

## Lady of the Shadows – Prologue 1892

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Her faltering gaze swept across the sun-bleached grassy slope before her beloved stone homestead and then down, deep into the valley. It lingered briefly on the line of scrappy tea trees that followed the meander of the creek, and then moved beyond and up into the hills in the distance on the far side. Oh, how strange, everything was dark at midday; there were no clouds in the sky and the sun shone in its full force - yet it was dark to her rheumy old eyes and cold to her wrinkled skin.

The pulsing, languid cacophony of cicadas carried through the heavy air. The poignant call of a koel that had been searching for a mate this last seven-night acted as a mournful counterpoint to the noisy insect orchestra. She breathed in slowly, savouring the sweet air, heavy with the eucalyptus that was still occasionally foreign to her nose, even after most of a lifetime.

She was dressed for dinner; be-jewelled and be-ringed as the Lady she was by birth. Her mane of snow white and grey hair, long deserted by the deep wine of her youth strained against its ties as it ever had. On her lap rested a carved box containing her pistols, both expertly cleaned and oiled. Her last instructions were written in her distinctive copperplate on a heavy paper and carefully set within a matching and sealed envelope inside the box that read; The Last Will and Testament of Lady Tisiphone Seymour of Lairn, now of Shadowlands.

It was almost done. There was but one regret; there could only ever be one regret. Of all her eighty-three years, she only wanted ... her eyes filled with tears, one last time. Just those few, few seconds - if she could only have them back. Be damned to that Persian poet of Mister Fitzgerald! If there were anyway that her finger could rewrite those few seconds, then she would do it. No matter the piety, no matter the wit required. She would have paid any price and gladly. She would have taken the ball herself and smiled at the impact. She ran over the event of sixty years before for one last time - one last piece of torment. Perhaps that would count for something on the other side. Her mouth opened slightly as the hooves of the horses sounded down the long halls of her memory, stealing her back to those ever to be mourned few seconds in the moonlit darkness of a night long ago. She didn't know why it always started with the hooves. Perhaps that strange German Doctor Freud she had read about recently could explain it.

Then the shouting and the screaming echoed emptily through her mind, followed by the sudden slowing down of time as she whirled in response to the shouted warning. She felt the reactive movement of her finger on the trigger of her pistol, just as her father the Colonel had taught her.

Memories became mixed and confused as her father's dry and long dead voice echoing in her mind heralded another, separate memory that cut confusingly into her remorseful reminiscence in an almost heretical fashion.

'My huntress,' ever had he called her that, 'if ever you get into a real fix, everything will move so fast you won't have time to do any of the fancy aiming you've practiced. That sort of thing is all very well for firing at wads and cards in the clubs or our garden, but not in a real bang-up.' She could see him shaking his head at her as if it were yesterday, his enormous red moustaches swinging with the movement of his head. 'No girl, the moment the barrel of whatever you have crosses your target, pull you that trigger as quick as you can.' Then he had made her practice it over and over again.

The sound of the hooves returned, hammering a staccato tattoo on her mind as she came back to her original memory and completed the tragic turn. Her raised and swinging pistol barrel moved across the dark figure that had ridden up behind her, calling for her to drop her weapon in the name of the King. Her finger moved quickly and a double report sounded - just as she saw the recognition further illuminating his torch-lit eyes; just as her beloved Captain lowered his own pistol, refusing to shoot her as she deserved. Just before she recognised him - too late.

She watched him fall, the reflected lamplight in his eyes dimming as his heart collapsed from the ball of her pistol that had torn through it. She knew immediately what had happened. He had recognised her profile through the mask, or perhaps her hair, just as she turned. It was his famous gallantry, not the shock of recognising her that stopped him from firing.

One more second; that was all she had needed; just one more second; she would have recognised her love, even in the darkness and her finger would have been stilled, or at least, she would have moved her arm and the ball would have missed him. One more second was too much to ask of this merciless world.

She had rehearsed what she should have done over and over in the early days. Over and over until her sanity nearly deserted her. She had hardly left her bed for months afterwards and her servants had despaired of her ever being cured of the brain fever.

That had been a good thing in one respect; the world had never known what she carried within her. She could not have faced the imprecations of Society for that shame as well as bearing her guilt. It was for that same reason that she had tarried in this grey and unhappy world so long. She had destroyed one love; she could not abandon another, no matter how empty her soul. Her family was all that was left. A Seymour never abandoned responsibility - her father had also taught her that.

Then finally she had found a way of living with herself; a way that would allow her to face the long and lonely years as they slowly slipped by. And it had worked, after a fashion. Now her confession was carefully wrapped in oilskin

after oilskin inside a sealed lead box deep underground. Perhaps it would be found one day and some far, innocent descendant of hers would read of her crime, her guilt – and curse or absolve her.

By then she would be long gone, dust in a cold grave and beyond the reproach of the world. Laudanum and powdered belladonna had taken care of that.

She breathed again, as deeply as she now could, shaking with the effort. She had done all she could. It was time – all her responsibilities were over. Soon she would face the verdict of the Eternities. Would her Captain be waiting for her? Or would he turn from her in disgust as she so richly deserved?

It was all fading, memories of the dim past of her childhood so foreign and far away, memories of her greatest happiness and greatest sadness and the long years of nothing afterwards as the world slowly changed into something that she did not understand. All of it was blending into a fast narrowing, darkening view from the veranda of her home. Down the slope and across the valley and into the hills on the other side. A penetrating icy coldness seemed to sap her strength from her.

She opened her mouth, determined to speak one last time. But she could not make the leap between thought and voice. It would not come for some reason. A cold, stony barrier seemed to separate thought and voice, though she tried manfully. Manfully! She tried laughing at the irony of the word, but couldn't. She tried to speak again and it came out in a voice from her long ago childhood, closer to her than the very present. Duì bù qǐ. (Forgive me)

The memories, the feelings, the sounds and the view, all somehow present in one single sense at the very end, narrowed and focused now to a pinprick, like the iris of one of those new photographic contraptions. Then there was Light and another long task was revealed before her redemption could be found.

Her warrior training would be required in another place and time.

## Chapter 1 2020 AD

Adam's stomach muscles cramped up yet again and his pulse started to hammer as he read the stat-message; then re-read it again. It was a notice from Joan of a special meeting of the Board of The Line to consider 'major new strategic initiatives'; tomorrow morning, eight AM.

Was Joan making her move? And if so, what form would it take? Tiny beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and he began to get the shakes. At least that was what he called it; that was how it felt.

Few people watching him would have noticed the fine, barely evident trembling. Buried deep down inside him it heralded and accompanied a gnawing fear and dread. He had seen too many bad things in years gone by and recent happenings were piling up; just piling up too quickly. He should be stronger than this. He should be able to handle it, but he couldn't. It felt like his whole body was shaking and trembling and he was convinced everyone noticed it.

It had been like this now for months. No matter how hard he tried to control his reaction, it still came like a freezing breath out of some confused and bizarre hell, making him sweat yet shake at the same time, overwhelming him with an uncontrollable, icy fear.

The death of his brother Jason, his sister-in-law Emily and fiancé Sally had been the incident that had finally pushed him over some sort of edge.

He had been hanging by his fingernails ever since. Then the numbers had arrived on their anonymous, diminutive bits of flash-paper. He could feel himself scratching down into a bleak darkness that seemed to gather momentum every day.

He had known that the numbers would come one day, but knowing had not prepared him for them. Now he sought enemies in every darkness and shadow. It wasn't as if he only had himself to protect either; he had to keep his niece, his beloved Tisiphone, safe as well and that severely limited his tactical options. With the final addition of Joan's machinations behind the scenes it was just too much. The precipice now seemed bottomless and his fingernails were breaking, cracking. He saw bleeding scratch-lines down the rough black basalt of the cliff.

Adam looked up at the photograph mounted on his wall as he did when the shakes caught him in his office. Everyone thought that he was mind-crazed to have such an appalling piece professionally framed and hanging on his wall. The creative director and driving force behind one of the most successful advertising agencies in Sydney had an unrecognisable, unbalanced, blurred abortion of slapdash photography in pride of place on his office wall. Even most of those who knew him well thought that it was some grim jest.

Grim it was, but it was not any sort of joke – it originated in another life that the advertising crowd could never understand. That photograph had cost more in blood and horror than any mortal should be expected to pay. He had paid it because he had been young and foolish and thought he was indestructible, but ultimately because he had no other choice at the time.

He continued to look at the photograph and his eyes filled with tears as they so often did nowadays. ‘The dew falls softly...’ his whispered voice faded away, seeing the slashing blade and the blood and the horrified look on...

He jerked abruptly; forcing his mind away from the next image and stood up from his desk, gently touched the photograph, then breathed deeply to get himself under some semblance of control and walked out of his office, convinced the entire world could see his shaking.

‘Jen, I’m just going out for half an hour or so,’ he said hurriedly to his PA, covering his fear with haste. He saw the concern on her face and the trembling increased.

Jenny Chapman had been his personal assistant now for over five years, from almost the very beginning of The Line and she knew him better than anybody. She was tall and slender and would have been ravishingly beautiful in her distant youth. As it was she still had a distinctively delicate face that few missed, though it was her intellect and organisational skills that mattered to Adam.

She had been tremendous when Jason, Emily and Sally had been killed, covering for him when he needed her and helping him to remain standing in the dog-eat-dog world that he had chosen for his second career. He would not have survived without her.

She could also be eminently efficient and ran him like an Italian train timetable under Il Duce when necessary. He sometimes wondered why she wasn’t the one running his side of things – she was certainly tougher mentally and probably smarter than he.

She was the classic PA; very, very bright, but from a family background that had not regarded University as even a consideration; otherwise she would be heading up some company by now or leading scientific research somewhere. Her life had fallen apart many years ago after the death of her son in a senseless drive-by shooting and as a result, she had slumped into years of prescription drugs and alcohol abuse before starting to conquer the demons gnawing at her. At interview, Adam had seen her potential; her determination to overcome her tragedy and he had immediately employed her to the surprise of many. They were the same in one way; both had seen horrible death and were seeking to overcome the effects of a past they didn’t want others to know about. She was searching for redemption and he - well he still didn’t know what he was seeking.

He made it out of the office and to the lift before any of the other partners spotted him. A thick red stripe went around the walls of the foyer, proclaiming to anybody who knew anything about advertising in Australia and increasingly the world, whose offices they were - The Line, largely the creation of one Adam Seymour. A few moments later the doors of the lift shut and he was alone and unreachable, his embed, with its multiplicity of communication and processing devices sitting on its recharging pad on his desk and no red lines around. There were only the restricting lines of mental force that somehow kept his mind together; and they were colourless shadows, not easily discerned. They accompanied him wherever he went, as binding as chains or steel cables. But they were slowly breaking down.

It didn't seem to matter whether it was a stat, a conversation or a voice call, if it was one of those sorts of communications about the power struggle in The Line, it set him off. It was the content, not the medium. His mind had started to dread any sort of communication with his partners, Joan in particular.

They were pushing him towards an action, a choice that he did not want to make. An action and a choice that he knew was inevitable since the numbers had come; an action that he would already have undertaken if he had been in his right mind and not like a certain Danish Prince. He'd paid attention to his English teacher in High School.

The lift had almost reached street level and he undid the black leather ribbon with its silvered ends holding his long dark hair back, shaking it around his face. He hated his hair hanging free; but it served its purpose well. In addition to driving him mad, bothering his face and getting in his eyes, it made him resemble Aragorn out of the old cult classic flat screen Lord of The Rings triptych. That and the light, pointed beard he affected.

People didn't look beyond the hair and the beard to see what he would have looked like with short back and sides. It was a simple and very useful disguise and worth any inconvenience. It also fitted in with what people expected of creative directors or advertising people in general. With his lean six foot two of height, most disguises wouldn't work at all, so a bit of added misdirection and pandering to stereotypes was useful.

As long as people saw what they wanted to see, they didn't realise what was actually there. Purpose accomplished. His hair in place, or rather out of place, he walked out through the extensive foyer and into Berry Street, ignoring the sign with the red stripe on it. Quickly he scanned for signal marks, but there were none, thank God. He breathed more freely and turned towards the harbour, walking on automatic, eyes mechanically shifting around everywhere, evaluating threats.

He was convinced that Joan had noticed his condition as well and her approach had been to hammer him with more work and problems, particularly of the sort he dreaded.

She knew that he was the only one who could stop her and she had launched attack after attack against him before he had even noticed what had begun to happen. She had hit him at his most vulnerable; straight after the death of his brother, sister-in-law and fiancé. Yet again, he mentally shifted away from what he did not want to face. He could not face the accident again; that would come later at night, along with a crowd of other flapping, cawing black crows of inescapable memories.

He was now under the Harbour Bridge, roaring with its traffic, and heading for the edge of the Harbour. The Opera House positively shone in the harsh summer sun and the water sparkled in shifting points of harsh, unsympathetic light. Government House stood in the background with Prince Harry's Standard flying proudly with an almost palpable power, symbolic of the way the world had changed over the last years.

His mind flickered briefly to the poor bastards trying to survive in most of Europe, Russia, China and Central and South America; the disorder and lawlessness and terror tearing their societies and lives apart. At least the population did not have to deal with that in Australia, though God only knew why they were spared.

It always helped, standing at the edge of the Harbour and looking at the view. He seemed to see a red line for just a moment on the shimmering hot snow of the sails of the old Opera House. He blinked several times and it was gone.

His gaze wandered across to Circular Quay, tracked back to the left to the idiotic buildings that had been built between the Quay and the Opera House before the turn of the century so many years ago and lingered on the famous white sails again, seeming metaphors for the freedom from the Darkness and Shadow that now hung over so much of the world. No red line. A large sloop, sails lashed down, motored by with half a dozen carefree people lounging on its decks. Some of them waved mindlessly in his direction. He did not return their waves.

Sitting on a low wall that had been constructed beside the Harbour-shore path, he wished he were on the sloop himself, waving mindlessly at strangers. A Royal Australian Navy destroyer was being nudged into the docks at Garden Island and he wondered what Governor Philip would have thought about such a ship in his harbour. She was one of the old tricked-up Aegis destroyers, so deceptive in her clean, almost unarmed lines. He saw her hull number, recognising her as an old friend as the tugs brought her around. It was HMAS Sydney herself, proudly flying the Australian White Ensign under the new British Commonwealth flag with the gold-crowned, red, rampant lion holding the golden sword Excalibur, glittering in the sunshine. Other golden lions and many Runes were also on the hull and superstructure, as they were on so many things nowadays.

The Sydney was as disingenuous as Joan; just a glimpse of a few minor weapons on the outside, hiding the leashed merciless cyclone of controlled destruction inside.

His mind was torn back to the reverberating crack of five inch rifles as she and several of her smaller cousins cruised the gun line, the shells tearing through the fabric of the sky, ripping reality apart before landing in shuddering crumps and the crack-crack-crack of sub-munitions ahead of him. Incoming! Incoming! Danger close! He remembered the cries. He owed the old lady and wished her well in her recently resurrected life. He silently saluted her.

His gaze moved to the solitary sandstone sentinel that was Fort Denison, still guarding the Harbour after so long against a Russian threat which had never materialised, and then to the north towards the out of sight Heads, thinking of the heights of North Head, wondering for a moment what it would be like to throw himself off. For just a few, precious moments there would be an incomparable feeling of careless freedom, an emptiness of conflict, a soaring freedom. Then nothing.

He imagined standing on the precipice, going up on his toes, raising his arms like an Olympic diver and pushing off. He would arch his chest and throw his arms back, leaving this world in as graceful a manner as was possible. It would be much more satisfactory than overdosing on something from a chemist and far more romantic. Well, he was creative director of one of the most successful new advertising agencies in Australia; he was supposed to be romantic! The sardonic thought echoed briefly in his mind.

Three things brought him back from the metaphoric precipice on the headland; his niece Tisiphone, a framed photograph in his office, and somewhere behind those images hovered a sepia picture of a severe and powerful great-great something aunt, also named Tisiphone, frowning at his self-indulgence, his cowardice - a Seymour taking the easy way? Turning his back on his responsibilities? He was anchored to the here and now, no matter what he thought or dreamed or imagined. Those three things bound him to this place and time. There was no easy way for him. Neither should there be. He would face each threat, one by one, somehow - trembling, inchoate fear or not.

He shook his head again, breathing deeply, emptying his mind of all thought. He closed his eyes, allowing the sea breeze to wash over him; the rumbling of a train mingled with the incessant traffic going over the bridge and the scattered conversations of passers-by. It was all blending into a deep resonating buzz, like the cicadas pulsing in their chattering chorus somewhere out in the bush. Out near Sandringham where the family property still waited for the return of the Seymours to the seat of their Power in this harsh, wide and empty land.

'Hey Adam, Adam Seymour - how're you doing?' came a voice from his right hand side.

Adam's eyes flew open and he saw the enormous form of John de Angelo bearing down on him. He stifled a groan at the interruption. Nice bloke, in fact a really nice bloke that Adam respected for his professionalism and his ethics – he could just be a little overpowering on occasions. A ferry flying the shining Commonwealth banner let off a blast from its siren as if to announce the garishly dressed giant's arrival. A smile formed in Adam's mind. John was as real as they came. He had honour and he had integrity; neither a very common characteristic within ten miles of where they were at the moment. The moment, it was all about the moment.

John was well over six feet tall and had never heard the word exercise in his life, so what he was doing walking along the foreshore of the Harbour at three in the afternoon was anyone's guess. As usual, his large, overweight form seemed to be more interested in squeezing itself out of the suit it was wearing than being covered.

John's pale yellow shirt was half untucked, showing a part of his expansive belly and his burgundy suit jacket strained around his chest, barely holding its stitches together. His dark blue, white polka-dotted tie fluttered in the sea breeze like a scarf worn by an old World-War One fighter pilot - Biggles forever.

'Yeah, I'm okay John - how about you?' Adam replied, his mind somehow connecting itself with whatever part of it handled day-to-day conversation with old friends. But his response did not sound all that certain, even to himself.

'Good, good,' John said quickly, as equally unconvincing in his own way, plonking his corpulent form alongside Adam on the wall. John was distracted, Adam could tell. Something was up; John the giant never hid his emotions – he didn't know how. That would have required cunning and skulduggery and other similar skills that John had never developed.

Adam wasn't sure how it was possible that dead silence could occur nearly under the Sydney Harbour Bridge with all its moaning traffic and rattling trains, but that was exactly what appeared to happen when John de Angelo sat next to him. Adam craned his neck and fixed his gaze on the massive Commonwealth banner flying above the bridge, between the Australian and New South Wales flags. The silence dragged on.

'My job's gone,' John said eventually, 'wasn't watching one too many times.'

Adam turned to look at his friend. 'What do you mean, it's gone?' he asked incredulously, breaking out of his laconic semi-slumber. 'You're one of the best around!'

John de Angelo was the finest business strategist that Adam knew. He seemed to have a natural knack for knowing exactly what to do and when to do it. And his people loved him.

'Yeah, well that doesn't matter when you lose the game now, does it?' There was something else mixed with the bitterness. Adam couldn't quite figure it out. It couldn't be relief, but if it wasn't, then it was something much akin to it.

'I'm really sorry to hear that, mate; the people at ELC must be fools to let you go. But what happened?' Adam asked, curiosity merged with concern, with a dash of anger for his friend thrown into the mix as a burning spice.

John gave an almighty sigh and rolled his eyes, 'look Adam, I don't want to go into it, I've been over it a thousand times in my mind already - another time and I'll scream. Just leave it as "I was outmanoeuvred by someone who played the system better than me". Not that I ever played the system anyway.'

John's avoirdupois form just sat slumped next to Adam in evident dejection. Adam was disturbed and troubled. Not so much at John's words; it was his attitude. John was the original Mr Positive usually, not the fake and forced multilevel marketing promotional sort of bloke; just generally positive and upbeat. Adam was about to try to say something comforting, to ask what he could do when the wind was taken out of his sails completely.

'Sorry to hear about your problems too,' said John matter-of-factly. The hairs went up on the back of Adam's neck and ice formed in his belly. His eyes started to flick around, looking for threats, people standing in strange places and positions, people moving towards him, shadows or darkness where there shouldn't be such things - anything that would set his alarms off. Time had not dimmed his training, nor his experience - just stored it away temporarily.

His hand moved towards the not-pen in his pocket, caressing it in a smooth and ready manner. But there had not been any further numbers sent, no chalked signs, no warnings at all. Had the warning system failed? Was he on his own? He reasserted control, hammering the shaking down. It was not for him that he was frightened; it was for Tisiphone. If they got him, she would be next.

But there was nothing; he was reacting foolishly. Something might be wrong, but it wasn't that. The information about a threat, such as it was, came from John alone - and all he doing was sitting - slumped, looking at the Harbour.

'Huh?' asked Adam eventually, 'what problems?'

John turned in surprise, 'what do you mean? You know, negotiating to sell The Line...' said John.

Adam's mind went blank. He had assumed that John had stumbled upon..., but now it appeared to be something completely different - something more mundane, but no less threatening. Adam wondered when the sharks would stop circling; too many more and he would not be able to handle them. Then he would be deep into the darkness, the true-night of the orcs.

'John, what have you heard?' Adam asked simply.

It was John's turn to be troubled as he realised that something was very wrong; either Adam had no idea of what was going on or it was meant to be secret and he shouldn't know anything about it. John knew too many people in North Sydney and he seemed to have picked up on something he shouldn't know. But Adam's reaction also confirmed another rumour that he had heard and immediately discounted; that the great Adam Seymour, who had turned the advertising business in Australia on its head, was losing it.

John straightened up and looked directly at Adam.

'Adam, mate. I heard a rumour that The Line was in negotiations with Johnson, Smith and Charles for a merger. It was so off the planet that I assumed it was another one of your wild strategies that was going to set fire to the industry again - I mean with that sized agency there's nothing that you couldn't do!'

No, there wasn't, thought Adam as a great many things fell into place, especially the stat from Joan that had arrived earlier in the day announcing the board meeting early tomorrow morning. He also knew about the series of mysterious board meetings to which he had not been invited - his Intelligence was not completely lacking. The last piece of the puzzle fell into place and he suspected that the decision that he should already have taken had been made for him. The next few days would tell.

The timing was not perfect; Joel Bernstein wouldn't be in a position to talk for a week, but it was good enough. You jumped into battle with what you had, making the best of it and improvising as you went; you couldn't wait for everything to be perfect - it never happened.

Adam nodded his head, 'thanks John, a lot of things make sense now mate, a lot of things.'

John cocked his head to one side, feeling sick to the stomach. 'You didn't know, did you? They're doing the dirty on you, aren't they?'

Adam stared at a point somewhere out in the blue of the Harbour; cars groaning overhead and trains roaring like the lions of the Serengeti.

'Well, we make a bright pair, don't we?' Adam laughed.

'Yeah, prize galahs,' answered John as morose as when he had sat down.

Silence ruled for seconds that seemed to be minutes.

'What are you going to do now?' Adam asked finally.

John heaved himself up and smiled and this time the relief was there, clear to see on his face and hear in his voice.

'I'm gone, mate - out the front door. Chucking it all in. Hanging it all up. Fifteen years and six launches are enough for me.'

'You're going to resign? Where will you go?' Adam asked.

John just stared at him for a few seconds.

'I'm off to the big Blues, mate. I've a lot of investments and cash lying around and I'm getting out. Going to live in my retreat, sell the city place or maybe rent it out and never be seen again. I've had enough glory, mate, enough for a lifetime. Might do something on the Internet eventually, who knows?'

‘That’s a waste of a great talent, John,’ Adam said seriously. But deep in his mind, Adam could see the attraction – the same pull had been dragging at him for months. His mind went far away for a moment, across John’s Blue Mountains to the fastness of his old family holdings on the other side of that next to impenetrable barrier, even now being prepared for his last stand - the last redoubt against the Darkness; the last stand of the Seymours at the seat of their Power in this great ochre land. A feral snarl rose in his throat.

‘Is it? I’m sick of the scene mate, have been for a while. You’ve seen it too Adam. You know what I mean,’ John replied quietly

‘Yeah, I suppose I have at that and a lot more too,’ Adam muttered, voicing his thoughts on the matter for the first time.

‘Yeah, and it’s the “lot more” that worries me too, mate. Too many weird things happening around the world lately,’ John observed, his eyes saying more than his words.

Adam’s eyes met John’s swiftly. Wondering how much John knew of that subject. He shouldn’t know too much, but so many things had happened that some sensitive people were starting to become... uneasy. Adam deliberately looked away from the banners of the Commonwealth and the Royal Standards that flapped protectively in so many places. The time was fast coming when it would be out in the open though. Something was holding it all back but it couldn’t last forever.

You could only fight so many battles in secret.

‘I... understand why the Blue Mountains would be attractive. They are... clean and free from Shadows,’ Adam said quietly. ‘Full of peacefulness,’ he added wistfully.

‘What about you, mate?’ asked John, changing the subject.

‘Me? I’ve a couple of battles to fight. Thought those days were over – I was wrong. We’ll have to see if the old war horse has anything left.’ Adam added with a humourless smile on his face, standing as he realised that the soft, clean interlude was over.

They agreed to keep each other informed about what was happening and went their separate ways.

‘Say hi to Tis for me,’ John shouted as Adam walked away.

Adam waved in acknowledgement as he walked off, wondering about the probability of such a meeting taking place at that precise time. Two friends working in different buildings the best part of a kilometre apart decide to take a walk that intersected each other’s path at the same time. Both had similar stories to relate, both exchanged key information with each other. Probability and chaos maths at work, butterfly wings beating in a strange and measured cotillion of coincidence and symmetry.

There is no chaos, just unrecognised patterns, thought Adam as he walked.

He re-examined the situation again; two friends whose careers also intersected in a profoundly similar manner. There was more than enough similarity for Adam to consider John’s reaction to what he faced and compare it to his own. Adam had chosen to fight; John had chosen to quietly walk away. There was a certain cool nobility to what John was doing, a certain symmetrical counterweight to Adam’s own actions, perhaps each one side of some mystical whole.

But in the end it was the same; both would be gone from something they had loved and put much of their heart into over many years.

John would shine in the minds of those who remembered him, the ones that mattered. And then he would pass into the realm of faint-remembered company legend; that was the way of the world with heroes, especially real ones like John de Angelo. Hang a few medals on someone and then pull the rug out from under them.

Adam knew all about that particular process.

As he walked under the Harbour Bridge back to the agency, he knew that something had changed. John had given him a gift, a priceless gift.

He was no longer afraid. Well, maybe he could face the fear a little more easily. The shakes were still there, but he didn't mind them as much anymore.

John had shown him the power that a simple, clean decision presented.

Adam had known what he had to do for months, over a year in fact; he had planned and readied many things for it, but had lacked the courage to take the big plunge, consumed by the darkness that ate at him from within.

Maybe things had changed.

Maybe a faint light was shining through.

Back at the foreshore of the Harbour, John de Angelo watched Adam as he slowly walked away, back to the pitiless jungle through which he had stalked so successfully for so long. He gave a small, mock salute, whispering, 'take the bastards on mate, straight into their line of fire - you've done it before against impossible odds. God Speed you Colonel, just like the last time, take the bastards down. Not everyone's forgotten or blind, you know.'

He smiled faintly for a moment then he turned away, a smile on his face, the clean Blue Mountains and freedom on his mind.

No one knew that the Australian Prime Minister and a highly secretive Brigadier Roger Howe in charge of certain... highly unusual operations were ensconced in the Hotel Westin in Sydney. No one knew that the American Ambassador, Prince Harry and a supposedly retired American Special Forces colonel had come to the Prime Minister's suite for a meeting that would have world-wide implications.

Arcane Powers were active and an indomitable, nonpareil of hidden Power was about to awake and shake the world and none in the room had more than the faintest inkling of the repercussions. Nor were they aware of the battle about to be fought on Australian soil within months; a battle that would be won in the most part by a sixteen year old girl and create a legend.

'So it is true? There have been almost no manifestations of the Dærkness and Shædow on Australian soil over these last fifteen or more years?' asked the American ambassador.

'No, and none in New Zealand either,' answered the Australian Prime Minister.

'And why would that be?' asked Colonel Joel Bernstein, 'the presence of His Royal Highness and the Royal Writ?'

After a moment's uncomfortable silence, the American Ambassador apologised for his gruff Colonel, pleading his status as a fighting man of many years standing.

'I suspect that may have some role to play in the matter, and we know that such manifestations are far fewer in Great Britain and other countries where the Blood Royale holds sway than other places; but there has to be more to it in the case of Australia and New Zealand,' replied Prince Harry, veteran combat officer that he was and used to brusque combat types such as Colonel Bernstein. 'But there seems to be some other... reason why the Dærkness and Shædow eschews Australia at least.'

'And what role does this... individual that we are here to discuss play in the matter?' asked the Prime Minister in some distaste. She had been a relatively minor minister when the man in question had... done certain things and raised the ire of so many.

'Colonel Bernstein has great experience in gathering Intelligence about the Dærkness and Shædow and he feels that this man is some sort of focus. We seek your assistance in making contact with him and maintaining... surveillance and possibly support for him. I should also add that Colonel Bernstein has the ear of the President, especially in these matters,' said the American ambassador.

The Prime Minister was not impressed with the last statement, feeling somewhat threatened but considered the request and gave her consent reluctantly. The man was a magnet for trouble and she didn't want her Prime Ministership damaged as others before her had been as a result of the failure to deal with this man properly. The public loved him, even if he had been a recluse for a decade, and if it got out that she had not helped him when he needed it, she would go the same way of her predecessors.

The Americans paid their respects, leaving Prince Harry and the two Australians alone.

'He is watched and supported? Unofficially, of course?' asked the Prime Minister.

'Yes, Prime Minister. Warnings have been sent and more will go. We have made arrangement for Royal Lithgow Arms Rune-enhanced weapons altered by skilled Rune-Mages to be delivered to him,' advised Brigadier Howe.

'Has this taken away from the development and implementation of melding The Power and conventional technology?' asked the Prime Minister.

'Not really; it is an extension of what is already being done with older weapons and part of the research. In any case, it took advantage of the new automatic micro-rune enhancement pioneered by the British,' the Brigadier said with a nod towards the Prince. 'Good practice for our people.'

Prince Harry nodded with approval and the Prime Minister grimaced. She did not like the methods of the subject of their discussions, but she knew her duty.

'I'd like to make arrangements for some of our own anti-Dærkness and anti-Shædow units to watch this Colonel Bernstein and back up Lieutenant Colonel Adam Seymour of The Three,' requested the Brigadier.

The Prime Minister started at the title given the man, terrified that he would once more surface publicly, but saw the logic. She also knew his popularity within the Australian Armed Forces.

'Do it - and try to find some way of making him accept at least one of his VCs,' she instructed. 'That at least should make the people happy.'

Prince Harry gave a smile that the Prime Minister totally mistook for approval of her political chicanery. His smile was, however, for the honour of the well-earned awards finally going where it should have gone long ago.

‘I knew there was a reason for having a son,’ the Prince said acidly. ‘It will give young Edward something to do other than to hide out in his barracks away from the media.’

## Lady Of The Shadows – Chapter 2

There was the red stripe on the wall of the foyer, stretching right across the sign that read simply; The Line. No explanation, no description of what it meant. No statement that The Line was an advertising agency. It didn't need any description or explanation. Those who did not know what it was or what it meant did not matter. Certainly there was arrogance implicit in its simplicity and the lack of explanation; but it was an earned arrogance; arrogance paid for in sweat and effort and unbending integrity.

He had been disgracefully proud of the name and the symbol once. He could remember the meeting where he had simply stood up and announced what the name of the agency would be and why it should be so. No silly list of surnames or letters like so many other agencies. Just - The Line, with the red stripe as its symbol or logo.

He remembered talking about what The Line should stand for; not some theoretical company vision, but a reality. He recalled the hesitant acceptance on the faces of the partners and later on the people that worked for The Line in its infancy. Then afterwards the expressions changed to pride as time and integrity gave meaning and truth to the words and the symbol. That was the point when it all came together.

Then he was back in his real and painful life and ascending to the twenty-first floor as though he had never left. The lift was the same and so was the foyer. Nothing had changed during his absence; which meant that the trouble was still there. Had he truly thought it would be gone by the time he returned? Was that not the nature of such things?

There would be little sleep tonight, then. So, what was new?

He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. Jen was mercifully away from her desk, so he went into his office, sat and tried to get organised. Thinking and analysis seemed to come slowly. It was another of the signs - probably the one that he hated the most as it unmanned him, taking his very life, or what was central to his life, from him.

It was almost fifteen minutes before he was able to get his thinking straight. It was a mammoth effort and he was sweating at the end. But it worked and he was reasonably on track. He looked at what was on his desk; three new creative briefs from clients and four folders containing first thoughts on briefs that he had seen previously from his creative teams. He started on the first run-through. At least he was on familiar and confident ground.

He quickly critiqued three of the folders, finding nothing special in the first two, but the last had something. There was a flash, a glimpse of something that might be brilliance from one of the new people. It might be hot, if it were developed and extended - yes, the beauty and attraction were there. It connected!

He was now in his element and the worries were suddenly gone and along with them the shakes. It was like being in the middle of an LSD trip, the type that he had read about as popular in the nineteen sixties, if that fabled long ago

time ever actually existed outside of Bob Dillon and Joni Mitchell songs. Everything was moving slowly, yet having an absolute focus and fascination for whatever was the centre of attention.

‘Adam, Adam! I’m going now. See you in the morning,’ Jen said suddenly, poking her head around the corner.

He tore his eyes, his mind and his spirit away from the maelstrom of whirling images, thoughts and concepts that had engulfed and enthralled him.

‘Sorry, Jen - I was just in the middle of something. What time is it?’

Jen shook her head at him in disapproval, ‘after seven, Adam - well after seven. Say hello to Tis for me?’

Then she was gone to wherever it was she disappeared to when she wasn’t at work. He sometimes thought that there was an opening to another dimension nearby that Jen simply stepped into at night when it was time for her to go. Of course she always stepped out of it again, ready for work the next morning, usually before he arrived.

He shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He wasn’t sure if LSD was addictive, but the sort of stuff that was work for him certainly was. He fought the pull to go back into the swirling creativity on his desk and started to pack up. Eventually, he gave up and left it all where it was and went, taking the lift to the basement car park.

The other partners laughed at his current choice of car, but he just couldn’t give a damn. Since his car had been a total write-off when Sal, Em and Jason had been killed, he had never seemed to get around to buying a replacement. The bug had been Sal’s and he felt closer to her when he drove it. Besides, he liked it in a perverse sort of way; it had character to him. The rest of the partners all drove BMW’s, Jaguars or Porches. He drove the old restored Volkswagen beetle. He even kept the fake pink flower in its holder on the dashboard. They could all take their modern machines; he would stick to the VW. Well, until the next phase of the great plan kicked in. The vehicle he had ordered required certain... characteristics that the trusty VW didn’t have and couldn’t be altered to acquire.

He carefully put his mind into ‘go home, it’s late at night’ mode and started to mull over his problems, considering them one by one as his unconscious mind handled the driving. He reviewed the complex actions that he had taken and started in reaction to the number warnings that had come to him, but they did not seem to be enough. The counter plan was moving, the construction side virtually finished. It was just The Line and the problems there that were holding him back.

All he could see were problems.

There were no simple, happy things in his life at the moment - just seemingly insurmountable peaks of difficulty and bottomless gullies of gut-wrenching irrational fear. Even Tis had ceased to be a source of gladness to him. His guilt and the difficulty that she had dealing with her loss had built a wall between them.

The trip from the office at North Sydney to the Seymour family home in Wollstonecraft took less than fifteen minutes. He pulled into the broad, camphor laurel covered and now darkened street and then into his driveway, the VW's tires crunching the compacted blue metal stones together in the familiar heraldic grinding of his homecoming.

The sandstone Federation bungalow that had been in his family for generations being originally intended as a home for town visits. It veritably shone in the night, reflecting the glow of the exterior lighting, which also illuminated the carefully tended gardens around it. The golden sandstone of the walls seemed to exude the warmth that he remembered from his boyhood days. He would come home from school on cold days; see the welcome warmth of his home and a warm feeling inside him would appear as if by magic. He was closely attached to the place and didn't want to leave it, even temporarily.

He quickly glanced at the flag pole in the front garden and was irritated to see the Australian flag and the new Flag of the Commonwealth still flying. He walked over and carefully hauled them both down, making sure that they did not touch the ground. During his boyhood, no one bothered with flying flags and certainly didn't worry about the Commonwealth flag. Most people in those days wouldn't even have realised that the Commonwealth had a flag, or cared less.

All that had changed when King Charles, had been killed in a Muslim terrorist blast and his eldest son William ascended the throne with a coronation in still unexplained and puzzling circumstances, taking the regnal name Arthur.

Lights were on all over the house, left on with typical teenage abandon.

Tisiphone certainly left her mark wherever she went. Hadn't he done the same when he was her age? Shut the door, were you raised in a tent? His father would ask. There came another twinge of sadness - too many deaths of loved ones lately and of friends and strangers long ago. It all added up in a hateful arithmetic.

'Hey Tis, I'm home!' he shouted out hopefully as he opened the front door.

'Hey Adam, you're late. Jules has just gone home.' His titian-haired sixteen-year-old niece said as she wandered around the corner of the room, out of the kitchen. She had inherited the trademark titian Seymour colouring and height in spades, while he had thrown to the dark Celtic alternative genetic imperative. As usual, her hair was a red fury, like her namesake. Her pale skin, with a dusting of slowly clearing freckles and her green eyes atop high cheekbones announced a coming beauty that would rival that of her aunt's within a few years.

It was a pity that the incipient beauty of her appearance didn't make it into the empty and dry tone of her voice. He tried an upbeat approach to lighten things up.

'Tisiphone Seymour, have you and Juliet Sommers been trying to bring down the entire Sydney Metropolitan area's electricity grid? Is there a room that the two of you haven't been inside and lit up like Christmas?' he asked, trying to look stern and forbidding.

'Oh don't be a sog, Uncle Adam. Anyway, I've cooked tea, so you shouldn't complain,' she said before poking her tongue out at him and going back into the kitchen.

He knew things weren't good the moment that she called him Uncle. He wasn't sure about the sog thing though – it certainly didn't sound good.

There had been a time when she would have said something like that with a twinkle in her eye and he would have heard a giggle as she turned away, taking the sting away from the tongue.

But not now - she was empty now.

Anyway, what the hell was a sog? Adam sighed, it certainly didn't sound cool, whatever it was. He wondered why anybody bothered with dictionaries anymore – the rate at which Tis and her generation were changing the language, most dictionaries would be redundant in a few years. He wondered if he could work sog into the copy for one of the teenage-related products that The Line represented? He'd better find out what it really meant before he did. Still, he would like to see the look on the faces of some of the young copywriters when he nonchalantly slipped it into an advertisement somewhere. 'Don't be a sog! Drink...' He sighed and reminded himself to keep away from copywriting – it was not his forte.

At that moment, there was a skittering noise on the dark green slate floor and he was suddenly surrounded by a joyful leap of whippets. Tails wagging fast and hard enough to sting, the two lean dogs stirred up a storm around his feet. Reaching down he patted them both and they sat, tails tucked under their arched stomachs, their rose-petal ears raised expectantly. Megaera and Alecta, the other two Furies. Jason had not been impressed at the names, but he hadn't lived here at that time.

'Yeah, yeah. Food will be on in a moment, you two desperadoes.'

He took a deep breath and went into his bedroom to change. The whippets followed him, concerned that he, or rather their food-source, was about to disappear again.

He went past Jason and Emily's bedroom, the master bedroom. He still occupied his own bedroom, the one that had been his when he was a boy. He had moved out of the main one when Jason, Emily and Tisiphone had moved in over a year ago, never thinking where it would all end. He couldn't face moving back.

Not yet.

Then there was Sally's death in the same...accident. He still hadn't even come close to reconciling his loss in one single tragedy; his older brother, his sister-in-law and his girlfriend – all three gone in one night, gone when he should have been killed as well. But he had been thrown clear, rolling automatically as he had been trained and done a thousand times. He had hardly a scratch to show for it.

'Take care of Tis, boy.' Those had been his brother's last words. Despite his med training and experience there had been nothing he could do for any of them.

Tis was in Jason's old room; the one Jase used when he was a boy. He wasn't sure how she felt about that; it was probably okay, as she had stayed there since they moved in when her parents had been alive.

Adam and Tis had always been close. He had doted on her as his only niece and her personification of the classic Seymour looks, so much like his beloved aunt, had only made it easier. But that ended with the car accident. He resisted running through the whole, horrible chain of events again, knowing that he was only putting off the inevitable. He would be drawn inexorably into the nightmare again before the night was out. But he would leave that for later, when the darkness and the guilt and the loneliness closed in on him.

He could hear Tisiphone calling and he shouted something about her very own personal sog coming in a moment. His response was greeted with a snort or some other incomprehensible teenage girl rejoinder. How he was ever going to be able to bring her up he had no idea. Such a thing had never figured in his plans or even vague thoughts of his future.

He washed his face in cold water in the en-suite in an effort to brighten himself up before heading for the kitchen. It failed miserably, but he flicked some water at the two-dog pack following his every move and received several reproachful looks. Free board, free food, free medical attention; they could put up with a bit of teasing every now and then. But he rubbed their heads to make up for it anyway.

‘So what did you get up to in school today?’ he asked hopefully. They were sitting around the cedar table in the kitchen, eating slightly burnt Tisiphone-cooked pasta. Tisiphone-cooked pasta was better than Adam-cooked pasta, burnt or not. Actually, Tisiphone-cooked anything was better than Adam-cooked anything, including boiled water.

‘The usual dok,’ she replied vaguely.

There was also a good share of eye rolling accompanying the empty words and empty tone. He was also left trying to figure out dok. He thought it was the equivalent of crap, but knows?

He was supposed to be the Creative Director of one of the most successful advertising agencies in Sydney, an expert in communication, and he couldn’t figure out a way to connect with his teenage niece most of the time. Great.

‘All right, what subjects did you have on today?’

Twin green eye-cannons framed in red hair held his for a moment, contempt undisguised in their depths.

‘The usual dok,’ she repeated, sand in her voice.

There was the emptiness again. He started to tug at his hair. Tisiphone gave him a disapproving frown. Correction – she gave him a deeper and more disapproving frown than the one she had worn from the moment he had come home.

The kitchen table was a great heavy thing built out of solid old cedar from up north around the Clarence River and had been at the old Seymour homestead, Shadowlands, before coming here. Adam felt one with it as he tousled the head of one of the whippets sitting at his feet, an eternal optimist waiting for food to fall into her teeth.

Noting his movement to give the dogs a titbit Tisiphone finally spoke of her own volition.

'Adam, you are a complete sog! Daddy would...' Tisiphone bit her teeth, thinking that she had crossed a line. Adam just reached out with his hand, touching hers.

'I know Tis, I know.'

They sat in silence after that and ate as quickly as they could. A dark gulf lay not only between the two of them, but around them. It seemed to close in on them without warning at times, almost asphyxiating them with its emptiness, its nothingness. Like a quantum vacuum lacking even the peripatetic virtual particles that supposedly bounced in and out of empty space. Neither of them could see any way out of the barrenness and blackness. They couldn't even cling together, sharing the small pinprick of light allotted to each of them.

It was like this most nights, but this one was worse for some reason.

'You want to go up to the beach house on Saturday?' he asked eventually.

She looked at him intensely; 'things bad at The Line again?' she asked.

'No, I mean - how did you know?' he asked brokenly. That was one thing he tried to protect her from. He didn't want to share his worries about work with her.

'Adam! Every time we go up to the beach house, you're having a bad time at The Line. Those nasty people of yours are doing bad things again, aren't they?' Again those green eyes of hers bored into his, so much like her aunt's. This time they were not showing any contempt.

So much for protecting his charge - so much for keeping the unpleasant things away from her - he should take up lecturing on how to bring up traumatised children. The self-addressed sarcasm bit into him. When he took over guardianship of Tisiphone under the terms of his brother's and sister-in-law's wills he knew it was going to be tough, but the months and months of continuously trying to deal with an almost-woman who was smarter than he was and twice as stubborn and wilful was taking its toll. Especially as he was also traumatised and mentally wracked by his past and loaded with guilt by a triple death for which he still insistently demanded blame.

'I'm sorry you've guessed that Tis - I really should keep you out of it all,' he said, trying to sound wise and protective.

'Oh stop it Uncle Adam! I know all about it. It's been getting worse and worse for months. Everybody at The Line knows about it and they're almost all on your side. What are you going to do?' She demanded.

A vision of John de Angelo, walking out of his job into the uncharted mists of the future came to mind - a seductive undertow that threatened to suck him down into its depths.

'I was one of the four founders of The Line; people look to me for leadership - to take the correct position for the success of the company. I can't really do anything drastic,' he stated firmly.

It was weird how defensive his voice sounded, even to him, especially as he was planning something very drastic indeed. But now was not the time to signal that. The longer that he could put off the final step, the longer Tis could enjoy her childhood.

'Adam, The Line started with real humanitarian principles of operation.' Tisiphone had obviously been listening to her sociology teacher - or maybe she had really listened when he told her about it years ago.

'But the others have become greedy. Everybody knows that. Especially the new one; Number Five they call her, you know.' Her eyebrows were raised, challenging him to deny what she said.

He did not challenge her words; he knew that they were accurate, even down to the nickname by which Joan was known. Something more concerned him.

'Tisiphone, who have you been talking to?' He saw in her eyes and her body language that she had been talking to someone at the Agency. He had already guessed the identity of her informant.

'I'm not telling you to whom I have been talking, Uncle,' she replied pointedly correcting his grammar. 'It doesn't matter anyway. What I said was true, that's what matters.' She was defiant and he wasn't going to push it. It would have been a waste of time anyway.

'True or not, I don't like it when my niece is told things that upset her,' he said firmly.

Her mouth set in that thin line that mimicked her great aunt's expression perfectly. The tone of her voice warned him that she was also as dangerous as both his mother and his aunt when irritated. His chin lifted as he saw so much of his aunt Tisiphone in her and probably a long line of Seymour females behind her, many of them named Tisiphone. It was something about the line of her nose and the expression on her face that recalled her, as well as the hair of course. Tisiphone was another one not to be pushed around, a positive thing so far as life-skills were concerned – he just wished that she wouldn't use it on him so often.

'Adam, you don't see things that are straight in front of your eyes. You are extremely talented in your area, but outside of it you sometimes need shepherding,' she lectured.

He almost gasped at the adult tones and arguments she was now employing. He suspected that she was repeating things she had overheard her father say; Jase had never fully accepted that Adam wasn't his little brother any more. Even after Dili he had tended to order him around. Tis had certainly inherited that tendency in spades.

In a matter of a few minutes, Tisiphone had moved from words like 'sog' and colourless non-committal tones to sophisticated, pointed arguments conveyed in a commanding and shifting timbre that he found hard to refute, rapidly taking charge of the conversation and his plans. What idiot had come up with the idea of educating teenagers?

'Adam, someone needs to take you in hand – if you continue as you are, you're going to be in real trouble. Those so-called partners of yours will eat you for breakfast and spit you out afterwards if it was in their interest. They might have started out as your friends, but that ended when they saw big dollar signs.' The sixteen-year-old mutterer of 'sog' was gone, replaced by a younger version of his dead aunt. It was unnerving, as well as accurate.

'Do you think I don't know that? Do you think I haven't seen what they do? How they act? Do you think I haven't seen the changes in them as our success has grown?' he asked irritably. He stood up and paced around the kitchen.

'We started from nothing, with just two clients when we left QuickWork. We worked our tails off and doubled our size within a year. Three years later we were at the top in Sydney and after six we are still there with branches in Melbourne and Brisbane and now overseas clients are sitting up and taking notice.'

Now it was his turn to lecture.

'When growth like that occurs there are always casualties. Things change and people don't always like the changes. Maybe I am one of those; but it doesn't mean that I have to change and go the same way. Maybe I can take steps to keep The Line's roots and original ethics and standards alive.'

There was a pride in his voice as he spoke. Pride for what the four originals had accomplished; pride that he still held out for the original beliefs that had served them so well; a culture that had set them apart from other agencies and attracted excellent people by the reputation of The Line alone.

Mixed within his accompanying thoughts was his inchoate implementation of the plans for The Line - his way out with integrity.

'Yeah, great Adam - and while you are standing tall and holding to the mighty Truth and Ethics, others are eating away at your feet!' said Tisiphone bitterly.

Adam stared at her in surprise. She seemed genuinely upset and disturbed. Somehow, his situation at The Line had managed to engage the jaded, disinterested, traumatised mind of a female teenager.

Adam felt himself disengage from the conversation; a process that was happening more and more in recent months. He would be doing something, talking, sketching, working at the computer - it didn't matter what, when he would suddenly find himself...elsewhere. Not in a different location in the physical sense - more in the sense of a mental separation from the moment.

It was as if a translucent screen had come down between him and Tisiphone, a screen that conveyed muffled sound and unclear images that a part of his mind was following. Time also seemed to have slowed in some manner, so that he could focus on what had distracted him between the moments.

Unbidden, a quotation came from somewhere long forgotten, something about seeing '...through a glass darkly.' It seemed that this glass was allowing him to see something about Tisiphone that he had previously missed, however faint and distorted.

She was focused on him.

Since her parent's death, Tis had shown little interest in anything. If her school marks had remained high it had been because a focus on study had kept her from going insane. In some ways she had turned to her schoolwork as a point of familiarity and safety.

But she had been moody; her friends seemed to be the centre of her interest outside school and she had gone a little...wild. Her piano practice had deteriorated appallingly and he didn't know how to fix it, he being as musical as a damp house brick. The only other area that still seemed to interest her was her Kung Fu, and he suspected that was because of the opportunities she had to beat the stuffing out of his rapidly aging body, punishing somebody, anybody for what had happened.

All of this was considered to be normal, exactly the sort of thing that teenagers went through following the death of a parent, as he had been assured by professionals. He had taken and was continuing to take Tis to regular counselling sessions, which didn't seem to be doing much. The psychologist had warned him not to expect a rapid improvement and had again assured him of the normality of her behaviour under the circumstances, but that didn't add much comfort.

The shrink warned him that she would likely break down in tears someday; probably at a seemingly irrelevant time and that he would have to take that moment and run with it as the turning point that it would be.

But it was not to be this night.

The issue was not new and had been dealt with in many books and films.

Teenage angst, whether from within or without, due to drugs, bad company, the death of a parent or sibling, the so called generation gap or any one of a hundred other vectors in a teenager's life had been done to death in every possible media. And here he was, smack in the middle of a living cliché.

It was however, not passé - not when you dealt with that sort of thing directly, not when it happened to one of your loved ones. It had torn his heart out to see her suffer the way that she had and still did and he had been unable to help her, especially with his job the way it was - especially since the coming of the warning numbers. The psychologist had told him that it could break suddenly, possibly in some unlikely area. And now was the first sign of the predicted break. She was taking an interest in something.

Adam had not expected it to be himself.

Sergeant Edward Windsor loped along George Street Sydney behind his glasses and long hair, taking no notice of the glances that came his way from the occasional girl who half-recognised him. His hair was longer than the last shots that had made it into the media and the quick switch that his mates had pulled at the barracks for him had allowed him to get out of Holsworthy Army Barracks undetected by the media hanging around on the off chance he might be there.

He needed some time out to be alone - or as alone as anyone could be in the big city. Look in some book shops; wander around the Botanic Gardens - even just walking down the street if his long-legged lope could be termed a walk. It was all good and he needed it after the hectic six months of battle in the United States.

They were all exhausted from the pace, but more so from the Enemy. Humans were simply not built to take on the Dærkness and the Shædow. Close proximity, let alone actual battle with either sapped the will, the spirit, the strength, the courage and the mind of any human - even augmented ones.

How many men and women of undoubted and battle-proven courage just simply laid down and refused to go in again? He'd seen it and no one judged them for it. Sometimes they came back, sometimes they didn't. How in God's name the Lone Wolves did it, operating behind the lines alone he had no idea. At least he had his men with him.

He breathed deeply of the slightly salty air as he approached Circular Quay, refusing point blank to look towards his father's residence, his jaw tightening. His father did not approve of the direction he had chosen in life, feeling let

down and disappointed that his only son had refused to undertake officer training and had gone through the ranks.

But he was now one of the most experienced and successful non-coms in the Royal Australian Regiment and had been invited to head up a small recon unit of 4RAR itself for his own qualities and not because of his family. The fact that his blood boosted any Power operating nearby was just a bonus.

He had proven himself, just as his father had in his own way in his youth, fighting in Iraq and then going SAS. His father chose to do it via the more acceptable officer way admittedly, but his way was just as valid.

He had the respect of his men, his officers and even the idiot media had stopped linking him up with every female that came within a hundred yards of him. He sighed inside though. At the moment some fool of a journalist had come up with the bright idea of calling him the Black Prince and telling lurid and highly inaccurate stories of his battle exploits. Well, largely inaccurate. They made for good reading but most bore little resemblance to what had had been doing. He grimaced. No, that was much worse.

He sat in the sun on a vacant seat in the Botanic Gardens, thankful for the complete lack of any sign of the Dærkness and the Shædow in Australia. He had no idea why it was so, but it was a peace that he craved. He needed it before he and his men were sent back into the thick of it.

### Lady of the Shadows - Chapter 3

They had moved into the living room and it was obvious that Tisiphone had been talking to someone and it wasn't hard to identify Jenny Chapman as the culprit. The two of them had been as thick as thieves for some time now, which was a good thing in many ways, and there weren't many good things for Tis at the moment. Adam trusted Jenny implicitly and there was no doubt she knew a lot more than he about dealing with sixteen-year-old girls.

He was in two minds about them discussing what was going on at The Line however. While he was relieved that Tis was at last showing an interest beyond her parent's death, he would have preferred that it be a subject less worrying for her. Why couldn't it be the latest teen heartthrob? Tisiphone didn't really seem to be the sort of girl who pined over some good looking actor or singer though. Then again, perhaps it needed something serious to get her attention. Like a brick falling on her head. He'd thought about that one himself a few times - a literal brick.

'She's trying to get you out Adam, that's what she wants - you're a threat to her!' Tis had raised her voice in anger. It jolted him out of the sense of disengagement that he had been feeling, jerking him back to the here and now.

He shook his head a little to further clear it, throwing out the cobwebs, the translucent dark-glass almost falling, tinkling with the destructive dismissal. He had a balance to keep; it was good for Tis to get worked up about something, but he did not need her to push it too far.

'Tis, I know what you are saying; but you don't need to worry yourself over this,' he replied, pulling at his stupid hair, which was coming out of the black leather tie.

'Adam, I know how The Line is your life. Everything you do revolves around it, even more so since Sally and Mum and Dad...went. You can't let that bitch get to you.'

'And stop pulling at your hair,' she added distractedly, which was his mother this time. Tis was always at him to leave his hair alone. It was, however, perfectly all right for her to suck, pull and mess up her own hair. Those with Seymour blood were apparently heavily into hair abuse.

Ignoring her comment, he was silent for a few moments before he replied.

'Tis, if you only knew.'

He drew his hands through his hair again before continuing, ignoring the unspoken criticism in her eyes.

'Up until, maybe just a few days ago, I would have said the same thing; up until then, The Line consumed most of my attention. But it's been changing over the last six months or so. I, we, need to move on - we can't be stuck in this life we have, where your Mum and Dad were. It's all changed; it just doesn't mean the same any more. But I have to look after my people when I go - I can't leave them to Number Five,' he added ruefully, admitting by the use of the sobriquet that he believed what Tisiphone had been saying all along.

He went back to pulling at his hair again. He wished he could tell her more, but the last thing he wanted to do was to scare her. If she knew about the

numbers and what they meant... He would have to tell her something and soon, but he wanted to let her keep her childhood as long as she could.

'I had a sort of an epiphany today...' he continued.

'A what?' asked Tisiphone.

Adam blinked. He sometimes forgot that she was only sixteen, but he was surprised that she didn't know the word from the stuff she used to read. She'd read *Lord of the Rings* and *War and Peace* from cover to cover by the time she was nine and had an enormous vocabulary, even allowing for words like *sog*.

'Uh, a sudden realisation, sort of out of the blue, almost mystical in nature,' he replied.

'Oh, like a theopneusty,' she said, having led him right down the proverbial path and out the front gate.

He glowered at her, secretly glad that a glimmer of her old humour had begun to show.

'You, young lady, are grounded big time! The only living beings you are going to see for the next two weeks outside of school are two long-nosed skinny dogs!'

'Huh, I'll be out my bedroom window before you can blink!'

'Not with two highly trained, lethal guard dogs on duty you won't!' he replied stoutly. He'd always wanted say something stoutly, so he gave it his best shot, only to have it fall apart in a burst of titian-haired sixteen year old laughter.

'Guard dogs? Those two? Only if they think I'm a possum!' she chortled.

He pretended to think for a few minutes.

'All right, you win,' he grinned. For a golden few seconds they were back to how it always used to be. But the exigencies of the moment drew them back; reality had no mercy.

'Anyway,' he said, returning to the conversation, 'I realised today that my whole attitude to The Line had been changing for some time. It just doesn't seem to matter as much any more.'

'But Adam, your whole life revolved around The Line. How can it just change?' she protested.

He breathed out heavily.

'Look, since your Mum and Dad and Sal passed away, since things changed; not just at The Line, but inside me too....' his voice fell away as he continued to try to identify the crucial issue. '... maybe it's also what The Line has become. It's not what the four of us started. It's changed - warped, I think,' he mused, stating for the very first time, even to himself, the crux of the problem at work.

'Are you going to just let that happen? You're not going to fight it? Why can't you just... un-warp it?' Tisiphone sounded aghast. She didn't seem to be listening to his arguments about change. She seemed to be spoiling for a fight. Perhaps it was part of the whole process she was supposedly going through.

Adam stood up and walked across to the massive fireplace that his mother used to love sitting by in winter. There were a lot of memories around that fireplace. Christmases and birthdays...He started down that dangerous

route before pulling himself away. He moved a couple of the ornaments on the shelf above for a few moments, before touching his favourite; a dark wooden box.

Opening the beautiful hand-carved box, a set of exquisite early Nineteenth Century pistols was revealed. Their eccentric and possibly mad great-something aunt Tisiphone once owned them - the original Tisiphone. It was after her that his niece and his great aunt had been named as well as many other female members of the family.

Whoever she had been, she must have been something to be remembered after so long. Her influence was still powerful within the family, generations-gone though she was. Somehow her spirit still purveyed through the family as Adam himself had cause to remember, though he shied away from those preternatural memories. At the transient thought, his hackles still rose, heavily suppressed though the thought was.

They usually called her GGAT for short, great-great aunt Tisiphone. Nobody could remember how many greats there should be, five or six he thought. Somehow, he didn't think that she would approve. Then he turned to face his own Tisiphone.

'It's too late Tis. It's already happened. It's not a matter of beating Joan. She's already beaten me. She caught me when I was vulnerable, mourning your Mum and Dad and Sally. I was also too busy running my side of things and dying inside to notice. While I was doing my job, she was doing a job on me. You can't fight that sort of thing - it is a question of ethics, philosophy and individual objectives.'

'You talk like it's a religion,' she accused.

'Maybe it is. But it's the way I was brought up. It's what I am. This woman doesn't think like that. Everything is business and profit and power to her. Everything has to be perfect. But it's not me.' He walked a few paces and sat down on a chair across from Tisiphone, a coffee table between them.

Tisiphone just looked at her uncle, slumping down in the chair, seeing perhaps for the first time the toll that had been extracted from him over the last year or so.

'I can't spend the rest of my life fighting for power at The Line. If I do that, my real job will be out the window. Besides, there are other things happening that need to be addressed,' he added enigmatically.

'But Adam, that's what she wants - to get rid of you!' Tisiphone protested for the second time. She wasn't getting the argument at all.

He was silent for a moment, thinking through the implications. Something didn't sit right about the thought, obvious and logical though it was.

'Tis, I don't think you're right. This one wants power and the best sort of power for people like her is power over powerful people. I suspect that what she wants from me is to have me under her control. She thinks that she can push all sorts of changes through at The Line and still keep me there under her thumb, watching me hate everything that she does; all the while using my skills. Deep down she knows that I am The Line, in the minds of the staff and our clients. And if she controls me, then she controls The Line.'

Adam could see that he had intrigued her; Tis had a piece of her wild hair in her teeth and was entirely focused on him; more Seymour family hair abuse.

‘Joan doesn’t want me to leave; she doesn’t want to force me out. She wants me to submit to her. She’s done it to the others – now I’m the last one left. She doesn’t control me yet,’ he said seriously. He didn’t add that he was also the most dangerous and difficult to handle, both by nature and by virtue of his popularity within The Line, let alone his personal holding in the company.

Tis wrinkled her nose. ‘Why do people carry on like that? I mean, isn’t the important thing the success of The Line? What is it with power?’ she asked, puzzled.

‘I really don’t think that Joan sees it that way,’ he replied. ‘All she sees is an obstacle to running the business her way, which she is convinced is the right way.’

‘But it doesn’t make any sense,’ she protested.

‘Since when has any human behaviour made any sense? We are all driven by our emotions; our claims to logic, planning and thought are usually reduced to puerile camouflage by our baser natures. I might add that it is pretty poor camouflage, more likely to deceive ourselves than others,’ he said wryly.

Tisiphone considered this for a few moments before asking, ‘what are you going to do?’

It was Adam’s turn to hesitate, thinking how much to tell Tisiphone of his plans, ‘... I’m not sure. I could give in, handing over moral power to Joan, I could pretend to give in and then look for ways out later or I could meet her head on or even walk away. I just don’t know. It’s pretty complicated.’ It just wasn’t time to tell Tisiphone the truth. Maybe he should tell her what he had planned, but to do so would also involve a why and he did not want to cover that until the last possible moment.

‘I wonder what great-great aunt Tisiphone would do?’ asked the latest incarnation of the name, still chewing at her hair. At least she wasn’t hassling him about his hair at the moment.

It actually wasn’t such a bad question. The family legends of her were mostly sourced in a few pages hand written by one of her grand nephews and lodged in an old family bible. The great-nephew had put together a lot of rumours, most of them wild and unsourced but he had at least met her in his boyhood to give some authority to his records.

Adam was glad that the subject had been raised, as it served as another point of interest and diversion. His Tisiphone had been wrapped up in stories of her Great-whatever aunt when she was younger as he recalled. Tis even had an enlarged copy of a photograph of her in her bedroom above her bed. It was the only known photograph of her, taken in the late Nineteenth Century when she was an old woman. Like most of the photos of that time, it was cold and serious, reflecting a grey and leaden world, but still something seemed to draw you in; something about GGAT.

‘Let’s go and look at her?’ said Adam, getting up from behind the coffee table.

Tisiphone followed him in surprise. The original photograph hung in the lounge room and they soon found themselves standing in front of it.

A single moment of the past, held fast and unmoving by the power of chemicals harnessed by the early science of humanity. Yet even the strength of humanity's ingenuity would one day fail as evidenced by the fading details of the photograph. The ancient aunt stood on the steps of some unidentified building, holding a large book in her arms. Her dress seemed to be black, but could in reality have been any colour other than white. There was a general air of solemnity about the scene, but all photographs of that age looked like they were taken at funerals.

Judging from the clues given by the doorway and stairs of the building, she must have been a tall woman. Her famous hair, which was supposed to have been a deep red in her youth, was white, though it was still long. It was slightly disarranged, the first indication that there was something different about her. For a woman of that age to have a photograph taken or even appear in public with her hair out of place was unusual, if not unacceptable.

A careful examination of her clothes revealed that she was wearing a divided-skirt riding habit, another hint that she was something out of the ordinary. Such dress was frowned upon in those days, yet there she was, in her seventies or thereabouts, openly wearing such a careless outfit. She was wearing a large ring on her engagement finger, but it was plain and without a stone.

Her expression was one of solemnity, but there was something... something around the eyes and the corner of the mouth, suggesting that she regarded the world she was in as absurd and unimportant. It was as if there was no great esteem in her for the world and that she did not suffer it gladly. Adam had always thought only a fool would cross her.

To one side stood an elderly Chinese man, of sad and sombre demeanour dressed in Chinese dress of the period. He was entirely bald except for a long tail of hair that sprouted from the back of his head. He carefully carried in his arms the very same hand-carved box of pistols that now took pride of place over the fireplace in the living room. The Chinese man and the duelling pistols were all part of the mystery of GGAT. Adam had often thought that there was a world of pain in the expression of the old Chinese man and had wondered who he was. Nothing was recorded about him, not even in the grand-nephew's scribbling.

Who was he? Why was he carrying those pistols and why did great-great-aunt Tisiphone own such martial things? Why had so many of the direct and indirect Seymour lines named their daughters for her? Yes, there was her entailed will, but there had to be more to it than that. A thousand questions and few answers – nor were there ever likely to be.

For some reason she was thought to have either been born in China or some other part of Asia, which might explain the old Chinese gentleman, or taken there as a very young child by her father. It was known that her father was a military man of some sort, probably explaining the exotic birth location. Nothing was known of her mother or why she was given such an outlandish name. Tisiphone echoed his thoughts.

'Why was she called Tisiphone Adam?' asked Tis quietly.

Tisiphone, of course, knew about the original source of her name, but she wanted to know why her ancestress had been given such an unlikely name in the first place.

‘I don’t know Tis. We know that was her name, we know her father was a Colonel in the British army, that she had an older brother whose name was Orestes from whom we are all descended, but why she was named for one of the Greek Furies is unknown.’

He continued to stare at the first Tisiphone, wondering about her as he had from time to time throughout his life.

‘Whoever she was, whatever she did, I can tell you that she left an indelible mark on our family. You know that every generation since has had a girl named after her?’ he turned to look at Tis. ‘Every generation – and there was sometimes more than one in various branches of the family when you go back a bit. I think there is one in Melbourne now, some cousin six times removed or some such – I don’t understand this removed business.’

He cocked his head to one side in a manner that anyone from The Line would have recognised as indicating he was considering and evaluating some sort of creative material.

‘Allowing for the difference in age Tis, you look a lot like her, you know,’ Adam said quietly.

Tisiphone straightened from her carefully affected teenage slouch and smiled, ‘you really think so?’

‘Yeah, I really do. We’ll have to get you an elderly Chinese man as a servant.’

After she had finished pummelling him, the two of them stared at the old photograph of GGAT for several minutes longer before calling it a night and going to bed, their conversation unresolved and hanging over some metaphoric precipice. Only one of them had any inkling of what was at the bottom.

Tisiphone cleaned her teeth, thinking of that sog of an uncle of hers. He was pretty good for a sog, but she couldn’t make out what he was doing with The Line. His whole life revolved around it and yet he was behaving as though it meant nothing. She couldn’t figure it out. It didn’t make sense. She also suspected that there was a lot more going on in his mind than he admitted. He was probably trying to protect her from something that would upset her, which would be so typical.

All she knew was that he hadn’t been the same since the night of the accident. Not at home, not at work and not in the mind, either. He blamed himself for her parent’s and Sally’s death.

It didn’t matter how much logic, how much common sense, how many impartial people, experts even, demonstrated that there had been nothing he could have done; he still blamed himself. A fluke of fortune had thrown him clear as the truck had ploughed into his car and he had escaped with little more than scratches and bruises. It was that more than anything that contributed to his guilt. She was old enough to understand that.

Adam had attended every session of the Coronial Inquest that had analysed all available information in an attempt to get to the bottom of the

tragedy. She had forced herself to do so as well, contrary to Adam's wishes. But she owed it to her parents and Adam needed the company.

She had heard and considered every piece of evidence herself and the only way that her uncle could have stopped the accident from happening was to have been somewhere else at the time, driving on a different road. The still unidentified truck driver had come through a stop sign that was on a road completely obscured by thick vegetation. The truck had been moving at over eighty kilometres an hour in a sixty zone at the time of impact and had not seemed to have made any attempt to reduce speed.

The police had never found the driver, who had run off in the terrible confusion after the accident. The truck had been reported as stolen several days prior to the accident. The owner was investigated briefly, but had clearly been uninvolved.

Still, her uncle blamed himself, though he never spoke about it and nothing she could say could change it. Tisiphone thought of Sally. She had been gorgeous and there had been high hopes that Uncle Adam would settle down at last. She was small and blonde and Adam had been truly smitten. Tisiphone could only imagine what it must be like for Adam to lose his older brother and his wife together with his own virtual fiancée in one stroke.

She knew that he was worried about her reaction to the whole thing and, she admitted, with good cause. Her behaviour had been appalling at times. But Adam was hardly innocent in the behaviour stakes. The trouble at The Line had its genesis in the days after the crash and had only deteriorated since then. But there was more to it than The Line.

Other strange things were happening as well – at least one of the things involved a lot of money. She had been able to piece together enough from what she had seen and overheard to figure out that much. He appeared to be buying property and building something somewhere.

There had been some strange people around lately too. Groups of fit looking man had arrived delivering things and installing alarm systems around the house.

Then there were the two metal boxes that had been delivered late one night. Both had heavy padlocks keeping them secure. A blanket in her uncle's bedroom covered one and the other was in the tool shed in the back garden. Adam had been evasive when she had asked him what was in them. Just old tools he hadn't used for years he had replied. Of course, it is very important to lock old tools in a heavy steel box and keep it in your bedroom covered by a blanket!

There was another thing that she had noticed as well. Her uncle was afraid of something as demonstrated by the serious security system he had installed. He was acting strangely too. Getting up in the middle of the night and checking things when he thought she was asleep; suddenly increasing his already extensive exercise program and getting her to practice her Kung Fu with him a lot more than usual; adding bladed weapons to her workouts as well.

That was one of the great things about her uncle; even though he was a classic Yuppie, he knew lots of really cool stuff like unarmed combat. Other uncles might give their nieces presents of books or riding lessons; on her

twelfth birthday, her uncle had given her a present of a year's Kung Fu lessons!

Actually, he had shown her a lot of really, really nasty stuff himself that her teachers didn't seem to know. Even though he didn't seem to have any belts or sashes or any other qualifications, he certainly knew a lot about various fighting techniques, especially knives. She was a terror in weapons lessons because of what he had taught her.

She changed into her pyjamas and climbed into bed after turning off the light. She was glad she had spoken to him about The Line and what he was doing. The silly sog just didn't seem to be able to cope. And he thought she wasn't coping!

Well, maybe she wasn't coping all that well, but what would you expect? Her eyes filled with tears and she cried again, as she did almost every night since....

A half hour later she was asleep and the shadows watched over her in softness and silence. Her great aunt Tisiphone's photograph stood guard over her as it had for many years.

Tisiphone's eyes flickered open at the sound of horse's hooves. She had been riding horses since she was six and had her own, Sherbet, kept in an adgishment a few kilometres away. She knew horses and was not concerned that several were trotting towards her.

What did concern her was that The Dream always started the same way. Standing on a grayling plain, half way between night and day - scattered gum trees, with their branches and leaves shedding pieces of shadow like confetti. A pale blue full moon, low in the dark sky added to the eeriness of the scene, but somehow brought her comfort as well.

She stood beside a gently curving road, or more correctly, a track, stretching out of the plains and into the hills to her left; disappearing into the distance and darkness in both directions. She turned to her right, waiting...

Exactly as she expected, a horse and a shadowed rider came around the curve to her right, slowing until they were beside her. The rider was tall and slim, wearing a cloak and a strange looking floppy hat, like something out of the early nineteenth Century. There was also a strange looking sword in a scabbard fixed to the saddle and she could just make out several old-fashioned pistols attached to the rider's belt under the cloak. They were pistols of the same sort that were in the beautifully carved box over the fireplace in the main lounge room, percussion pistols or something, as her uncle described them.

'And will you ride with me again tonight Lady Tisiphone?' The voice was female, despite the dress. It was soft and full of warmth, almost as if it were her mother speaking but there was a hidden crispness of command carried in its rich timbre.

Again, as in each re-run of The Dream, Sherbet walked out from behind the shadowy rider, fully saddled and she mounted him silently, answering the question by action rather than words before riding off along the moonlit track with the shadowed lady.

Tisiphone loved riding above all other experiences - even more than her Kung Fu. The power of her Sherbet, his warmth and strength, all under her control!

She could feel the balmy wind whipping past her face, while her friend the moon rode beside her, lighting her way through the inky shadows caused by the tossing leaves of the gum trees.

It was always like this, the long ride with her silent companion, so strangely comforting. Tisiphone always awoke the morning after any night where she experienced The Dream extremely rested and even happy. It took half the day for the sadness to come back. She sometimes felt a little guilty on those days, as though she did not deserve such a glowing feeling when her parents had died.

The road started up into the hills, winding more than it did on the flat, causing the moon great difficulty in Her task of lighting the way; but somehow She always succeeded in getting enough of Her pale blue light onto the track for Tisiphone to see. During the rides Tisiphone believed and pretended that the moon was a Goddess watching out for her.

Eventually the track petered out and the two riders slowed to a walk, picking their way amongst the gum trees, yet still the moon shone down upon them in Her power. Tisiphone could just see some sort of house or cottage over on the ridge in the far distance as she went deeper into the hills.

At last they went over another hill and down into a small, enclosed valley. The place they entered through was the only point that was not a sheer cliff of limestone. If they had not arrived at that very point, it would have appeared that there was no access to the secret valley. As they rode down the steep and winding incline of the hidden entrance, Tisiphone saw that the valley was roughly oval in shape with a stream running down the middle.

They pulled up under the overhang of a steep cliff of limestone almost at the other end of the valley. There was a large dark hole of a cave there, seemingly formed by some split in the rock into which the stream bubbled. The cave was big enough to ride a horse into, with room to spare on each side of the flowing water. The stream flowed from the other end of the valley in the pale moonlit distance. Small groves of eucalypts dotted the floor of the valley. It was an enchanting place that could only be found by someone who knew its location.

'Well, my girl, the ride is over for the night and I have things to do, Powers to bargain and consult with!' The voice was a little more serious now, as though the fun was over and work was now in the offing.

'Listen to me well. Your uncle faces a number of enemies at this time and needs your support. He will be forced to take a strange and drastic path before long, as will you. This will be difficult for both you and he - see that you are not burdensome to him. He faces great danger and he thinks only of you. Remember this; the Dærkness and the Shædow come and you must be ready for them!'

For the first time Tisiphone noted a strange accent in the Shadow Lady's voice and even stranger use of words. The words darkness and shadow in particular were pronounced strangely, almost making them something different and dreadful.

A feeling of dismay engulfed her as she thought what enemies her uncle could have beyond Joan at The Line. And what danger could her staid old uncle face? She opened her mouth to say something and the whole scene seemed to draw

away from her to a single point, stretching like so much moonlit and gum tree shadowed rubber.

'Be of good cheer; your uncle can defend himself and has powerful friends in many places. The Seymour and other blood as powerful runs strong and true within his veins - and he has you. And even the very Light will not abandon him though the Dærkness and Shædow encompass him about.'

The rich voiced of the Lady of the Shadows faded with the scene and full sleep enveloped Tisiphone once again.

Elsewhere in the Seymour house, Adam Seymour tossed and turned, dreaming of a terrified blonde girl, gunfire, galloping hooves and greenery that seemed to stretch on forever.

'You can't stay in your Regiment forever, you know,' his father said.

The Prince's tall, black-haired, olive-skinned son just looked at him, making the Prince wonder if there was any of his side of the family in him at all - exactly the same question his own father wondered of him, when he was still alive.

'I like 4RAR, dad. The blokes accept me for myself, not your son - besides, my company is the Night-Stalkers and it fits my colouring,' he said with his famous quirky grin; the same grin that set the women's magazines on fire whenever they could get a shot of it.

His father knew that was a major part of why he had not gone to University and joined the army straight away and headed for battle as soon as he could. Avoiding the press.

Prince Harry had to admit that his boy was good at what he did if even half the stories about him were true. A senior sergeant at twenty-two in the Night-Stalkers, he stood tall with his thrice-blessed, Rune-scored, Royal-Sealed long-handled shobu-zukuri katana slung negligently over his micro-rune-enhanced, jet-black, silica nano-tube battle armour.

He had to admit to a certain pride that his son had made it into that fabled anti-Dærkness and Shædow company all on his own. The Night-Stalkers were the ones always called in to patrol the darkness of the night and strike wherever the Dærkness and Shædow manifested. Its origins was the very company that had fought at Dili and from which the infamous strike-team that had hit Borneo had been drawn, the same company that the leader of The Three had made his own and won everlasting glory to 4RAR.

And his son was one of the senior sergeants! At only twenty-two. Now the whole of 4 was being converted to Night Stalker status. They were needed.

But he could only allow it to go on for a while longer. There was too much at stake, too many things happening to allow it to continue for much longer.

The media called him the Black Prince after his colouring and his Night-Stalker uniform and the British media were hunting for any shot that they could get of him. The Regiment protected him as they could and God help any photographer that tried to sneak into their barracks when the Night-Stalkers were in-country, which wasn't very often.

The Prince took a deep breath and spoke.

## Asmara of Eritrea: A Lament for history repeating itself

Asmara, Asmara – I never knew thee.  
For many more months than I can count, alone, I crept  
Outside thy sweet influence, guided by thy distant lights  
The Muezzin's call, far out in the desert heat, alone, I slept  
Yet something drew me, for I could see thee through my sights

When they were not focused on duty and death.  
They cloud my memories – what I saw and what I did  
Blood and endless horror, yet in the end, we did rid  
My Grim brothers and I, ye of the Darkness that surrounded thee  
For justice, for humanity, for honour, but for no knight's fee

I still shake and black-dream some nights.  
What I saw, what I met, alone, out in that bandit land  
That surrounds thee, threatened by a millennia of sand  
I regret much, I remember much, yet most of all in my mind  
I but entered your piazzas and mosques just once, alone, to find

Your glory all gone, taken by the wars and strife.  
I wish that I could have seen thee in thine exotic prime  
When beauty and peace did reign, languid in endless time  
When Islam, Judah and the Followers of Christ felt no need  
To kill, to slay, to reave, to destroy and upon each other feed.

We did, my Determined brothers and I, what had to be done.  
Now, as time dims some memories, turns them to darkened mist  
I hear thy glory hath returned, peace has come due to our iron fist  
And yet, my heart fails as I learn that we but cut down one bur  
As a new name shames thy region, all repeated as in my time; Darfur!

Asmara, Asmara, I never knew thee.  
Our Silent names were never known to thee and are lost to history  
But who is there now to take up the sword, this new conflict to bury?  
Where are the Nameless Men who leave their lives, some to die  
And remain forever on the lips of Forgotten Men who now do nought but sigh

Where are the Grim Men?  
Where are the Silent Men?  
Where are the Determined Men?  
Gone.

They are no longer acceptable under a new paradigm.  
Shall we see their like again as the world turns?  
Age takes their memories, their health and gives them not one jot of glory.  
Darfur, thou standest alone; you have no oil and honour is no reason now.

But Asmara, Asmara - I still yearn for thee.