stupid enough to follow suit, lunged at him.

He grinned and parried but I had the impetus and forced him back a few feet. I had to take the initiative because despite his age he was probably still a better fencer than me. He certainly thought so and the speed with which he'd caught my arm suggested he was right. He also had a distinctive height and reach advantage over me. Let's face it, what odds would you give in a match between a six foot two man and a five foot five woman despite the age difference?

He back-pedalled parrying my every assault.

"Jolly good," he said, "I do so like a girl with spirit."

Then he stabbed me in the left side, steel going right through me like a hot needle through butter.

I yelled and slashed wildly catching him on the bridge of the nose as he stepped away

"Ouch!" he said, brushing his nose with the back of his hand and flicking blood away. "Naughty, naughty."

This time he caught my right thigh, again just a glancing thrust which barely broke the skin.

I'm not stupid; I know when I'm being toyed with.

I went on the defensive, backing away. No I didn't jump on chairs or tables or desks or jump up as he slashed at my legs so his blade swooshed underneath them. I stumbled clumsily backwards, bumping into things and hurting myself. This made him laugh. Don't know why but I just didn't find his sense of humour at all amusing.

He came after me again. I sidestepped to my left. Did it again.

And then he stood just where I wanted him.

He lunged and his blade went under my ribs and came out my back and, yes, it did hurt. Quite a lot.

He started to withdraw it but I put my hands on the hilt stopping him, keeping it inside me. He pulled one way and I pulled the other, the slick glistening blade see-sawing in and out of me like some sick parody of fucking.

Then Debra fell on him, her hands coming over his shoulders, her weight pushing him forward. Her fingers came up, dug deep into soft tissue, and she gouged out his eyes, dragging them bloodily from their sockets.

I let him pull away this time, screaming as he did so. But his screams were louder than mine. I liked that, a lot.

I lunged upwards and stabbed him through the throat. The thin blade came out the left side of his neck through an artery, effectively destroying it, and blood gushed out like a special effect in a Hong Kong martial arts movie.

Debra looked stunned. Eyes glazed and unfocussed, she leaned against the back of a heavy leather chair to keep herself upright.

“We’ve got to destroy the computer,” I said.

I knew what I must look like. Blood trickled from a dozen wounds on arms, legs, and torso. My stomach felt as if it was on fire and I wanted to be sick. But Debra looked worse. Her shoulders and the side of her face were covered in blood, her yellow hair matted and sticky with more, I was afraid, than just blood.

We staggered up to his desk and almost fell over it. Together we wrenched cables from the computer before lifting it up and then smashing it on the floor.

“We did it,” Debra said, her words barely intelligible, her eyes closed.

I stretched out a hand to the phone, thinking, hospital, help, and then...

And then, there, appearing in the room, a small golden sun of quantum particles no more than a foot in diameter.

We saw it pulse for a moment.

Then it expanded and swallowed us up.

And we died.

What happens next is history.

But to learn of it, we first had to be reborn.





## **INTERREGNUM: The Event.**

### **14.02**

*Here.*

*The sphere expanded at multi-light speeds. The time it took to encompass the Earth and the Moon could not be measured in any meaningful way except to theoretical physicists. Expanding outwards at a speed which would have given Einstein an apoplectic fit, it swallowed the solar system in less than twenty seconds.*

### **14.02**

*There.*

*The sphere expanded at a more sedate rate of one quantum universe per second, methodically boring a hole through the multiverse.*

### **14.03**

*Here.*

*It had now taken in the Oort Cloud and all the other masses of floating debris on the farthest edges of the solar system rim and moved on into interstellar space.*

### **14.03**

*There.*

*The rift now encompassed sixty universes, all relatively similar, all strikingly different. Changes began.*

### **22.02**

*Here*

*By this time it contained several star systems and had reached a size of approximately twenty-five light years in diameter –the precise size would never be known.*

### **22.02**

*There.*

*Twenty eight thousand eight hundred universes suffered from the tear in multiversal space/time. Impossible things happened in each of these.*

### **22.03**

*Here.*

*It stopped expanding, pulsed briefly, and began to contract.*

**22.03**

*There.*

*It stopped expanding, paused as if for breath, then began to withdraw. Those furthest away suffered least. The final world endured only one second of chaos.*

**06.02**

*Here/There.*

*It took as long to contract to zero as it had to expand. Our world had endured 57,600 seconds.*

*Then it was gone as if it had never been.*

*Except for the changes it had left it in its wake which numbered, and only one being ever knew this, precisely nine billion.*

**06.02**

*Here.*

*The Shadow intrusions came to an end.*

*Except for the changes left behind in sphere's wake.*

*Except for the chaos.*

*Except for the deaths.*