

ShadowWalk

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Shadow **W**alk

by

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Names might be important...

You may have heard about him. He, too, is known by many names. He is Wanderer, Sorcerer, Searcher, Shadow Walker. And many more. He himself has, during his lifetime taken several different aliases. His best known is, coincidentally, that given to him shortly after his birth, *Ted Warren*.

Birth names may have some importance, but taken names carry great weight, especially to those who walk in the shadows... Coincidentally, his best-known name is his given and taken name both. It's one he has had to fight for and thus it carries immeasurable weight.

This is not a story about Ted Warren, though. He is part of the story, like many others are parts of the story, but he isn't the main character. Not this time. Far from it in fact. This is about young girls and boys gaining insight, gaining self-awareness, gaining good and evil. Ted Warren did that many years ago.

But it's the start of his story. Or maybe one start. Or the end of the beginning, the beginning of the end. A start of the ascension. It is perhaps about Elizabeth. Or the Janus Clan. Their start, end and new beginning? Life and Death and the End of Time. They are *present* all of them. Even if they're not seen, even if they're not heard. They might not be physically on the actual spot, all of them... Ethel, Nick, Ruth, Linsey, Stewart, Martin, Lydia and Kyle... but they're *there!* Everybody knows this, now, all these years later. Very few knew it at the time, but Mankind, once countless as ants in the ground, so few now, had started on their way back, their way *home*.

Chapter One: THE WALK OF VISIBLE SHADOWS

It was the Day of the Dead, the day when, according to ancient mythology, people long dead caught up with the present. How appropriate this day, with wreckage and ruins visible as far as the eye could soar.

And Beyond.

They came from faraway. From faraway they came.

One image dominated the view, one single sight of chaos incarnated. This was not your ordinary 2.4 kids' family picture. Oh, no, not at all. It was a beyond staggering departure from that.

The black dome filled the horizon.

Even from several miles away through the clear, bright air, it was clearly visible, seemingly sucking light from the Sun itself. The two passengers in the helicopter, surrounded by their very own, very nervous honor guard saw that it easily covered what was supposed to be a nice, quiet little town. Not many buildings were visible. Only a few, outside all the black inside. There were supposed to be quite a few of them. In fact this was, had been one of the fastest growing, emerging urban areas in this part of the country.

There were really no visible shapes on the dome except for the shape itself, a ball cut in half. Nothing more than the black surface, some incidental sparks of half visible, ghostly lightning close to the rim were exposed to the people in the chopper, as they descended and landed in relative safety well over five hundred meters away from the damn thing.

The army had made a tight perimeter ring almost twice that distance around the whole diameter of what was already all over the world referred to almost unanimously as the Black Dome. The Army, the American government had tried to put a heavy lid on things, of course, they always did. But this was too big, too gross, too huge to hide. All the shouting reporters, all the starving cameras, every single hungry eye were kept very safe, very far away, but they had a nice unavoidable view and could easily see everything and everybody inside the enormous closed ring. It was not difficult, not difficult at all, for anyone to recognize Ted and Elizabeth Warren the moment they emerged from the helicopter. The hunger of curiosity grew and the shouting became a crescendo of frenetic shouts, high-pitched, distorted calls of the wild.

It was a riot, even a laugh riot, the whole thing, a spectacle to warm the hearts of even the most cynical rebel. The male and female Warren couldn't say they didn't enjoy it all.

And they wouldn't...

The secret smile they exchanged spoke volumes.

By their arrival it became even more of a spectacle, a ruckus, an event. But strangely enough, even if you couldn't convince yourself the decibel count actually went down, there seemed to suddenly be more... silence in the air. To anybody who stopped a minute, a second to listen it just might be possible to hear what was being shouted, what was being said and done.

– HEY, Wanderer, what are you doing inside the ring? You aren't cooing with the military, are you?

– Don't listen to that IDIOT, wanderers! Just go an' give them one *hell* of a time... for me, please!

Both Ted and Elizabeth were quite infamous already in their early youth. Their reputation had not improved over the years.

It was indeed easy to read that fact in every expression, every movement of the man waiting for them inside the military tent some hundred meters away from the dome.

An aide led them deep inside to something that was certainly through several security checkpoints and levels. The man in front of the wall of video screens, the head honcho of the operation smoked his cigar a little more anxiously, puffed on it a little harder than he usually did, something that didn't escape them.

– Warren... he nodded. He ignored Elizabeth, he always did. And her reply to his «lack of interest» was of equal measure.

– McKenzie... Ted said in the same officious manner, smiling his famous, sardonic smile.

Floyd McKenzie was not military. He was not FBI or CIA or NSC or Homeland Security. He was all of the above.

The sound was turned on loud, giving voice to one particular audio image.

A man, dressed in white stood on a platform, speaking to a crowd that was evidently a congregation. They recognized Brian Garrett instantly.

– Sons and Daughters of the Light, he cried.

His opening gambit brought, as always a rush of hot air through the listeners. Some of them raised their arms to the heavens and some started crying.

– My friends, he said in a loud, intense, officious manner. – We are living through trying and often frightening times. It's more important than ever that we're drawing strength and comfort from each other and from each other's faith. We, the resurrected faith, drawing inspiration from many cultures, many creeds have a unique opportunity to lead mankind through these rough waters and into the promised Golden Age...

He was on several of the screens, but most showed the dome from various viewpoints. The images of the dome close up flashed and blinked as its currents and electrical fluctuations disturbed the video feed.

McKenzie gave a signal to the operators, the underlings sitting at the back of the room, people staring blindly at all the screens, listening to the screen's sound with all the remaining external noise cut off.

– We have one hell of a situation here.

Liz and Ted stared at him, at the screen, and back at him again. They could practically observe as he pulled himself together and became colder, businesslike, more the way they had learned to know him. Whatever animosity he bore towards them, and there was a *lot* of it, he had resolved it with himself well before he with his teeth gritted had decided to accept their... unique expertise. He had without doubt tried virtually everything else first.

– You can say that again.

The male Warren looked impressed at the towering structure showing up on most screens, dwarfing all the technological equipment, all its spokesmen in the foreground, speaking into their toys, their microphones flushed in spit and saliva. A majority of the world's well-known journalists and public figures had already descended on this place.

Not Garrett, though - the Bishop of California. He remained in his home state, consolidating his position.

It could be a recording, though. Ted thought he had heard something familiar there, and he had, but he couldn't be sure it was an exact match. Garrett wasn't exactly known for variety in his life and speeches.

At least not among the Warrens... and neither in what could be described as McKenzie's inner circle.

– I can have you both briefed thoroughly before dark...

If he had shown them, made sure they saw the screen to rattle them, it didn't, wouldn't work.

– There's nothing you can teach us, Floyd... about the structure or anything connected to it, the female Warren said relaxed and without any animosity in her voice. – Besides, we prefer, as you know, to make our own independent scrutiny.

No doubt he also wanted to use this opportunity to study them more closely. That was quite okay, even if they couldn't learn anything more from him. They knew who and what he was. It was enough.

– The President acquiesced to your rather unreasonable demands and terms. You are to have free reign of the vicinities and are effectively, within reason, in charge of the operation.

– That's good of you to confirm for us, Floyd, Ted said extremely good humored, – but totally unnecessary. The president's aide took us through the same lecture hours ago.

They all knew McKenzie could have the President killed within hours if he really wanted and found it to serve his long-term interest.

The two of them went outside, took the long road away from there and they breathed easier almost immediately.

She stopped a little bit and turned back towards the tent.

– May I borrow your watch, Floyd, she said in a light tone. It wasn't a question or a request.

– Why? McKenzie did not show himself in the tent opening.

But he couldn't hide the fact that he had followed them, chased after them like a hawk.

Fortunately they didn't need to hear his voice to confirm he was there. They had known, they knew, feeling him like a festering sore in their consciousness, assaulting their senses.

– We're going to take a closer look at everything, she said teasingly. – And want to keep track of time, that's all.

The watch came flying out of the tent, as if thrown by an invisible force. She caught it with an elegant swing of her right hand.

Their sharp senses started taking in the atmosphere, the mood of the area. Every place they had visited or lived had been different from each other, but in most cities and areas they only spotted minor differences. This place... was *different*.

There was, except for the obvious nothing obvious. Not even to them, who always looked for strangeness wherever they traveled, who were able to smell a city, a place. Though it had to sink in slowly. They had felt *something* of course, when they first landed here, but it wasn't until now it started to «surface». Under the ruckus, under the laugh riot, they sensed something... deeper.

A fundamental... Change.

They walked towards what scientists probably already loved to call a «phenomenon». When they looked in its direction it filled their entire view, long before they got close. Now, on the ground, confronted by «it», it became almost impossible to measure the distance to the beginning of the black surface. They proceeded with caution, but not excessively so.

Four eyes caught the sight of them, the bodies, the statues, the soldiers frozen in time. There were four of them, just under, inside the surface. They were obviously aiming to run forward, but hadn't been able to advance very far. One step, perhaps two, it was hard to tell.

The Black Dome was not completely black, at least not on its outskirts. A kind of twilight allowed a view to the first fifteen meters of the main road leading into the dark. The two saw no more humans, but while looking more closely at the details they discovered birds and objects floating perfectly still in the air. As if it wasn't air at all, but glass or some other form of transparent, solid compound that had captured it all.

Elizabeth stretched out one arm. The hand penetrated the surface quite effortlessly, the lower arm, too, and the elbow, all the way to the shoulder.

– It tingles, she reported. – It... hurts and... I cannot move my fingers.

The withdrawal happened slowly and with some effort. When she managed to pull out the hand it was clearly swollen. The change from wonder to pain had happened over a span of seconds.

– Its border is fluid, she said. – It's hard to say where it actually begins. You can't penetrate very far before the effect becomes quite... pronounced, though.

– Come on! He knew she didn't need coddling and they started walking along the dome's edge.

They took their time, circling around it all, walking through urban areas, fields and abrupt wilderness, back to the few remaining houses and streets, stopping by the big dig in the ground they had noticed earlier.

– So they have tried to dig under it, she said bemused.

The tunnel was more than big enough for a man to walk upright in it, big enough for cars and bigger vehicles. He went down inside it. There wasn't much light, but he had always seen well in the dark. The military had, with their usual thoroughness started the dig at least twenty meters away. It didn't help much. Almost before the tunnel opening disappeared he could decide decisively that, as usual, the world was the same below as above, above as below. The Dome literally sucked light out of the air. His hand started tingling. It was enough. He withdrew it after a few seconds. The tingling persisted a little, then vanished. He turned and walked out of the dark pit.

– It's a ball, a sphere, he reported quite unnecessary. – No way in through the backdoor.

They went in among the houses and streets, rang bells and made the locals react. People opened their doors reluctantly, but because of the military presence without any tangible resistance.

– We would like you to tell us, in your own words what you've seen happen here. Ted spoke quietly, sweetly and was straight out uncharacteristically charming. Elizabeth shook her head in frustrated admiration. She had always taken care of tasks like these in bygone years.

Slowly, hesitatingly the few remaining inhabitants of the area started to speak, started to tell.

There was no electricity, no artificial generation of heat or light. Torches burned on the porches and seeded the air with soot. If not for the modern look, the architecture of the living quarters, the scene itself, they could just as well be visiting a genuine medieval village. It wasn't so much the

look as much as the feeling it gave the two outsiders. It was the people, how they behaved, how they moved. Both Elizabeth and Ted had long ago learned to see beyond appearances, beyond skin and bone, the surface of the living daylight.

Away from the tents and the soldiers, from the workings and trappings of technology, among the few houses that remained on the outskirts of town, it reminded them both of New Orleans. Mixing the old with the new, the future with the ancient...

It reminded them more about New Orleans than New Orleans did.

– Before this, Elizabeth asked, – did you notice anything extraordinary, anything at all? We would like you to tell us everything, even if it seems trivial and unimportant.

– There’s always *something*, a young man said, a little less timid than the others. – This is New England, after all. We’ve lived with the strange and offbeat since they hanged witches in Salem, as part of the local folklore, so to speak. There’s a trail up to a hill where nothing will grow. Nothing at all. I’ve never heard a satisfactory explanation to that one.

– On that hill there’s an old castle. It’s supposed to be haunted. When I was a kid the adults told us that there were no such things as ghosts, but on the other hand, we were also forbidden to ever set foot there, even in the forest surrounding the old house. I’m not sure it can be called a castle... We went there anyway and nothing ever happened. It wasn’t boring up there, but we felt somewhat cheated, I guess.

– The last two months, though, that’s a different story.

He did speak rather hushed. Sometimes his voice was so low that even they had problems hearing what he said. He didn’t speak in a hushed whisper like most of the others here did.

– It isn’t easy to put into words, he began hesitantly. – Events that didn’t seem to matter when they happened, are now gaining, in hindsight, a lot more importance. I didn’t see much. I didn’t see the floating fireballs, the shimmering lights others told me they had witnessed. What I saw was the slow, inexplicable changes. We’ve always had witches, of course...

– Hush, a woman whispered in a mixture of fear and rage. – Can’t you see that he’s one himself, and she is, too?

Ted and Elizabeth exchanged glances, good humored. It was the eyes, naturally. They had stopped using dark glasses many years ago. They did not hide themselves any longer.

– The correct, general name, if there is one, should probably be mutant, ma’am, he said with a huge smile, one definitely overdone, as it showed off his big, juicy fangs.

– You said witches..? Liz prompted the young man.

– Yes, he pulled himself together, recovering from her dazzling smile. – There have always been some. Every town in New England seems to have them, do they not? Even if they, like here, tend to keep a low profile. That changed here, especially during what they called the Festival of Samhain. As I understood it, it is the time leading up to Halloween, what christians call All Hallows Eve and they called All Soul’s Night. They grew in number and importance. Many treated them badly, but it hardly seems to matter anymore, does it?. They managed to do their thing anyway and what they did engulfed the whole town... Didn’t it?

He stared up on the older, taller man that seemingly towered over him.

– She *flew*, a girl spoke up. – She flew over the city embraced by Fire.

– That’s a witch for you, Liz laughed, – as always, a disaster waiting to happen.

– Yeah, isn’t it GREAT? Ted exclaimed.

She tried her utmost to stare him down, in vain. It was she who was supposed to have said that. He had changed significantly since his younger days. He had developed humor and self-irony, for one thing.

– Do you think she did it all... alone? She asked burning with need, with curiosity, mirroring his fireeyes with hers.

– No way! He said quite decisively. – No one can manage such a feat alone.

The townspeople imagined that the torches burned brighter and taller when the two walked away. The frightened and the lost hoped for reassurances. There were none. They hoped for comfort. No one answered their prayers.

The two with dancing fires in their eyes didn’t lose an ounce of their good mood on the walk back to the camp. Not even the sight of all the uniforms and subsequent scenes affected them as it had before and should have done now. They entered the bus where more electronic equipment was

stashed. It was almost darker here than outside, where ghost lightning often flared and didn't illuminate anything. The machinery was supposed to be shielded from any outside interference, but still it struggled as most people in this place, «faced» with the unknown.

They walked straight to the head honcho, as if they knew by instinct the spot they would find him.

– The people you sent in, they're alive, are they not?

McKenzie, unbelievable enough, looked exasperated. He allowed by a glance one of the scientists to answer the question.

– We can't really be *certain*, but we believe they are... They were sent in with sensors on each body for us to monitor their life signs. First we were convinced they became... deceased the moment they entered the dome. Later we found that they still have heartbeats, though highly irregular ones. There can come one shortly after the previous or pause for minutes. They're fluctuating, varying wildly.

– They're moving, another said and pushed a button. – This is a video constantly monitoring them all. It's speeded up ten times. The movement is still painstakingly slow, but it's *there*.

The two noticed and it helped confirm what they had already surmised.

– So? McKenzie blew against Elizabeth. – Any theories?

– Look at this watch you so graciously contributed earlier today. She held it up, then handed it to him, smiling a bit. Ted brought another wristwatch out of his pocket and held that up. – Both these mechanical devices show the same time, which is coincidentally half an hour late compared to your watches.

They stared at her, as uncomprehending as ever.

– It's a Time Distortion field, she shrugged. – Time moves much more slowly by the rim of the dome than hundred meters away from it. Not as slowly as it probably does inside, but *noticeable*. You must have gathered as much yourself. You have the world's biggest brains at your fingertips. Beyond that... We don't have a clue.

– WHAT! His patience already running thin, his cautious calm gave in as the thinnest ice.

– The only way to really find out more is to confront the beast head on, face the music, pay the piper...

– Going in, the male Warren confirmed, not without some modicum of satisfaction.

– But... who's behind it? McKenzie said with a despair impossible to hide. – Who can do such a thing?

– Who says it's *done*? Ted challenged him. – Can't it just be a random, rare *phenomenon*? Who are you who claim to know everything there is to know about the Universe?

He didn't get an answer, had not expected, and did not expect any.

The early morning dawned for the third time over the Dome. He saw it before his inner eye. Suddenly, slowly, he seemed to look at McKenzie and everyone and everything from outside himself. This wasn't unusual for him, but he had hardly experienced it this pronounced before. Also the world outside the dome seemed to slow down to a crawl. There was no wind, but the curtains still did flap in the wind. The air blew under the door. He remembered another bus, long time past, not the past. He didn't want to, but he did.

Dawn, the color of blood and rust. They stood there, alone, facing the dome.

He heard a rusty voice, one from the past, clear as day, his brother's voice:

I saw everything. I saw the Phoenix rising.

– I keep seeing rows of open windows, he said.

– I do, too, she said. – In a long hall. There's no one else inside, I see nothing outside. There are white curtains floating in the wind, straight out from the wall. I know there's sound, but I can't recognize it. A therapist would have a field day here.

– Good thing we don't believe in them, then, he said.

Again she looked at him with a half humored sting in her eyes.

– We don't need a crystal ball to realize the obvious. She cocked her head in contempt.

They started walking. Behind them McKenzie and his men stood, close by the best technology money and power could buy, everything totally useless. Ted enjoyed that, they both did, and they embraced that enjoyment with everything they had, everything they were.

– This is... monumental, something I never would dare expect.

– And it's just the beginning.

Behind his eyelids he once more saw the bird, the bird of Shadow rise in the twilight.

He embraced yet again the feeling of the moment. This time she didn't give him any look, but shared the joy with him.

– We're at the top of our Power, she said with for her an unusually quiet confidence, confidence edged with just a little lace of bravery. – Whatever is residing in there should have some problems gobbling us up for breakfast.

McKenzie and his crew heard everything through the microphones.

– They're joking, an assistant gasped. – How can they...

McKenzie silenced her with a sharp move with his hand, a hand, a movement that killed and mutilated.

Ted and Liz started tearing off all the microphones and the ridiculous army clothes they had been fitted with. One microphone had been hidden under the skin by the right shoulder. Liz tore it off and a lot of skin and blood went with it.

– A good thing we refused all those idiotic and beyond silly inoculations, she murmured. – Otherwise we would have had work until christmas.

– HEY! The Man screamed well behind them, unusually and uncharacteristically *excited*.

That, too, pleased them more than they could ever express.

Thoughts dwindled as they the last few seconds prepared, braced themselves. They felt it, how outside influence slowly was cleansed from their bodies and minds, their soul and their fire. There was only the boiling of the blood and what was ahead.

They ran the last ten steps as fast as they could, they held nothing back, and just before they could feel the first stiffening of limbs and muscles they jumped. Onlookers might even be tempted to think they were flying, levitating as easily as a bird flapping its wings. The blood flowing from her shoulder seemed to jump straight up and the drops, shining like sapphires, seemed to be freezing in the air.

And just as with the soldiers and the birds their two bodies... *stopped* the moment they dived under the transparent surface of the darkness, a darkness strong enough to keep the day at bay. Facial features already hardened by intense concentration and wild passion were captured as if on a giant painting. All their power, all the power of will they could muster, was for nothing. They, too, had become prisoners...

Of the Black Dome.

2

What is reality and what's fantasy? Who can say for sure?

From far away they came. All of them. They came from far away.

The bus moved slowly through the landscape, through the pockets of heat and air.

Jill Stafford ate rolls of chocolate. She knew she wasn't supposed to, but she couldn't help herself. Besides, she had to eat the chocolate fast. She had bought it at the gas station just a few minutes ago, and it was already melting.

She licked chocolate from her fingers and dried the remains off her skin on the seat beneath her. It left a visible brown line. Nervousness mixed with excitement whether or not anyone noticed or would notice.

It was hot outside, she supposed, but the heat inside the bus reached monumental levels. Her body and her clothes stank of sweat. Everybody on the crowded bus stank of sweat. All the deodorant, anti-perspiring stuff in the world couldn't stop that from happening. The bus was a charter, just like the driver, hired in to do a specific job. The thought was condescending and cruel. She knew that, but couldn't help herself. Most of the girls and boys had been sitting on the same spot all the way from Boston, without being able to move much around. It was an uncomfortable, unpleasant and worst of all, boring ride. Some of the passengers had the nerve to move around a bit and amuse themselves. She didn't want... to do that.

The year had reached the first days of September. Jill knew the summer lasted longer here than in Wales, where she had lived for most of her life. But shouldn't it at least be waning a little at this time? Just a little bit compared to... August, for instance? It did not wane, that's for sure.

It was waxing.

During the days since she had arrived in the United States the temperature had risen from hot to red-hot.

– This is the hottest summer in New England *ever*, she heard someone speak out. – I grew up here. My father and grandfather, too, and they say the same. This isn't «Indian Summer», but Hell.

She had tried reading a book. It was hopeless. Sweat got in her eyes and almost blinded her. Besides, she was fucking tired of books. She couldn't even remember the title or what it was supposed to be about.

She looked up, suddenly startled. Tried to remember what, if anything, had caused her to react the way she did.

The bus had passed a turn, a hill covered by trees. She could see it with something akin to sudden, photographic memory. There was a house up there somewhere, a huge building, or rather a structure, hardly visible, hidden in the land as it was. But she had seen it and the sight of it made her turn strangely cold.

It was like she could imagine long, dank corridors filled with screams.

She had stopped looking through the windows hours ago. It was too hot, too boring to bother with exploring anything or satisfying her curiosity.

But still she had. She awoke with a start, a start from her slumber.

– Did you say something?

– Eh? She looked up, startled, with big, weary eyes.

– You said something, the boy in the seat next to her said. – I couldn't hear exactly what. I realize now that you dozed off and were dreaming.

– I thought I heard a scream, she said. – Someone was screaming, I'm certain of it.

– In this terrific place, he joked. – Pretty improbable, don't you think?

She smiled, in spite of the awkwardness she always felt in the close presence of boys.

– You see, that's exactly what I was talking about. He leaned a little closer to her side of the seat. – Do you remember what I told you?

– Yes, she replied. It was not necessary for her to concentrate. – You quoted a man called Havelock Ellis. You didn't know anything about him, who he was, but you liked the quote. It goes like this: «Dreams are real as long as they last. Can we say anything else about life?»

She looked him straight into the eyes. He was not put off, as she had thought he would be.

– I *knew* you heard me, he said excitedly. – A little shy, are we not?

And on that note, her shyness returned vengeful and with the usual foulness. She nodded and felt very small. He was... experienced. She saw it in each and every one of his movements, his very being, fuck him.

– I still want to know you better, he told her compellingly. – Not because of the shyness, but because you're special. That's why I told you I wanted to appeal to your intellect.

He touched her generous chin and wiped off some chocolate. She was blushing, she knew she did. She always did!

The bus stopped quite suddenly. She was ill prepared for it and would have been thrown forward if he hadn't grabbed her.

– This is my stop, he explained to her, as he would to a small child. – I live here, you know, I have just stayed in Boston the last week. See you around!

He went off the bus, with several of the others. He said something to a tall, beautiful blonde and she threw her head back and laughed. She kissed him on the chin. So casual, so easy.

The brief stop made Jill even hotter. That didn't seem possible, but as Havelock Ellis probably or possibly would have said: «Things can seem very unlikely sometimes, but who are we to argue with facts?»

She moved hesitantly on the seat until she sat where the boy had been sitting. The reward came in the form of the wind from one of the open hatches in the ceiling blowing straight at her. Her long, black hair that ordinarily fell down on the brow was pushed backwards and she felt she could breathe for the first time since the trip started. It felt great. A fleeting feeling quickly fading.

The bus drove into Northfield, Massachusetts. The town was far enough away from Boston that its location was on the outskirts of the enormous Metropolitan Area stretching all the way down to Washington DC.

Northfield was a field. A field part of a bigger, flat land. It lived up to its name where there were houses and streets, and the farmland to the north. There were no houses where the land started to curve to the west. Jill could see the path leading up the forest-clad hill, because of the lack of vegetation. After they had passed the hill, she saw that the land leveled out behind it and the plain continued westward. Jill could glimpse more woods and single trees and far beyond that, haze-covered smaller hills.

Now, that she was almost at the end of the tiresome trip, her mood improved decisively and she even felt a surge of low-level excitement. After all, this was the place she had chosen to live the next few years. She realized this suddenly, with a start. This had been a distant place, until now, now when she was here.

The main road reached a sharp curve in the otherwise flat landscape towards what she suspected was their destination. The school, with its adjacent boarding area, was situated to the east, at the opposite side of the hill, with the old part of Northfield between. The bus drove on to a surprisingly big parking lot. Jill was not used to the typical huge American education facilities.

There were three tall, interconnecting buildings on the campus. The driver stopped the bus and killed the engine in front of what was supposedly the school itself, with the living areas on each side.

Sleep and work, Jill thought for no specific reason.

The heat hit them all almost immediately. No more cooling air through open hatches. She grabbed her black, flat-brimmed hat from her lap, the one she had carried with her since leaving the house in England, and hurried off the bus with the others.

The students collected their luggage from the cargo bay under the bus.

In spite of the impractical color in the heat, she put the hat on her head. The long, flat brim hid her eyes and she could look at the world without the world looking back.

They were, after a remarkably short wait led the modest stretch to their destination by a girl and a boy dressed in a school uniform. Jill recognized the blonde bombshell from the bus.

– Boys with me, the boy called.

He brought the boys in one direction. The blonde bombshell signed for the girls to follow her in another and led them even closer to white paint, to walls of heat. There was no defense against the searing sun anywhere. They stood there sweating and suffering, while the girl talked with what was probably one of the supervisors.

– Thank God for the wind, a girl close to Jill moaned.

– I've been told that it's always windy here, another whispered.

Only a short walk now, to the shadow, but it felt like miles and miles.

The air in the hall inside was surprisingly cool. In the big house, that almost certainly had hundreds and hundreds of rooms, it seemed like stairs and hallways went on forever.

The blonde turned towards her wards for the first time and held up her hands. It became quiet except for the murmur created by the echo in the halls and the passages between halls. It was the first time she talked to them using her voice. Outside she had used hands and eyes, with an obvious patronizing flair.

And they had followed, like good sheep.

– Hello, she greeted them (sort of), – my name is Victoria. I wish to welcome you all to Northfield College Campus. I will guide you to your rooms and also help you to get settled. I know it might be difficult for some of you to come here to a totally different environment from what you may be used to, but I and the other student contacts are here to make the transition as smooth as possible. We pride ourselves on our friendliness here at Northfield...

Jill listened only halfheartedly, without really registering what the well dressed, well-done-hair girl said.

– Then there's the matter of your rooms. We've already assigned them to you, though, so individual wishes to move or trade places may be difficult to fulfill. This is made twice as hard by the fact that the lot of you is the last to arrive...

Stafford was one of the last names to be called. Jill didn't need to call out or otherwise identify herself. Victoria, apparently and obviously had already made her.

– Your room is on the top floor. Victoria enlightened her. – You're lucky!

Jill didn't feel lucky, but inside her sparked the small ember of rebellion, the same that had led her across the vast sea.

– That's GREAT! She exclaimed. – I can slide down here on the banister.

The joke was not appreciated.

– We've got quite extensive rules of conduct here. Especially for fresh meat like you, young lady. Some things are allowed, but we practice freedom with responsibility here. If you cross the line...

She obviously had a desire to repeat points more than once. Jill did not say anything.

– Your roommate is expecting you upstairs. We couldn't let all of you meet down here and she is also quite *busy*, if you must know.

Welcome to Northfield College, Jill thought sourly. She was on her way up the stairs before the other girl had finished speaking.

Half way up she stopped, suddenly curious, wondering. The diminished rays from the sun spiraled through the dust (there was dust here), and seemingly made shapes, shadows out of nothing.

Whisper, *whisper*, Shadow cried silently.

She reached out for one of them, but it disappeared when she held out her hand. The dust blew away. She looked around. There was, in fact, possible to slide down the banister almost all the way from the top. The staircase went from top to bottom in a broad spiral along the wall. It was at least as old as the house itself. She smiled then, without quite knowing why.

Jill Stafford was tall, a fact she was quite aware of. She had been both lightheartedly and heavily handedly teased about it her entire life. The girl waiting for her at the top of the stairs was even taller, though. Jill doubted that she had met boys or men who were taller.

– You are Jill? A smile and an outstretched hand. – They call me Tamara Farley. Nice to meet you.

– I'm not so much into shaking hands. It came out as a mumbling, hesitantly, slightly out of breath. She had always hated stairs.

– Traditional bullshit, I know, but let us make an exception this one time, what do you say?

Jill did shake her hand and the girl's smile widened.

Jill felt her skin pressed against hers, the feeling lingered long afterwards, of skin, of more. Words pressed ahead from behind tight woven lips, but she held her tongue.

– It means so much more when it's done only occasionally, Tamara said.

They walked the vast sea to their room, at the end of another long corridor, by the dark stairs to the attic.

– «Your room is on the top floor.» Jill mumbled. – «You're lucky!»

– That's Correct Victoria for you, Tamara laughed. And then more somber. – You know, you're really good. That really did sound like her. You might wanna consider a future as a mimic.

– Why did you meet me by the stairs? Jill asked curious.

– I arrived yesterday and nobody was there to meet *me*. I searched very far and very long before I finally found my room. It's an experience I wouldn't want anybody to repeat.

They grinned at each other.

Tamara unlocked the door and opened it and allowed Jill to enter first. Jill entered cautiously, sought and took in the sight with her gray eyes and her senses opened wide. The room opened up to them. It... welcomed her. A shiver passed through the tall and big body. She straightened.

– It's big and... bright. I like it.

– Our home for a loong time to come, it came merrily from behind from the other girl.

The room turned westward, where there were two big windows. Everything was huge here although she suspected there were other rooms, where more «important» students resided, which were substantially bigger. Under the windows someone had placed the beds, far from the cool shadows in the corners and straight in the path of the white heat rays.

– Don't look at me, I didn't put them there.

– Good. Jill moved in one sweep her bed into her corner, into the shadows.

Tamara, after a brief hesitation, did the same.

– It isn't so bad in the afternoon, she said. – The Sun sets fairly early behind the big hill.

– Yes, Jill mused, – and a shadow is cast all over the place.

She shook her head wondering if she herself knew what she meant by those words.

– They have named it Frazer Hill, but the way I understand it, everybody call it quite simply the Hill, the other girl told her. – Funny isn't it? As big as it is, they could just as well called it the Mountain or something...

– Yes, it is strange, isn't it? Jill still thought she herself sounded a bit far away. – That it seems so much bigger than it really is, how it seems to draw light from its surroundings. Look, it's dark even now, in the middle of the day.

– If you say so. It was uttered with obvious embarrassment. Jill didn't notice. – Uh, do you have any more luggage? We should perhaps carry it up.

– This is it. She pointed at the small suitcase on the bed. – I do plan to buy myself more clothes... She knew her insecurity was exposed in her voice and her pose and hated herself for it.

– Don't worry, Tamara grinned. – Not that it matters, but as you can see, even if my suitcase is a little bigger than yours, it's not much to brag about.

Jill felt strange, skittish, but not skittish at the same time. Strange!

– Even if you probably have traveled wide and far just to get here, the bigger girl continued hesitantly. – Your accent is pretty strange, far from anything I've ever heard before.

– I guess it's my Gaelic upbringing, Jill replied with a calm voice. – I grew up in Wales. Everything is... strange there, even the language. It's pretty boring actually. I know I would've been disappointed if I was a traveler coming there seeking something... special.

Someone played some kind of string instrument somewhere in the building. It sounded like a harp, but could just as well be a guitar. A cloud passed the Sun. There was no cloud. A fog not chilly, not visible, gave her gooseflesh all over.

– Funny, isn't it? Tamara laughed nervously. – And at a *school*. Too bad it isn't prolonged aid against the heat.

Jill looked out the open window and did nothing else than breathe in and out, in and out, a couple of minutes. She regained her calm, but maybe not her center. She wasn't certain she had one, feeling the same restlessness she had felt her entire life.

Breathing was the very reason she had come to this place, so far away from what had passed as her home. That had seemed distant, or sickeningly close, not like this. She had traveled far, to think through her life.

No one would claim that their new home of a room was filled with personal stuff or even stuff. A brig or a prison cell could be more accommodating. Tamara had put a few posters on the wall. And she owned a Walkman. That was all and everything. Jill had nothing to contribute, except the hat she hung over the bed.

The heat, never truly gone, returned with a vengeance. The temperature rose even a few notches more during the seemingly endless hours remaining of the day and the sun shone mercilessly on the rooms on the west side. It became nearly intolerable. Doors and windows were opened wide, but the wind racing through them was so hot that it didn't help much. Not much at all. Rather it served to dehydrate poor bodies even more.

– I apologize about my claim concerning the livable temperature here earlier, Tamara moaned.

– Don't... sweat it. Jill made a poor attempt at humor. – I presume the heat has turned even worse since yesterday afternoon?

Tamara nodded glumly.

They thought about leaving, decided against it, thinking it couldn't be worse. Regretting it one hour later when every part of their clothes was soaked in sweat. Shy eyes looked in the mirror and at each other. Everything was visible, or so it seemed. They couldn't go anywhere like this, just couldn't.

– I must take a shower, Jill mumbled. And then, with something like renewed energy she pulled and pushed off every piece of cloth on her body.

Tamara was not used to such immediate, impulsive behavior. Eyes widened. Hers - and Jill's own.

– Your body is golden all over! she said most of all to say something.

– The family is supposed to be descendants of Vikings. A shrug. – I guess it must be correct. Both my parents have fair skin and hair. But I would gather it isn't the whole truth...

– It wasn't meant as an insult, Tamara apologized. – As you can see, I'm pretty ethnic myself.

A pause, if not hesitation.

– I'm Jewish, she added explanatory.

Her hair was as black as that of the other girl, but while Jill's hair was smooth and shiny, hers was curly and disheveled.

Jill used only cold water in the shower. She stood under the endless waterfall long after she was reasonably clean of sweat and dirt and allowed herself to be cooled down as much as possible. The water was warmer than it was supposed to be, but it did help. She was still somewhat chilled after carefully drying herself with a towel and dressed up in her last change of clean clothes.

Tamara took the plunge, too, and afterwards showed her roommate around the campus, the few places she knew. She had only been here a little more than twenty-four hours herself.

Outside in the hall, it was merely moderately less hot. No respite from anything there. Doors had been opened to every room and the sun easily reached those who sought refuge from it in the bleak shadows.

– That door is closed, Jill noted.

They had reached the big hall by the stairs. The door to the opposite wing was closed.

Strange, not so strange at all, she suspected.

– They have air-conditioning in there, Tamara sighed. – The door is probably locked, in order to keep us ordinary mortals from entering or benefiting from it.

Jill turned and went back to the door and touched the handle, pushed it down, pulled it to her. It didn't budge. For a moment she pushed her entire body against the door. She had sensed the cold in there and now she felt it. It felt good.

She shrugged and they went on their way. Half expecting to see the same dust shapes, she felt something almost identifiable as disappointment when they didn't appear.

– The boys live over *there*, as I suppose you can guess, Tamara giggled and pointed through the window. – As you can see they live *bigger* and probably better. There are more of them and they're not gonna be housewives and give birth to a bunch of kids.

They set down in the mess hall, the school's dining room. There were blessed few people present and the air conditioning was on, had to be, with all the food close by.

And even the rich brats have to eat here, Jill added cynically in her mind.

– ... so I'm a real happy camper because of the scholarship, Tamara said in a somber way a while later. – I wouldn't have been able to keep it going at home much longer. I had already distanced myself in a major way from the religion and everything connected to it. I couldn't bear all the hypocrisy, for instance my father's defense of the murders the Israeli nation and soldiers did in Jenin and on the West Bank and in Gaza in general and the government sabotage of the peace process. I expressed my fervent desire to hunt down Ariel Sharon and his entire terror cabinet.

There was Passion, wide open and boiling. Jill froze in joy.

The TV was on. They sent even more reports from New Orleans and Louisiana about the devastating effects of the Hurricane Katrina. For some reason it made the strange chill and heat burn even stronger somewhere inside Jill.

– Reporting such events is very important, Tamara said. – Usually they don't, you know, but this is quite simply too big to ignore.

– You're an avid political beast, aren't you? Jill said with a grin.

– I am! Tamara said, clearly agitated. – Established media won't report on important issues, because they want to lull people to sleep, so I rely on the Internet and alternative venues in an ongoing effort to find out what's happening, what's truly happening in the world.

She looked a little hurt and clearly vulnerable just then.

– I think it's great, Jill assured her.

The big girl visibly brightened.

– You do? Really?

– Most certainly, the Welsh stated firmly, - I have despaired in my ongoing effort to find astute friends, people able to see beyond the veil of deceit and lies so prevalent in the world today.

Hearing herself speak like that felt strange, too, felt so good. When the two grabbed hands she did so without thinking, without anxiety, forgetting herself. She gasped and blinked.

Tamara didn't notice. She had her attention on the TV. The news broadcast ended.

- Did you *see* that?

Jill grinned and shook her head, and waited for the other to explain, and Tamara understood, too, and she was also grinning.

– There have been major protests against the construction of the Israeli «security wall» every day since January, largely unreported by US established media, and just a few days ago I heard about major clashes between protesters and the Israeli army in Bil'in, the *correct* version of events. US media is so Israel-friendly that it makes me want to hurl.

– Western media in general is, Jill said, – even though an increasing number of Europeans have grown aware of what's going on.

They had a lot to talk about, both equally agitated and passionate, and Jill almost forgot again, forgot about the tingling in the hand from Tamara's touch and the vivid impressions it created.

It happened as they were about to leave, as the eager exchange of thoughts halted a bit, turned sober.

– Sweet Daddy expressed his desire to beat me up the day I left. «To teach me to respect authorities and tradition». I threatened to go to the police. Then he threatened to throw me out, but I was already standing on the stairs outside...

– It was a bit different with me, Jill said with burning eyes. – They stated that they wouldn't give me permission to leave. They wouldn't even discuss it. If I hadn't been eighteen already, I would've had great trouble getting away...

– ...escaping, her new friend completing for her.

– *Yes!* She agreed.

Jill noticed something then, in her moment of vulnerability, a sore, raw spot of feeling spreading all over her. She looked around her, at the other people in the room. It wasn't just her, feeling the way she did about the past. Everybody looked, glanced uncomfortable... at the Hill. And so she joined them in their venture. And she saw the Sun hanging there, a moment, not over the horizon, but over Frazer Hill.

And then disappear.

It happened so sudden, from one moment to the next, so abruptly that it seemed like the whole shining disk had been swallowed whole. It wasn't any transition like with daily sunset, hardly any shifting to red. One moment the entire disk was visible, the next it was gone. Someone screamed. Jill hardly noticed in her excitement, didn't even notice the tingling of fear running down her own spine.

They all felt it, it was tangible and real, how the shadow and the cold reached them at the same time, immediately and without the slightest delay.

– Isn't that something? One of the teachers said proudly. – Scientists from all over the world have visited us, but even through extensive studies they haven't yet been able to solve this particularly fascinating riddle. They assured us that there is nothing to fear, though, a conclusion I wholeheartedly agree with. For no matter people's unhealthy reactions to optical and sensory input *illusions*, the Hill is still *there*, is it not?

Jill wondered if the man understood the implications of his own words, or was merely grandstanding. She decided it didn't matter. Not now, when the mystery was still fresh in her mind.

The two girls stopped at the top of the stairs outside. It wasn't cold in any way. A typical New England summer afternoon, Jill guessed. They would still sweat easily, if they moved, walked faster than a slow stroll in the afternoon heat. But...

The Sun hadn't really set between the trees on Frazer Hill. There was no residue of sunlight there what so ever. In fact, there were no trees, no details visible up there at all, except the smooth edge of the huge Shape.

– The rays from the sun are visible not far from here, a boy enlightened them. – Everywhere else, in fact, except on that damn heap and in its shade.

It was true. When they looked, they saw the effects of sunlight both north and south of the «phenomenon». But the entire older part of the city of Northfield was cast in Shadow.

Tamara fell. It happened so fast that she almost tore into Jill and took her with her all the way down. Jill swayed, but stood her ground. Tamara was lying by the base of the stairs, whimpering slightly. Jill hurried down to her.

The other girl already rose and straightened herself.

– I'm fine, she said. – I don't know what the fuck happened. The lovely sight took me in, I guess, and I lost my footing. It is a lovely sight, isn't it?

– Yes... Jill hadn't thought about it that way before, but now, when the thought had been spoken aloud, she did. She took it all in. The Shadow tempering the full daylight, the sunlight, rays on the edge of it, like waves of fire, the sea of humming voices surrounding her...

She «awoke» with a start, from what resembled a dreamlike state.

Many of those around them did stare bemused at the two. One girl walked over.

– Is everything okay? She asked and seemed worried, surprisingly enough.

– Everything is okay, Jill reported with a skewed smile. – We were just a bit too eager admiring the view...

– It is a nice view, isn't it?

– Yes! Jill said.

She stared into eyes as gray as hers and so alike her own. She felt dizzy. The strange feeling of familiarity overwhelmed her momentarily, before it subsided.

– But you didn't fall?

– No, I didn't.

– We'll meet again, Stacy said.

– Yes! Jill acknowledged.

Stacy? Was Stacy her name? Had she said what her name was? She was gone before Jill managed to ask her.

– Did she say what her name was?

– Who? Tamara asked good-natured.

– The girl who was here.

– Which one?

Frustrated Jill held back, well aware of the fact that this wasn't the first time something like this had happened to her. Had Stacy been here at all or had she been a part of Jill's usual overactive imagination? She knew she had one. Her teachers had always told her so. Her parents and friends had, too. And the therapist they had sent her to, when she was twelve. She feared now, more than ever, that they had all been right in their assumption. Stacy had, when she thought it through, seemed more like a mirror image, than a real person.

She knew she wasn't crazy. She knew there were other explanations. Better explanations. If a person... dared to believe, trust in oneself. But a bit of fear always remained.

She walked away, half hoping that Tamara would follow her, half hoping she wouldn't.

Tamara did, and the hope inside her dwindled and died, died and was reborn a thousand times. The afternoon daystar crept forth from the Hill this day, too, like she had been assured it would do. And she wasn't certain at all whether she preferred it that way or not. The cool shadows had always been a source of both joy and fear to her.

– I've always seen... things other people don't, she said quietly to Tamara. – Here everybody is seeing something and they still don't see.

Tamara did not reply at first. They had walked more steps in silence than any one of them dared to count, when the bigger girl grabbed her arm and stopped them both in their tracks.

– Your scholarship, where did you get it?

– Prometheus Corporation, Jill said. – They tested the whole class, both physically and mentally. As far as I know I was the only one they offered anything. They didn't do anything really weird with us or asked us strange questions, not weirder or stranger than many other tests I've seen. They do all kinds of tests on everybody these days, don't they?

– In my class they called themselves the Phoenix Foundation, but otherwise everything seemed remarkably similar to your description.

Disappointment and hope warred for dominance in both their faces. They exchanged slight smiles.

– Prometheus, according to mythology, was the ancient Greek god who gave humanity the gift of fire, Jill said. – Fire to survive the gathering storm. And Phoenix is the bird of Fire, the ancient symbol of Life, reborn through life, throughout Eternity, from the ashes of its own fire.

The slight smiles broadened insanely so.

The matriculation started in full the next day. Jill hardly remembered the night before. She was kept so busy that she wasn't certain she remembered anything or even her own name. Even if she had to repeat it numerous times during the day and the days that followed. Her first conscious memory of that day was the precise moment

She saw Stacy pull out a chair from a desk not far from hers. Stacy didn't seem to notice her, to acknowledge her presence. And why should she? How would she react to a stranger staring at her like that? Jill disliked the sting of shame coursing through her, cursing her, but the feeling persisted, until she felt the overpowering need to look away in embarrassment. The strange feeling, so seldom felt earlier in her life, returned to her several times this day, though, like a shadow, a whisper, also this time hardly noticeable. Not so strong as the first time, not only Stacy but others, too, brought it on. Brought exhilaration, brought fear and numerous other layers of emotion.

She and Tamara took a stroll in the school park in the afternoon. The Hill started to tower over them as Jill imagined it did every day. But the wind blowing through the town and the surrounding farmland was just the same soft breeze. Jill looked for Stacy, but didn't see her. She remembered herself as a girl, a sharp pain memory, both unwanted and welcomed. She had loved to stay on high ground and feel the wind blow. Her parents always asked her why, no matter what she did. Both with the wind on the high ground and most of her other activities. The worst part of it all was that she could never really explain it to them, no matter how much she tried.

She looked at the trees and growth around her, how it all needed water, in order to grow and thrive. How much they lacked even the most elementary manure nourishment. Year by year now, she had felt the winds grow hotter and more fierce. The summer in Wales had been uncanny hot this year, as was the case with all of Britain and the rest of the world. The weather, the mood. As the wind had blown more and harder and the rainfall had beaten all former records in the colder half of the year. The wind blew ever harder. Everything seemed ready, more than ready, to... to blow.

The increasing heat wasn't so bad. She had really adapted to it a long time ago. It had never represented much trouble to her to adapt to a changing environment. It was those that didn't change she couldn't stand. The excitement connected to the Journey and what she traveled to, had for a while put her inner balance in turmoil, one now clearly abating.

– Why did you leave?

– What? Jill raised her head. Her thoughts had wandered off there, for a while, wandering off yet again.

– Why did you leave? Really. It wasn't merely your parents doing, was it? Why did you seek out a place like... this? You did, didn't you?

Tamara spoke mostly to keep the conversation going, but the question had a certain quality that clearly revealed that there was more to it, somewhere in her soft voice. Something was nagging the big girl.

Jill decided to reply to her. Tamara was nice and they had spoken so much that they had taken the first steps towards what could be friendship.

– Truth to tell I don't know. Not fully, at least. It was, is more like a series of hunches showing up simultaneously. I wanted to experience more of the world, of course, but it's more than that. I was lonely, in a way I couldn't define. I've heard it be said that loneliness isn't a need for company, but a longing for kindred souls. I believe that to be true. There were friends, even close ones, but there was a part of me they couldn't reach. The whole of Wales is so mundane, you know, like a painting, unmoving. It was almost funny the way the tourists talked about it and so much of it that seemed to me like ridiculous myth. I did some sabbaths, witch sabbaths, with a bunch of sun worshippers, but nothing much ever happened. Their heart was clearly not in it. It was more of an excuse to drink herbal tea. And such. I wanted to do... more.

– So you never found out... if you can do Magick... do Witchcraft? In spite of the cheerfulness in the big girl's voice, there was, to the other girl, an easily detectable edge there.

– No, Jill replied embarrassed. She gave away a short snort that might be called laughter, filled with nervousness and no small part of repressed animosity. Many promising friendships had ended this way. She decided to answer as truthful as she possible could, in an attempt to explain. Explain what couldn't possibly be explained. – There were flashes of... something, there always have been. Nothing convincing or conclusive.

Tamara did not seem to have heard a word of what she had said, merely what she maybe wanted to hear. Or maybe not.

– Are you psychic? What can you tell about me?

They had stopped now. Tamara held her in a firm, painful grip.

– I shook hands with you, Jill said carefully measured. – I touched you.

Inside her something happened that led her to forget the pain. A flow, a release.

– I don't mind, Tamara Farley assured with eagerness imminent in her voice. – Don't worry, I'm interested in this.

Jill had attempted to shove her away. Tamara released her grip. They both smiled apologetically. It was refreshing in a way, to experience interest, as it was, instead of the usual distant treatment.

– All humans are sensitive, I guess, Jill spoke in a low voice, akin to a whisper. – Curious, too. At least they have been once. At least in the cradle. This vital part is shredded off during childhood and adolescence. We're taught to fear the strange and the different. A certain degree of respect for the unknown is healthy, but in our present age hatred toward strangers has become a way of life. You yourself, have managed to fight off the brainwashing pretty well. You're just *a bit* afraid of me. Much more anxious really, about the possible consequences of your last adventure before traveling here. Don't worry, there aren't any. Therefore you don't need any shoulder to cry on.

They both stared shocked at the other.

– How DID you know that? Gasping in horror, Tamara practically slapped her own cheeks, as she hid her face in her palms. – You couldn't know! There is no way you could know!

Totally out of it, she ran away from there.

Jill remained, frozen on the spot, almost as out of it herself. She felt shock, mixed with a number of other nuances of impression. She hadn't known what she was about to say before it left her mouth. Her aim had been to expose something superficial, harmless, anything non-conclusive they could laugh about and forget. But she had slid into some kind of *trance*. And her dormant abilities had shown themselves with a vengeance, beyond reproach.

In a second, between one heartbeat and the next, everything had changed. Eternity revealed itself to her. The very air. Even to her plain eyes the very air seemed changed. And the trees...

There was one tree in particular, to the left of her. She turned and faced it. To her it seemed alive and of course it was. Seething with Life's energy, as it did. She started to laugh, giddy with sudden happiness. It threatened to grow to euphoria, when she noticed the stares and the attention she attracted from the nearby people. Better not gather too much attention to herself. Virtually crestfallen, she forced herself to calm down. She became calm in her outward manner, but inside she was seething and boiling. Something akin to labored breathing became close to normal.

But the tree still seemed to glow to her inner eye. And the need to embrace it grew close to a compulsion.

And then, the flow in her mind transformed itself into a flood.

So strange... People around her, not close really, in a wide circle... felt as if they were closing in on her. They were steps and steps away, most of them. They didn't come to her. She came to them. Their *thoughts*... she could feel them. Their loud thoughts closed in on her and she was unable to resist them. She started to walk, hardly knew where she was headed, knew only she had to get away. The walk broke into a run, she broke into a sweat, and feared she would soon lose control over herself completely. One thousand feet drummed against the tarmac, a narrow path between bushes and low trees, the school park. Everything filled up her brain and it threatened to burst. She moaned, in fear, in terror.

Slowly, slowly, it dawned on her that the flood of voices in her mind had vanished. If it had happened just now or some time ago, she couldn't say. But they were gone. Once again she heard only the sounds the ears could hear. A few more hesitant steps and the rampant run halted.

Slowly, slowly, she calmed down, calming herself. With labored breathing and leaden legs and thighs, she felt as if she coughed her guts out there on the ground. The taste in her mouth was sour and bitter.

For a long time afterwards, she stood absolutely rigid, while she listened and waited and tried to compose herself.

She turned around and slowly, hesitantly started to walk, walk back. Each step, every moment, she feared she again would hear the terrifying chaotic sounds in her brain. She didn't. Not in the park and not in the schoolyard in the middle of the crowd. But she felt a splitting headache coming on. It was the worst she had ever felt. During the next couple of minutes it grew to such proportions she feared she had popped a blood vessel or something. She wanted desperately to run to the school's nurse. She didn't, but steered her steps towards the girls' dormitory, up the massive staircase. Climbing a mountain, almost blacking out.

Bed, head on the pillow, wishing she could actually black out. The pain kept just below unbearable and kept her from slipping into unconsciousness. Every time she moved only the slightest, knives of pain cut through body and mind.

Tamara entered the room. Her hardened expression softened when she saw the state of the other girl.

– Jeez, you're pale as a ghost, she burst out.

– Killer headache. Do you have any... painkillers, aspirin, anything?

– I'll get something. Just a minute.

She left the room and Jill imagined less than a minute passed, before her return.

– Can you sit up? She held out pills and a glass of water.

– Yes, I... The pain tore into her. Thoroughly frustrated she couldn't keep tears from flowing from her eyes.

Tamara helped her sit up and held her head, stroking her forehead carefully. She put the pills between quivering lips. Jill swallowed hard.

– How many... how many did you give me?

– Two. Hesitantly, worried.

– Give me one more!

She swallowed the rest of the water in the huge glass in one swap. Whimpering like a child as her head hit the pillow.

Someone had said something she had overheard during childhood. Something about joy being fleeting, lasting only through moments and flashes in time, but pain... pain was forever.

It subsided painfully slow in her head, turning from unbearable to a soft stab somewhere and sweat began pouring from her skin, while the poison she had taken to dull her senses spread through the body.

– That seemed to be *terribly* painful, Tamara finally said. – Have you ever gone through something like this before? I mean, I searched your bag, but found nothing there to...

– I don't believe in painkillers. Jill still had to mumble, but she could talk somewhat. – The few times before was not pleasant, but now it was...

– Yes, I know. Tamara smiled a wicked, sympathetic smile. – There comes a time in life when you may find it absolutely mandatory to kiss high and mighty principles goodbye.

Jill smiled, too. It did hurt, but was well worth it. She fell asleep a few minutes later with that slight smile around her mouth.

She slept.

And dreamed nothing in the dreamless sleep. Nothing at all. As if all her energy was conserved to... to sleep.

She awoke with a start, some time later.

And Jill Stafford started dreaming, started imagining.

She stood by the open window, watching the gathering Night, with a feeling, both good and bad, of water in her eyes, her eyes resting on Frazer Hill. She had to look a bit to the left. The sun had, seemingly ages ago, set behind the Hill. In midsummer or winter it might (probably) set left or right of it. Now at least, if not also in spring, it seemed to have swallowed the gigantic fireball whole. The forest at the top still seemed completely... gone. Something up there both attracted and repulsed her. What could there be with the giant Shadow and this entire city that affected her so? She knew some of the history of both this and the entire New England area. That had to be something any promising young witch had some rudimentary knowledge of. She smiled slightly.

Even that was enough to remind her of the pain behind her forehead. It had faded now, merely a weak reminder of what had been, but remained more than potent enough.

To her it was unnecessary to do as most others, take a look at the map. Many of the places and names were like pulled from legends. Boston was, for instance built by the mouth of *Mystic* River in Massachusetts Bay.

– How is the ol' head? Tamara asked from behind.

– Let's say it's a definite improvement.

Tamara laughed a bit, before continuing haltingly.

– I saw the book in your bag, looking for painkillers.

– Oh, that book, Jill shrugged.

– Such books are a particular interest of mine, Tamara said with something akin to enthusiasm. – And I haven't seen its equal since mom burned mine. It's *old* isn't it?

– I found it on a market in London when I was eleven, Jill's voice become even more distant. – In a stretch called Camden Street. It was the one and only time my parents brought me anywhere.

– You remember the name of the street? That's really impressive, I can hardly remember anything from I was eleven.

She took the book out of the bag, hesitantly at first, more confidently when her new friend didn't object.

– It certainly looks old.

She brushed a hand over the front cover, as if to remove dust. And the entire cover really seemed to be covered in dust. The original color had almost faded entirely, the edges worn down. The once white paper faded to yellow. It was a well-kept book, but it was... old.

Tamara opened it and started reading.

– «Folk sayeth that a girlie is not fit to writ, but ah know ah am Wise and am fit and wilt do as I pretty please».

She looked up.

– Handwritten and in some kind of old English. What's this?

– It's a diary. Jill still stared with a fixed look at the Hill. – Basically in two parts. The first contains the partly personal account of a young girl burned as a witch in these parts 300 years ago.

– My book was about that, too, in a more generalized way, I guess, but no less frightening and *interesting*. Most of it emitted from history books. Definitely emitted! It was about witches and their craft, the execution of witchcraft, Sorcery. Some of the tales were from this area, New England. The first immigrants, *refugees*, from Europe came here. In history books there are a lot about the pilgrims, the orthodox christians and the learning places founded here. I guess that the victorious write the history books. It doesn't say much of the most important facets of it, does it? About the fact that all kinds of persecuted people sought this land, among them witches and «followers» of the ancient «heathen» ways. One of the few accounts is about the Salem witch processes, as if they should be one of the rare and proud. Do you know what? I'm pretty much convinced by now that there were far more. The victorious wanted their triumph to be well known, but didn't want to draw too much attention to the extent of «paganism». Their belief, the only right belief, should be the only belief in the new world. But they failed. Belief in witchcraft survived, even some witches, despite the fervent persecution. Later more arrived. And Africans... in addition to the natives already present. Do you know that the coast Indians are supposed to have been exterminated by *measles*? That lie is up there with the Nazi's claim that 6 million Jews died of exposure to water...

– There is a witch coven here still, Jill said, seemingly unfazed by Tamara's sudden exaltation. – In Boston.

– I've heard they don't do much. Mostly social work and such and keeping mostly to themselves.

– Maybe they're waiting, Jill said slowly.

Just as slowly, seemingly, she felt the dampness in her eyes evaporate. She opened them wide and their look turned firm, focused. She noticed the change in herself, as she noticed Tamara noticing the change.

Still hesitant, she leaned a bit out of the open window, the wide-open window... and stretched out her senses, herself. Backwards, forwards, right, left, down, up and none of the above.

Northfield wasn't really one city, but two, two cities distinctly and radically different from each other. This one, the Old City, with low buildings centuries old. That one, the New City, the modernistic, post modernistic town to the east. She flew then, floated, following Mystic River all the way to Boston.

The Old City, the New City, and the hidden, ancient, hidden one, so old that it didn't have any name. Other stuff not seen with eyes, without eyes.

In this area, so shockingly full of contradictions, the girl felt she would do her Journey, her non-moving traveling. It started here, the Journey. The crossing of the sea from Great Britain was merely foreplay. She more than imagined she was destined to come here. She didn't understand it, as little as she understood herself. *But she would!* She realized that much, as the joy of expectation coursed through her.

She was «back» in the room. The headache was back, too. She bit her lower lip in frustration, bit deep into a tightly clenched fist. Her eyes stayed focused, her vision clear.

Something... *happened*. A pressure shift in the air, behind her eyes. The hill was no longer dark, but glowing. Glowing, she suspected, just outside the normal spectrum of light... or dark.

Somebody stood behind her. The certainty made her flinch and turn around fast as a whirlwind.

Tamara sat quietly on her bed. Her eyes grew large.

– You had a really lethal look, just there, do you know that?

Somebody had stood behind her. In this room. Not Tamara. Another. In front of the closed door, but there was no one here now. Jill didn't take her eyes off the door.

Jill stumbled a bit, catching her footing, catching her breath.

– I saw... It was as if I saw... saw a misty black hole sucking me in, sucking me in, forming words like lips, a hungry, giant mouth devouring me *whole*.

Still visible in her mind, in her black, black vision, her eyes staring at it, seeing nothing besides. She shivered visibly.

Seconds, minutes passed by as she pulled herself together.

She stopped, smiling embarrassed, still shaken at the other girl.

– Sorry if I scared you...

– Not scared exactly... but... with that look... The girl paused, and struggled a bit, before she managed to continue. – It's easy to be afraid of you. I think you somehow communicate *something* even to the most insensitive.

She crouched a bit, rubbing her upper arms, the big, strong girl, nervously awaiting the ax to fall.

– I felt it, too, you know, the pressure shift. But not with your extravagant intensity.

The apologetic smile did nothing to improve the pale color of her face.

Jill had already turned back towards the window. It was even more difficult than usual to interpret her feelings.

– It's okay, Tam, I'm a bit... scared myself.