

WALKER

Jane Alexander

PART ONE: THE AWAKENING

CHAPTER ONE: Dead

Some people go through their whole lives and never realise they are shamans. Others know from the moment they are born. I can't remember a time when I didn't "walk between worlds". Sometimes though, it can take a huge shock or accident to jolt a shaman into his or her powers.

Leaf and Stone: First Lessons in Shamanism by Tabitha Greenway.

Tom sat on the steps outside the school hall, rubbing tears from his eyes. His cheeks burned red as he remembered stumbling off the stage, Nathan Lockwood pushing past him to take over. He had promised his drama teacher that the nerves wouldn't get to him; sworn that the asthma wouldn't clench his lungs shut. But once again the tell-tale itching grazed his chin and the tightness clasped his chest. His mind had gone blank.

Surely the play must be over now? As if on cue, applause roared behind him, muffled like the sound of the sea in a shell. He jumped up, desperate to get away before they all came out; the thought of his friends' sympathy and pity made him cringe.

He jogged quickly to the parking lot and found the car. Pulling the inhaler from his pocket, he dragged on it, praying nobody would come and talk to him. His reflection stared back at him from the car window – no longer the great movie god, he thought, but thin and pale, a ghost with large gray eyes and a curtain of muddy blond hair. Footsteps crunched over gravel. He blinked away the last tears and turned around. Mom gave him a rueful smile; Dad wore his 'never mind' mask. 'Cheer up, son,' said Dad. 'You're only thirteen. You'll grow out of it. Don't worry, eh?'

Mom tried to hug him but Tom shrugged her away and pulled open the door. 'I don't want to talk about it, okay?'

They drove into the thick Massachusetts night. Crickets crashed out their staccato riff; a sickly scent of flowers clung to the air, like too much perfume on old ladies. Nobody spoke.

Tom gazed out the window, lost in dark thoughts. What the...?

A shadow broke free from the forest, zig-zagging onto the highway.

'Dad, look out!'

Brakes screeched; the stench of burning rubber.

'Oh my God!'

Mom screamed. The rusty red of a large animal's flank, a glimpse of antler, a sharp knowing eye staring straight at him. Tom's stomach lurched as the car careened across the highway.

Suddenly there *was* no more highway; just empty air and the gut-pulling sensation of falling. Falling. Falling.

I'm gonna die. I'm gonna die, he thought, and I'm only thirteen. I'll never do stuff like having a beer in a bar, and I'll never kiss a girl. I'll never get it right and I'll never be a movie star.

Oh, who cares? Wasn't this for the best? No need to strive; no need to push anymore. No need to gasp for breath. No need for the moment when the words vanished and the shame burned his face. Who wants to be a lousy film star anyway? But he did. He really did.

A crimson curtain dropped slowly, so slowly, over his eyes. Wow, you really do see red. You really don't feel the pain.

How much time passed? He didn't know. Tom could see his body lying far below him beside the car. How had it gotten there? It didn't look so great: more blood on the outside than on the inside and his left leg was stuck out at a right angle. The car wasn't in good shape either. It was heavy metal sculpture, twisted and tortured.

I'm dead, he thought. *Dead*. He tried whispering the words for size and found, to his surprise, it was okay. He didn't really mind. *Dead*, he said a bit louder. Nothing happened so he yelled it: 'DEAD, DEAD, DEAD'.

His parents were slumped in their seats, puppets tossed aside after playtime. The smell of hot oil stung his nose. If someone didn't come soon, the car would burst into flames and they'd all frizzle up like burgers forgotten on the barbecue. Did it matter? Not really. Nothing mattered any more.

Then the sirens sounded and lights strobed the trees, like a scene from Grand Theft Auto. He sledge-hammered back into his body and took one huge deep breath into pain, excruciating pain. Voices shouted, cursed. The clunk of the hydraulic jaw bit into metal. Tom jammed his eyes shut and strained every muscle, willing himself back to the place of not-caring. Nobody could endure this agony. Then something sharp jabbed into his arm and the pain slunk away.

He was out of his body again, thank God. No longer floating but standing on the forest floor. A huge stag, bigger than any usual deer, stood nearby, gazing solemnly. It jerked its head and stalked away. Tom followed. They walked silently as the pine trees gave way to other trees, softer, greener – he didn't know what they were called. A scent that seemed familiar, amber and sandalwood, like Mom's perfume. The forest cleared and Tom gasped. Goosebumps tingled his arms and a cool shiver slithered down his spine.

'Wow.'

A small valley opened up below, its sides cloaked by trees, the grass so green it looked like the color in a kid's painting. Wild flowers spun wobbly necklaces of vivid blues, soft pinks, shocking yellows and creamy-whites. A narrow waterfall sent a spray of mist, rainbows flashing through it before tumbling into a rushing brook. In the center of the valley stood a tiny church; soft lichen-laden stone, its spire like an upturned ice-cream cone.

Tom had never seen a church or any building quite so old. It shimmered as if in a heat wave. For a moment it transformed into a temple of light, bright as the sun.

Then the light faded and the sun slid away, the shadows chasing up the slopes. Tom blinked and looked again but the church was different now. It was painted bright pink and yellow now, littered with colored signs. People lounged against its walls, gulping ice creams while children shouted and laughed in the playground where the gravestones had been. It was a day-glo world of gleaming plastic: neon pink and orange palm trees, inflatable bushes, rubber paths with nobbly bits all over. Some kind of theme park? Disneyworld and Epcot were pretty cool, so why did this feel so wrong? Not here, he thought. Not *this* place. He winced and turned away.

When he looked back, the valley and the stag had vanished. Instead, deep in the shadows, another shape waited, dark with eyes glowing yellow. Too big for a coyote. A wolf. It lowered its head, licked its lips. Could you be killed when you were already dead? Tom didn't want to find out; he spun round and ran. Behind him the sound of panting, the soft thud of paws. Please God, don't let the asthma come, not now. Headlong through the trees, branches whipping his face, snagging his clothes until finally he tripped and nose-dived into green. His heart was beating louder and louder until its panic-stricken rhythm was all he could hear.

CHAPTER TWO: Wambarrow Farm

The guardians are the ancient shamans of this land. Their job is to protect the land and all who live on it. A shaman is a walker between the worlds. They can live in the everyday world and also in the world of spirits. When they move from one reality to another, the rules are different and the shaman must be prepared. They must train and practice for many years. Nobody should attempt shamanism without learning how to walk safely between the worlds. If they do they've only got themselves to blame if they fall into danger.

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'Shortly arriving at Taunton. Taunton your next station stop.' The voice juddered through the train, tinny and distorted. Tom stared out the window as fields were edged aside by rows of houses and warehouses. The countryside was grim – flat, boring fields stretching out either side. Some had been flooded and once it felt as though the train was ploughing through a huge lake. People muttered about global warming: it seemed the flooding was far more widespread this year. Like Tom could care less. He didn't care about anything, anymore.

It had been months since the accident. The leaves turned and fell, to be replaced by ice and snow as Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year passed by. Tom remembered the staff in the hospital whispering that he had been brain dead for several minutes; that it was impossible for a human being to flat-line that long and not to suffer permanent damage. But Tom was fine. At least, his *body* was fine, apart from a slight limp.

The couple sitting opposite smiled uneasily and he realized he had been shredding his sandwich into tiny bits. Tom had refused to talk to the busybodies, turning his head to the window. How long was he staying? He had a one-way ticket. Where were his parents? Dead. Was he okay? No.

He was being packed off to England to live with a grandmother he had never even met. Nobody had asked what he thought. Nobody seemed to care when he stifled a sob as the plane took off from Logan. The woman accompanying him simply buried her nose in a fat paperback as he'd gazed back and watched Boston fade into nothing through eyes thick with tears.

He'd given her the slip in London, sliding into the crowds at the subway station as she bought candy from a kiosk. He'd thought about hiding in the city but realized it was hopeless. He was too young; he'd never make it. So he texted the woman to say he'd make his own way, turned off his cell before she could reply and made his way across the city to Paddington (like the bear, he thought).

As the train wheezed into the station, Tom pulled down his bags and lugged them down the corridor. The door released with a hiss and he stepped into a tangle of people, bags and suitcases. Shouts of recognition, hugs, kisses, small children leaping into arms, dogs barking and spinning. Tom stood, shoulders humped, and felt the familiar wave of darkness sweep over him. Before the accident he had been desperate to meet his grandmother. He could never understand why his mom wouldn't let them visit. Now the curiosity had all faded.

Gradually the platform cleared and he was alone. The train heaved out and the only movement came from a pair of empty chip packets waltzing around each other.

'Tom! Tom Greenway!' A figure strode down the platform, a black and white collie bounding beside her. The dog followed her every move, its eyes laughing. The woman was tall and rangy, wearing Levis and work boots, and a battered waxed jacket that flapped around her knees. Her hair was gray and cropped short. Silver earrings with turquoise stones glinted from her ears.

'Tom? You *are* Tom Greenway?'

Tom shrugged. His real name was Tom Essen-Greenway – linking his mom and dad's names, but she could call him whatever she liked. He didn't care.

'Tom....I'm....I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry....'

She opened her arms but Tom shrank back.

'Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I know we don't know one another. Look, I'm your grandmother. Well, of course I am. But it's a bit late for all that Granny stuff. Call me Eden. That would be best, don't you think?'

He nodded tersely and marched off up the platform, struggling with his bags. Eden caught up with him and grabbed his backpack, slinging it over her shoulder as if it weighed nothing. He had to trot to keep up as she swept through the arch towards a beaten-up pickup. The sheepdog leapt nimbly into the back and Eden tossed the pack after it. She reached for his computer bag but he hugged it to his chest.

'I'll keep it, thanks. It's got my Xbox and laptop in it.'

'Come on then, let's get you home. We can talk properly when you're settled in. Oh Tom, I've wanted to meet you for so long.'

The drive seemed to take forever and as Tom gazed out the window he became aware of a new world around him. Hills rose on all sides, some thickly wooded, some pasture studded with sheep. It was still winter but many trees clung onto their bronzed leaves, as did the hedges, often savagely hacked down to bare stumps sprouting top-knots of russet. Small swift waterfalls punctuated the steep banks and bracken patch-worked the slopes with fawn. It was a wild landscape, totally different from home.

The truck braked hard through a village, all thatched cottages and hump-backed bridges. Ye Olde England, he thought, with a sneer. Then, gears crunching, they were climbing again.

With a wrench of the wheel, Eden swung the truck straight towards a hedge and twigs cracked against the window. The sheepdog jumped off the back and emerged somehow ahead of the vehicle, barking as it led the way.

The farmhouse was long and low, with walls of rough-hewn stone and a roof padded with green. Tom stared more closely and realized it was moss, sprouting between slate tiles mottled with acid yellow lichen. Small windows with thick stone sills like beady eyes peered out suspiciously. The house seemed to crouch, as if all it wanted was to lean back with a sigh into the hill behind. It had tried that trick but the buttresses propped it like sturdy elbows.

Barns, sheds and a small stable block huddled around it, like protective arms. Chickens pecked at weeds in the cobbled yard and a brown horse with a white splodge on its nose peered from one of the loose boxes. The truck screeched to a halt in the yard, sending up a snowstorm of hens pocking in indignation.

‘Wambarrow Farm.’ Eden cut the engine and turned to Tom.

‘I can’t tell you how thrilled I am that you’re here at last. I just never thought it would be like this. I know this can’t be easy for you and, to be honest, I’m not sure it’ll be easy for me.’

Tom didn’t even dignify her with an answer. He got out the truck, slamming the door behind him. Why did she have to lie? He knew she didn’t care.

‘Oh, and this is Sparrow.’ Eden rubbed the head of the sheepdog and the dog grinned at Tom. He stuck his hands in his pockets before the dog could think about licking him.

Eden kicked off her boots under a wooden bench in the porch. She raised an eyebrow, indicating that Tom do the same. For a moment he thought of pretending he hadn’t noticed, but a slight frown above those hawk-like eyes made him change his mind. He bent down and slid off his Nikes.

A stone head was set into a niche above the front door. It was roughly hewn yet clearly a head – but of what? Man or monster? It had wide blank eyes, a gaping mouth, thorns or maybe snakes sliding out of both. A shiver wriggled down Tom’s back and he found his hand creeping up to scratch his chin. He hurried into the house away from its blank gaze.

Inside it was dark. Tom felt along the rough wall and found a switch. It seemed a bit big for a light-switch but he tugged it anyway. A low rumble shook the house; the light shuddered a couple of times and then, finally, came on.

‘What on earth?’ Eden turned, her hand flying out to the switch. ‘Hey, we don’t just turn the generator on willy-nilly. Okay?’

‘I didn’t know. Geez.’ He glared at her. ‘So how do you live like this? How d’you cook? Watch TV?’

Eden’s face softened.

‘Sorry, you weren’t to know. I’m a bit tense right now. I cook on the AGA, that’s easy. I don’t have a television. That’s easy too. We can use the generator if we need to, but I try not to. It saves power. And hey,’ she shrugged and gave a smile, ‘I love firelight and candlelight and starlight. Don’t you?’

Tom looked at her as if she were mad.

‘What? So where do I plug in my Xbox? It *will* work here, won’t it?’

Eden frowned. He’d been right; she really *didn’t* know what he was talking about.

‘You know, computer games?’

Eden just stared and Tom continued, uncertainly.

‘Er, it’s what I, like, *do*, how I spend time.’

‘Well, I don’t think so,’ said Eden, her face settling back into sternness. ‘Did your mother really not teach you *anything*?’

Tom winced at the mention of his mom, but Eden didn’t seem to notice. ‘I’ll expect you to help me outside during the holidays. And before and after school, once it starts again.’

She glanced down at Tom and came to an abrupt halt. She raked her fingernails through her hair as if she had a bad case of head lice and busied herself lighting a fire. When she spoke again, her voice was softer.

‘God, child, there are plenty of books to read. You do read?’

The room certainly was crammed with books. There were bookcases on every wall, piles of books on the floor and another heap on the old desk too. The only book-free zone was the enormous fireplace, stone seats built in either side of the hearth. A black cat coiled in a low-slung armchair eyed him balefully.

‘Oh sit down, I’ll put the kettle on.’

Tom perched on the edge of a chair and peered around. There was a smattering of novels, recipe books and farming manuals such as ‘*Good Breeding Practice in Sheep*’ and ‘*Poultry – Old breeds, New methods.*’ But on the whole the books were pretty weird: ‘*The Subjugation of Demons*’, ‘*The Path of all Evil*’, ‘*The Control and Destruction of Vampiric Life Forces*’. Up high were older books whose names Tom couldn’t make out, bound in leather and ringed with metal. A sweet smell hung on the air, like incense. There were almost as many candles as books – fat wax-dribbled ones in niches in the wall and balanced on sconces, slim tapers in iron candelabras. A large drum lay on the sofa.

Just like a gaming magician’s den, thought Tom. Even down to the black cat. Maybe Eden was a witch. His friend Jake would love this. He *had* to text him. He pulled out his cell.

‘No point trying,’ said Eden, setting down a tray with two mugs of steaming tea and a plate of sandwiches. ‘No signal out here. We’re a bit cut-off.’

She settled a log on the fire and the room glowed soft yellow.

‘Look, I’m sorry I snapped. I forget how different Wambarrow must seem to you. I’ve lived here all my life.’

She stroked the black cat and it purred, pushing its head into her hand. ‘Jasper,’ she said. ‘He can be a bit unpredictable so I wouldn’t chance your luck, unless you like scratches.’ The cat glared. Tom glared back. Grinning dogs, glaring cats, whatever next, talking horses?

They ate in silence for a while and Tom found himself becoming edgy. Silence bothered him. It reminded him too much of the hospital shrink who had tried to get him to talk after the accident.

‘Awesome books,’ he said, with his mouth full of sandwich. ‘Pretty weird stuff though, isn’t it? What’s the story?’

‘No story, Tom. Just an interest.’

It seemed like she was thinking, puzzling over something when, abruptly, she stared into his eyes. Tom found he couldn’t stop staring back at her. A moment of panic

flashed through his body and he closed off, just as he had with the shrink at the hospital. Walls crashed into place one after another, creating a fortress in his mind. Eden blinked and turned away.

‘Tell me something, Tom,’ she said, casually, *too* casually. What was she after? ‘Have you ever had any strange dreams? Ever experienced anything unusual, weird, out of place?’

‘No, never,’ said Tom without a moment’s pause.

‘When you had the accident...’

‘I don’t want to talk about that.’

‘I understand. I just wondered if you remembered anything happening?’

‘Nothing happened. We had a crash and I flat-lined. Dad and Mom were toast. The doctors saved me, more’s the pity. That’s it. There’s nothing to remember.’

‘I’m sorry, Tom, I didn’t mean to pry. It’s just interesting that you... Well, the doctors said that technically you died and then came back to life. I suppose that makes you pretty special.’

‘Pretty unlucky, I’d say.’

‘Life goes on.’ Eden shrugged. ‘I know it’s hard to believe but you’re young. You will heal.’

Tom had heard this so many times before he didn’t even dignify it with a reply. He just couldn’t get his head round this place. How could his mom have grown up here? She was, *had been*, so, well, urban. So normal.

Tom sipped his tea and remembered his mom, sitting in their kitchen at home, saying ‘I can’t do a thing until I’ve had a nice cup of tea,’ like she always did. Parents weren’t supposed to vanish like that. It wasn’t right. Tears pricked his eyes once more and he swallowed them down. Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it. Think of anything but that. He yawned somewhat theatrically, casting a glance at Eden. She rose to the bait, rather eagerly, Tom thought.

‘I’ll show you your room. I hope you like it: it was your mother’s old room.’

Tom winced. Why couldn’t the woman stop talking about her?

They walked down a long corridor. The floor was flag-stoned and the cold seeped through his sports socks. The walls were uneven and painted white, the plaster flaking in places. Eden didn’t seem to bother too much about pictures of people; they were all of animals – horses, dogs, prize sheep, and faded hunting scenes. The corridor widened and heightened out into a hall. Antlers hung from the walls, one with a stuffed stag’s head attached. Tom blinked, stifling a memory.

He tried very hard to dislike his room. Tucked up in the eaves, it was small with sloping whitewashed walls and a narrow arched window deep-set in the wall. Eden lit a fire in a simple stone fireplace and the squat candles set in niches in the thick plaster wall. It was about as low-tech a room as you could get, yet it felt safe and welcoming.

‘Don’t forget to put up the fire screen before you turn in and blow out the candles.

The bathroom is two doors down and there’s a torch by your bed so you won’t need to turn on the light, OK? I’ll see you in the morning. Sweet dreams.’

‘Sure,’ he muttered and turned away. Behind him he heard a sigh, then Eden’s footsteps and the click of the door as she left.

Tom stretched out on the sleigh bed. Numerous sets of initials had been carved into the bed-head, all ending in 'G'. TG. ESG. LDG. TG must have been his mother. T for Tabitha. ESG, Eden perhaps. He couldn't imagine his grandmother as a girl. Was he scared of her? Not precisely, but she wasn't exactly what he had expected. He searched around for somewhere to plug in his computer. Surely Eden would turn on the power at least a few times a day? But there wasn't even one socket. Nor any sign of a phone line either. How was he supposed to live in this dump? His grandmother didn't even seem that thrilled to see him. Tom kicked the bed but only succeeded in stubbing his toe.

A piece of wood was sticking out at an angle. Tom tugged it and it swung out into his hand. Oh what the hell, he thought, stupid bed isn't even made properly. Then he realized it wasn't broken. He had opened a little door and behind it lay a hole, about the size of a laptop case. Tom poked his fingers in and felt around, pulling out a tattered exercise book. A childish sprawl ran over the cover:

'Leaf and Stone – First Lessons in Shamanism'
by Tabitha Greenway

Wambarrow Farm,
Larcombe,
Exmoor,
Somerset,
The West Country,
England,
Great Britain,
Europe,
The World,
The Solar System,
The Universe,
Infinity.

Pictures of trees and fairies danced over the cover - rainbows, suns, stars and the moon. His mother's book. Tom turned the first page and stared in amazement at her writing, so round and childish with little smiley faces over the 'I's.

A shaman is a walker between the worlds. We can live in the everyday world and also in the world of spirits.

A shaman? World of spirits? Why had his mother written about shamans and spirits? Was there anything else in there? Tom reached in and pulled out something that rattled. The room fell quiet at the sound. The rattle was made of leather stitched with what looked like sinew, with a piece of antler for a handle. A memory stirred and he ran his finger over russet bristles still clinging where the skin met the handle. 'Ugh,' he shuddered and threw it across the room, flinging the book after it. They landed with a thump against the skirting.

He wanted to be back at home, in his nice clean room with the fluorescent stars on the ceiling and his computer plugged in next to his bed; falling asleep to the flickering blue of his TV. Why did they have to have that accident? Why did his mom and dad have to die? Why hadn't *he* died? In a fit of desperation he snatched up the rattle and beat it repeatedly against the wall until the dry skin cracked and tore, scattering seeds all over the wooden floor.

Fighting the urge to be sick, Tom fell onto his bed, and sobbed.

CHAPTER THREE: The Barrow Opens

Journeying is the way the shaman moves from normal reality to the spirit world, to find a teaching or a healing. The shaman usually enters the lower spirit world through a hollow tree, a burrow, a spring or a cavern. Certain places should NEVER EVER be used for the starting point of a journey. Above all, never EVER journey or even just fall asleep on a burial mound or any kind of grave. This is really dangerous and really stupid.

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Tom wasn't into animals; he didn't do Disney cute or earnest eco-docs about the plight of the Amazon or the tragedy of the very last spotted toad. He preferred *Hellboy*, *Tour of Duty* and *Gears of War*. So why was he dreaming of badgers and foxes, of buzzards and owls, bats and field mice? Why were they all running as if a forest fire were licking at their tails? Well, not quite all. The stag wasn't running. It was standing in front of Tom, looming over him. It lowered its eyes to his and he heard words vibrate through his head. 'Remember. Learn. Temple.' What temple? The stag shook its head, turned and cantered away.

Tom noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Something dark and full of teeth. 'No!' his mouth made the shape, his throat constricted but no sound emerged. He tried to run but the earth sucked at his legs. 'No!' This time the scream came, with huge effort as if from some place miles away, and he awoke, heart pounding, yellow teeth flashing in front of his wide-open eyes for what seemed like forever. He reached for his inhaler and took a deep gasp.

Thank God it was no longer night. Light filtered through faded floral curtains and Tom tucked his head under them to peer out onto a blank, grey day. It was so quiet. Before the accident he would wake to the sound of cartoons on the television, or the phone ringing or mom yelling at him to get up. Even in hospital there had been the buzz of people talking, phones ringing, instruments beeping. Here it was silent. No, not quite true, thought Tom, as his ears attuned to the world around him. There was the pock of hens, the caw of crows in the large bare trees behind the house, the distant whine of some kind of vehicle and the guttural 'mmaaa' of sheep. But the everyday sounds of normal life, *real* life, were just gone. It was as if he had been picked up and placed outside time.

The house seemed to watch and listen as he padded down the stairs and found his way back to the kitchen. It was gloomy, the thick-set windows barely letting in the winter light. But Tom didn't dare turn on the generator for fear of Eden swooping down screeching at him. He peered round. Hardly high-tech, he sneered, casting an eye over the old laminate units, the gas fridge so ancient it was almost trendy, and the wooden farmhouse table surrounded by mismatched chairs. Lucky that the large red range belted out heat or it would be freezing in here. Next to the stove was a sofa,

betraying faint hints of its original floral design, covered with a couple of plaid throws stiff with cat and dog hair. It smelt of dog too, sort of yeasty, sweet and thick. Tom crinkled his nose in distaste, contrasting it to his kitchen at home, all sparkling white and stainless steel, scented with lemon and vanilla. This was a total hygiene nightmare. There was a note on the table, written in green ink in a firm hand.

'Tom. Left you to sleep in (just for today). Sorting sheep. Help self to breakfast (forage). Back later. E.'

Short, sharp, to the point, thought Tom, relieved he didn't have to face Eden right away. She was just so intense. Tom found the walk-in pantry and hauled out a loaf of bread. He also brought a large slab of bright yellow butter and a stocky earthenware pot labelled MARMALADE. His mom had liked that. There didn't seem to be a toaster anywhere so he simply sawed off a slab of bread, slathered it with butter and sweet-tart marmalade and sunk his teeth into the wedge. There was a jug of milk in the fridge and he poured himself a tall glass. It was thick, creamy and utterly delicious. Bet this isn't fat-free, he thought. Mom'd freak.

He felt uneasy in the house on his own so he shrugged into his ski jacket, tightened his second-best Pumas and let himself out of the kitchen door. At least he didn't have to go past that spooky head. But there was another one, leering over the door. This time it had blank eyes, small ears like a bear's and a long beak or maybe a snout. Hands, or claws, rested on the creature's cheeks. Repulsive thing. Like it was staring at him. Tom shivered and hurried across the farmyard.

Which way should he go? The little track, he figured, led back to the lane. A larger track, almost a proper road, would obviously link with some other road. Either side, hills circled with sheep. There wasn't another house in sight. He could hear the whine of a vehicle and, shading his eyes, tracked down a four-wheeled bike bouncing down the hill. Eden was hunched over the handlebars, a woman-bike hybrid, with Sparrow hurtling rhythmically round the field like a dog screensaver. Above them a hawk drew circles in the sky.

That decided it. Tom turned his back on the house and followed a stone path that led up a hill behind the farm. At first it was wide and clear, with shale underfoot. Trees and bushes had been tamed into hedgerow, studded with berries, some dull, some bright. But once he turned off the main path and started to climb, shale gave way to thick mud. 'Goddamnit,' Tom swore as his sneakers turned from snowy white to sludgy brown. Brambles plucked his coat, pulling him back. 'Damn,' he muttered, untangling himself. I wonder if they get poison ivy out here? I guess I'll soon find out, he mused, rubbing his hand where the thorn had snagged his skin.

It was a tough climb and Tom wished he'd brought a drink. He could hear water nearby but it was probably full of sheep's piss or dead cows or something. He kept on walking, up, up, always up, taking puffs from time to time from the inhaler. The trees began to thin out, giving way to scrubby gorse and bracken. The grass poked up in small hillocks which made walking tough if he left the path. Why didn't they have proper trails out here? Pave it decently? When I get to the top I should be able to see where I am, he thought, feeling hot and irritable. He'd never been really fit. He and

sports didn't go together that well and he'd lost count of the times he'd had to give up halfway through matches or runs and puff into his inhaler. Briefly he wondered what sports they played at school here. Soccer, he supposed, weren't the Brits mad about soccer? And cricket, all dressed up in that lame white gear, polite clapping, 'Well done old boy', all that garbage. He'd have to go through all that again. The rolling of eyes, the nudges, the being picked last all the time. Sport sucked.

Slowly he crested the hill. Stretched before him was the moor, miles upon miles of heather, gorse and bracken in tones of taupe, moss, russet and grey-brown. A little shiver ran down Tom's spine but he refused to be impressed. Like, it was hardly the Grand Canyon, was it? Or the Badlands? Nearby were a series of raised mounds, small hillocks. He climbed up the first one, higher than he expected. The grass on top was short and neat - a good place for a rest, he figured, pulling his jacket down to keep dry.

It seemed warm and dry on top of the mound. Tom yawned and his eyelids tugged downwards. Whoa, he'd only been awake an hour or so. Jetlag, he supposed. Maybe he'd just close his eyes for a minute or two. Snuggling into his jacket, he curled up like an animal in its nest, and was asleep within seconds.

Something jolted Tom and he opened his eyes, blinking. What the ...? The mound seemed to be moving, shifting, as if a digger were pushing it up from underneath. The earth scattered to each side revealing an opening, like the entrance to a cellar. Leading down, deep into the ground, were steps. Moving metal steps? Some kind of escalator. This was mad. How could you get an escalator in the middle of a moor? It must be a dream. The walls were covered with posters, just like on the subway. It was bright too, lit by fluorescent tubing. Nothing scary about this. Let's see where it leads. He stepped onto the steel ridged step. Hang on a minute. Tom started. He *knew* he was dreaming. Wow, this was neat.

The posters advertised all kind of stuff, cool stuff - movies, games, holiday resorts, theme parks, toys, food, sodas and candy. Tom missed the end of the escalator and stumbled headlong onto a smooth white floor. He ran his hand over it - some kind of plastic? There wasn't a speck of dust. Then looking up, he realised he was in a circular hall, with tunnels leading off in five directions. Hey, cool, like a game. Of course, if this were a game, one would lead to the treasure, and a few would have tomb guardians and flesh-eating demons. But then, if this really *were* a game, he wouldn't be in some bright well-lit subway station; he'd be in some kind of cavern, with flickering brands on the dripping stone walls. Then the brands would gutter and die. Except fluorescent lighting didn't do that. Except, oh hell, it did.

Plunged into total darkness, Tom spun round, trying to find his bearings. His hands stretched out and touched nothing. He fell to the floor and crawled, heart crashing in his chest. Mustn't panic, there has to be a way out. It's a dream, okay? His best friend Jake always said you could make things happen in your dreams, if you tried. Tom had laughed at him at the time and Jake had turned away, blushing. Tom felt a bit bad about that now but then he'd never known he'd been in a dream before. Well, it's worth a go, let's make a light. Tom screwed up his eyes and visualized lights. He opened them again and, yes, a shimmer of yellow light appeared down one of the tunnels. Not bad for a first attempt, thought Tom and moved towards it.

The tunnel was rounded, but it turned and twisted, always heading further down. Should he turn around? He looked back but the tunnel behind him was inky black. He couldn't stop himself thinking back to childhood fears, of things crouching under the bed, of monsters lurking in the shadows.

'Do monsters exist?' he'd asked his mom and she had frowned then shaken her head. 'Absolutely not. No such things at all.' She hadn't sounded totally convinced though and Tom still jumped the last few feet into bed, rather than letting claws grab his feet. The light ahead glowed brighter, as if beckoning him forward, and Tom followed. The tunnel started getting narrower and in places became little more than a tube through which Tom had to squeeze and wriggle. At one point he almost got stuck and wondered for one horrible moment if he would be trapped, like a cork in a bottle. The plastic made him sweat, his skin dragging against its surface. It felt horrible, alien, and Tom struggled to break free.

At last the tunnel widened again, and the descent became gentler. The plastic flooring started to break up and turned into multi-coloured gravel, like you get in some fancy yards. Tom found himself looking out over a subterranean lake. The waters were royal blue, a solid colour like a child's poster paint. There was a slight breeze, bringing with it a thick, *pink* sort of scent – bubble gum and candy floss, taffy and cherry cola. In the distance, he could hear what sounded like a fairground. He sat down on the shore and let the gravel run through his fingers. Weird place. The sky was blue again, slightly paler with wisps of clouds. He watched for a while and then frowned, he'd seen *that* formation before. It was some kind of simulation.

Nice enough, thought Tom, but it was a bit boring all on his own. Then the hairs on the back of his neck began to prickle and rise. He knew, somehow, that he *wasn't* alone. He could sense something around him. He spun round, gazing about, but there was nothing. The place was so bright and light and kindergarten coloured, it shouldn't feel threatening. How could anywhere so child-like feel so wrong? Something touched his face and Tom jumped back. 'Who's there?' Something tugged at his sleeve and he screamed.

'What are you? What do you want?'

Bony fingers brushed his cheeks, clutched at his sleeves. He stumbled back, meeting a resistance, the slightest crackling, like tiny bones being broken. Then the voice whispered in a dull hiss, 'Save us. Save us, Tom. Please, Tom.'

'Who are you?'

He brushed at his clothes, as if dislodging gnats. Not one now but hoards, all pressing in, pushing against him, fingers clutching.

'Dead. Lost dead,' murmured the reply. 'Trapped for ever. Eternity. Never-ending. Help us. Please.'

Tom was staggering to keep his balance.

'Stop tugging me! Get away from me.'

The fingers shrank back. Tom found that if he half-closed his eyes against the brightness, he could just make out shadowy figures in a circle around him. They seemed to stretch back as far as he could see, an insubstantial throng of pastel shades.

'Help, help, please help,' their voices the susurrations of leaves.

'How can I help you? What am I supposed to do?'

'Do you have the knowledge? The knowledge? Do you have the power?'

'What knowledge? I don't have any 'power'. Leave me alone. Look, go away. I can't do anything to help you.'

A sigh washed over the shoreline. Lost, lost, lost, whispered the voices. Lost, lost, lost.....

They faded away to the furthest corners of the cavern, fading into rocks and shadows. 'Look, I'm sorry, right? But I can't help you.'

'Lost,' one voice whispered, and then became all too clear. 'And now the ferry is coming,' it hissed. 'Goodbye Tom – you will soon be joining us yourself.' A mocking laugh echoed over the sand and then that faded away too.

Blue waves slapped precisely, obediently, against the multi-coloured shore. A boat moved silently, slicing through the waters. In it stood a small child, maybe three years old, wearing a pair of polka-dot dungarees and a baseball cap. The boat and child seemed to glow with the same sickly yellow he'd followed through the tunnels and Tom felt queasy just looking at them. Part of him yelled a warning to run but, as he turned back, the tunnel vanished, giving way to a sheer cliff of purple and pink, like some kind of climbing wall with tiny handholds. Could he climb it? No way. He'd get halfway up and then get stuck. The asthma would rise up and then he'd fall to his death.

Don't be stupid, he reminded himself, this is a dream. You can get out any time you want. So why didn't he just wake up? Maybe the child on the boat was going to show him something amazing, Tom reasoned. Just because those silly ghost things were frightened, doesn't mean it's all bad. But a chill crept over his heart and he willed himself to wake before the boat came to the shoreline.

He pinched his arm hard but nothing happened. Wake up! He shouted to himself. But the boat just kept gliding closer and closer.

It drew alongside the shore and the child beckoned Tom to get in. Tom tried to see its face but it was turned away. Reluctantly he stepped into the boat and slumped onto the low plastic seat. Without a word, the boat turned and glided back over the lake. Peering out, Tom realised with horror that the shoreline stretched in either direction for miles. Every inch was crowded with the pastel ghosts. Far in the distance, he could see one spreading out its arms as if to Tom. For one moment, he thought he recognised the figure, but then it sank back into the throng.

At the other side of the lake, the child indicated that Tom should get out and walk. Its face was bland and smooth, like some kind of doll without the features painted on. It made his skin crawl. He jumped out and hurried down another tunnel and tumbled into a circular room with a domed ceiling. It smelt squeaky clean, as if someone had just scrubbed it with disinfectant. It reminded Tom of something – one of those fast food restaurants maybe, the ones that have slot-machines and games round about, the ones his mother hated so much. There was only one table though – circular white plastic with seats attached. A neat pile of takeaway cartons sat on it. Hmm, what's this, Tom wondered, moving over and undoing the foil lip around a carton. Sweet and sour something. He wrinkled his nose. Chinese was *so* not his favourite. But there was a can of soda, and he was just reaching forward to grab it when he noticed a mirror bending around one wall.

The glass was shifting colour, like an LED display – from red to yellow to green to blue. As he came closer it pulsed faster. The mirror seemed to be watching him, scanning him. Then the colour settled to blue - his favourite - and Tom realised with a jolt of pleasure that he was staring at a computer screen. He looked round for a

keyboard or a mouse but there wasn't any sign. Damn, he muttered, I'd love to know what this could do. As if on cue, the screen burst into life and Tom watched a swirling kaleidoscope of colour fill the screen.

'Pretty psychedelic,' he muttered, but I need a menu or something. Faster than any computer he'd ever used, icons snapped into place. Wow - I just have to think what I want and it happens. He read the logos: GreatGames; FabFriends; SuperSport; Mega-Mall; Cool Clubs; Xtra TV; Extreme Movies; Cyberfun; Fun-Club; Movie-Star; Happy Home.... This is neat, thought Tom, mentally clicking on icons to see the contents. It's like the Internet and cable and the mall all rolled into one, he grinned. Forget Wambarrow Farm, I'll just hang out here.

'Great idea.' The screen filled with the face of a young man. 'Welcome, Tom, it's good to have you here with us.'

'Hey, it's cool.'

The man smiled in a matey way, as if he knew all about Eden and decrepit Wambarrow Farm. He looked cool too, with long beaded dreads and studs in his eyebrows and nose.

'Weren't you hungry?' he asked in an off-hand way and Tom noticed his eyes were different colours – one bright blue, one dark brown. The man gestured back to the table and, as Tom turned, he realised the food had changed. Now there was a bright red, white and blue tablecloth and on it was what looked like a Whopper, large French-fries and a mega carton of Coke. All round the room there were curving floor-to-ceiling TV screens, showing rock vids.

'A bit more to your taste? We aim to please.' The man sounded a bit eager, thought Tom. 'Go on, try some.' Tom frowned. He wasn't really hungry. After all, he had just eaten breakfast.

'There's apple pie for afters, Tom, just how you like it,' the voice urged. 'Go on. Have a bite.'

Well, now he came to think about it, maybe he could eat a bite or two. He shrugged. Perhaps he'd been down here longer than he'd thought.

Tom sauntered over to the table and slid onto the bench. His mouth watered at the smell of hot meat, onions and pickle. Back home he wasn't allowed burger, unless he went to a party or something. He stretched out and picked up the burger with both hands, the bun soft and squishy and the juicy filling oozing out over his hands. Hmm, this is more like it, he thought as he raised it to his mouth.

'No!' a voice screamed and out of nowhere a slim hand smacked the burger out of his hand. 'If you eat it, you die, you stupid fool!'

CHAPTER FOUR: Rowan

Greed, hate, injustice, envy, intolerance, jealousy, cruelty, despair. These are the real perils and in the other worlds we meet them as demons and devils. The guardian shaman must fight these evils at every turn. In this fight, above all else we need our power animal, our spirit guide. This courageous all-knowing spirit is our most true and honest helper. Without him or her, we are lost.

Leaf and Stone – First Lessons in Shamanism by Tabitha Greenway.

Tom spun around. A girl was standing behind him, feet planted square on the ground and eyes blazing with fury. A huge panther stood beside her, its coat gleaming as jet-black as the girl's skin, its eyes green and full of intelligence.

'What d'you think you're doing? Leave me alone.'

'You stupid idiot!' said the girl. 'Can't you see what you're eating?'

She pulled a twig from her pocket and tossed it at his hand. Tom stepped back in disgust as the food slid off his hand in a pool of slime. Green patches filmed the top of the Coke and the fries turned furry with mould.

'Oh gross. What's that about?'

'One taste and you'd belong to him - forever,' she said, gesturing behind her. Tom turned back to the computer screen. Irritation furrowed the man's brow and his smile was cracking around the edges.

'Ignore her, Tom. She's just a stupid silly child. Stay here. We could catch a movie. What d'ya fancy? Or play a game? Necromancer? Dragonbreath?'

'Hah, Belial, you trickster,' said the girl with a surprisingly deep laugh, braided hair slapping round her elfin face. 'Let's play a different game, huh? Show your new friend just how handsome you really are!'

She aimed another twig like a spear. As it struck the screen, the face shifted and changed, the soft tanned skin shrinking and sagging. The blue and brown eyes shifted to dull yellow and the once perfect lips crumpled inwards, revealing decaying blackened teeth.

'Tom! It's just a trick, Tom. Stay with me.' The voice was still honeyed but Tom felt sick as he looked at the wizened face.

'Let's shift,' shouted the girl and this time Tom didn't hesitate. Grabbing her hand, he turned and ran, the panther loping behind.

The moment they turned, darkness fell, thick and cloying. Tom stumbled blindly between the girl and the panther. Sometimes he brushed against walls, no longer smooth and plastic but harsh hard rock, slick with water. His senses told him the tunnel was narrow. Then he felt cool air on his hair and guessed they were running through a larger cavern. He frequently faltered, nearly falling, but the girl held on tight and, if he leaned in the other direction, he felt soft fur and flinched away.

‘Why are we running?’ Tom managed to spit out the words between gasps. ‘Hell wraiths,’ shouted the girl. ‘Keep moving.’ ‘I don’t hear anything,’ said Tom, wrenching his hand away and collapsing onto the slimy floor. But, as his heartbeat quietened, he *did* begin to hear things. A swift slithering. A scaly scratching. Tom imagined things without eyes or ears, just wide open gaping mouths. The things he had always known were waiting under his bed. He leapt to his feet and the race continued.

Just when Tom thought he could run no further, he saw light, pale but real, up ahead. It grew brighter and brighter and then they were out, in the cold grey daylight – and on a beach. Tom remembered that other shoreline and shuddered. But these were large pebbles and the water crashing into them was the grey-blue ocean. The girl fell on the pebbles and hugged the panther in delight. ‘We did it!’ she said with a grin, punching the air. The panther looked indulgently back at her and licked a paw.

Tom sat trying to get his breath back. He realised that, although he felt out of breath, he hadn’t wheezed once. His fingers closed around his inhaler.

‘Who the hell are you?’ he said. ‘And what the hell’s going on?’

She raised an eyebrow and ignored the question. ‘We’ve got to get back to your body. It doesn’t do to leave bodies hanging about, you know – particularly on barrows and above all on the wambarrows. What were you thinking? Let’s go. We can talk ourselves silly later, can’t we, Comer?’

The panther looked fondly at the girl, ‘It would seem prudent to get back to the wambarrows as soon as possible, for certain.’

Tom blinked in amazement – the panther talks? But then, this was a dream. Or was it? The beach felt as real as anything he had ever known. What was she talking about, getting back to his body? His body was here.

‘I don’t suppose you can journey at will, can you?’ the girl said hopefully then shook her head at Tom’s frown. ‘No, thought not. We’ll have to take you between us. Comer?’ she looked at the panther who gave a shrug.

‘Lie down,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘Look, there’s no time to argue about it. Do you want to stay stuck here? Lie. Down.’ She spoke with that imperious English accent, as if she were talking to a dog. ‘Whatever.’

Tom felt her bony hip against his. The panther lolled on the other side, the huge head with its gleaming white teeth rather too close to Tom’s neck for comfort.

‘I don’t bite, stupid boy,’ said the panther with an irritable growl. ‘I’m not *that* sort of panther.’ Tom hadn’t felt so put-down since second grade.

‘Close your eyes,’ said the girl and Tom snapped them shut without question. He wasn’t about to argue with a nutcase and a bloody huge wild animal.

One moment he could feel pebbles digging into his back and the sound of waves slapping against the beach, the next he felt cold damp earth and the croak of some bird. Opening his eyes he saw they were back on the moor, back at the barrows. ‘What the...’

The girl shook her head, ‘Not now. Let’s get back to Eden’s.’

She sprang to her feet and tugged at Tom’s hand. ‘Come on.’

They ran over the heather, Tom stumbling to keep up once again. His bad leg was starting to ache and he took a gulp of his inhaler. He looked round but there was no sign of the panther, although a sleek black cat like Eden's was bounding behind them. How did she know who he was? How did she get to that place? Come to that, how did *he* get there? And what *was* that place? The girl looked younger than him but she was taller and fitter. He felt a bit disgruntled. By the fading light it seemed he had been down in the caverns almost the entire day. If it hadn't been for her and that panther, he might still be there. Well, maybe that would have been all right. In fact, he figured, it had all been fine until *she* came along. Maybe she made it all happen. Sullenly he followed her, feet dragging until they were back at the farmhouse.

Wambarrow Farm seemed quiet in the fading light. There was no sign of Sparrow, the chickens were already roosting in the rafters of the barn and even the horse had turned away her head into the loose box.

'Hmm, funny,' said the girl, heading for the kitchen door. She didn't seem bothered by the head on the wall, even nodding at it in a friendly, almost deferential way.

Another note lay on the table.

Tom. Called away on urgent business. V. sorry. Have to fend for self. No more than a day or two I hope. Don't worry about sheep - Michael (next farm down) will sort. Please feed hens and Ellen (horse). Any questions, ask Rowan. E.'

'Oh bloody great,' said Tom, 'I've been hauled out of some place where at least they had a computer and decent food and now I'm left in this weird farm in the middle of nowhere which doesn't even have a TV. How the hell am I supposed to look after animals? Like *hello*. I never even had a hamster. And who's this loser called Rowan?'

'I am,' said the girl with a smile. 'I told Eden I'd go and find you. She wanted to talk to you about some of this, er, *weird stuff*.' She drew little speech marks with her fingers. 'But I suppose she was called away before we could get back.'

'Bit goddamn irresponsible, leaving us on our own in the middle of nowhere,' said Tom sulkily.

Rowan shrugged. 'Eden knows I can sort out the animals and that I can look after myself. I should be able to. After all,' she said with a prim smile, 'she trained me herself.'

'Well, I'm going to get some food. I'm starving,' said Tom. 'Don't suppose there's a McDonalds around here?'

'Hardly,' said Rowan in a rather superior voice. 'Anyhow, animals always come first. We have a sacred duty to our animals to look after them and care for them.'

'Well, do your precious sacred duty and sort them out yourself.'

Rowan fixed him with her tawny eyes and furrowed her brow. Without a word, she turned and stalked out the door.

Tom sat at the table and began to feel a bit guilty. Slowly he got up and found the barn where she was locking up the hens: safe from foxes, she said. He watched her give Ellen fresh water and reach up to kiss her goodnight on the nose. She softly rubbed the horse's neck and Ellen nudged her pocket. 'You old rogue, go on then,' said Rowan and held out a mint to the horse's whiskery mouth. Tom cringed. He'd

never been this close to a horse before and she seemed enormous, her yellow teeth fearsomely large as she crunched the mint and twitched her ears. Rowan rolled her eyes. 'You're scared of Ellen? Give me a break. Save it for something worth being scared of. Let's get inside before it gets dark – who knows what'll come sniffing around then.'

They walked back to the farmhouse and went in through the kitchen door, Rowan once again nodding to the head as if it were an old friend.

Inside she set to chopping vegetables and dicing meat from the fridge. Every movement was graceful and assured. Tom had never cooked anything other than the odd sandwich or a Hungry Man dinner slapped in the microwave.

'Get me some herbs, will you?' said Rowan. 'Thyme, winter savoury and a couple of bay leaves will be about it.'

Tom sighed but got up and walked towards the pantry. 'No silly,' said Rowan. 'From the kitchen garden...'. She noticed his blank look and shook her hand dismissively in the air. 'Forget it, I'll go.'

She marched out and returned almost instantaneously with a bunch of greenery, which she quickly chopped and added to the stew. 'I'll just pop it in the top oven and then we can have a rest while it's cooking,' she said, cranking open the heavy door of the range and wrestling in the pot.

They sat at the table, spooning in mouthfuls of stew and sipping glasses of cool water, which tasted better than anything Tom had ever drunk. 'Spring water. Beats Coke any day, doesn't it?' said Rowan with that superior, know-it-all tone again.

'I wouldn't go that far,' said Tom. 'How old are you?'

'Thirteen.'

'Oh, okay, same as me,' he admitted. 'You look younger but you seem, like, mature, I guess.'

Rowan shrugged. 'Eden says I'm an old soul. Anyhow, you learn early how to look after yourself out here – not much choice really.'

'I didn't mean the practical stuff,' said Tom. 'I meant what you did earlier. The weird shit, yeah?'

'You're Eden's grandson – you should know,' she said, nibbling a hangnail. 'But then your mum ran away from here, turned her back on it all, didn't she?'

'I guess,' Tom gave a shrug. 'Maybe she just wanted something a bit more, well, *modern* from life.'

Rowan snorted. 'What, fancy shops and big televisions and flashy cars? Great. What about the land? What about the guardians? She betrayed us.'

She rubbed her face against the fur of the cat, which had settled into her lap.

Tom kept silent and stared. She looked quaint and old-fashioned, nothing like the pampered polished girls back home. Tall and rangy, she had a sharp chin in a heart-shaped face and braids tugged back into a ponytail by a plain elastic band. Her skin was deepest ebony and her eyes tawny, with specks of green and yellow. If she had been one of the mall girls he would have sworn she was wearing contacts. Her skirt came to her knees and was several sizes too big, unlike the hand knitted jumper that had clearly been washed so many times it looked like felt. Having shed her green gumboots inside the back door, her legs and feet were bare. Each knee bore a large scab and her legs looked as though they'd had a fight with a thorn patch – and lost. Rowan looked up and caught his eye.

‘You really don’t know anything about it, do you?’

‘I figure Eden is into some weird stuff, like witchcraft or something.’

‘Eden’s not a witch, you idiot. She’s one of the Guardians. A shaman.’

‘What, like medicine man stuff?’

Rowan rolled her eyes. ‘Oh brother. You really do know shit. Shamans can walk between the worlds. They can journey in this world and also in other worlds, spirit worlds. They do it to protect the land, to save the Earth.’

‘Well good for them. What’s it got to do with me?’

‘Eden thought you’d be brimming with power. She even thought you might be a guardian. She hoped you would be able to help us find the new Kashebah. But you just don’t have it.’

Tom shrugged. ‘I’m not sure I want ‘it’ whatever ‘it’ is. Why should I want to be some loser guardian anyhow? And what’s a kashaban? Like I care.’

‘*Kashebah*. It’s a sacred temple. It could help us save the world...’

Tom rolled his eyes and she faltered.

‘Who cares about some stupid temple? What I want to know is why those things chased us? And like, how did I get there in the first place?’

Rowan bit her lip, ‘I don’t know. I wish Eden was here. Maybe they thought you had power – and you don’t. Or maybe they wanted to capture you as some kind of hostage – to prevent Eden and the other guardians from finding the new temple. I don’t know.’ She pushed away her bowl.

‘My guides say you’re a piece of this, Tom, but they don’t seem to know why.’ She shrugged. ‘Maybe they got it wrong. I suppose even guides can have off-days.’

CHAPTER FIVE: The Dying Hind

The wild Red Deer are the heart and living soul of Exmoor. They were here before mankind and watched us arrive with our small, faltering, uncertain steps. The deer provide us with food, with clothing, with material for our drums and rattles. To hunt and kill a deer is a serious business – and must only be undertaken if you can gain free and willing agreement from the animal. Deer magic is deep and powerful. Without the deer, Exmoor will no longer be a hallowed place.

Leaf and Stone – First Lessons in Shamanism by Tabitha Greenway.

Far away from Wambarrow a group of figures stood silhouetted against the evening sky. They were close to the summit of a cone-shaped hill crowned by a ruined chapel. A small fire burned in the center of their circle. Tom could see it all as clearly as if he were right there, yet he knew he was tucked up tight in his bed. This was journeying again, wasn't it? It was unsettling, unnatural somehow. Why could he do this? How come he never could before? Was it something that just switched itself on here on Exmoor? He didn't like it, but then again he didn't know how to make it stop. It was kind of boring watching this lot. Now if he could be right there at a Red Sox game, well that would be *really* cool.

'Who's going to drum?' said a tall woman wrapped up in a thick coat. Her voice sounded familiar but then all English people sounded much the same.

'I'll do it.' An elderly man, all bundled up in stout tweeds like Sherlock Holmes in the TV series, leaned to pick up the drum that sat behind him. It was the kind you saw in New Age stores, like a Native American thing, but instead of coyotes and eagles, it had a curling pattern painted on it – leaves and animals and flowers all entwined.

They placed rugs on the grass, and sat down around the fire. They were going to freeze their butts off, thought Tom. Though maybe, like him, they were in this weird dream world. No, this was real somehow, Tom just knew. It was happening somewhere right now.

The people closed their eyes and sat silently for several minutes, as if gathering their thoughts. Then the drum began. It was not loud, but firm and insistent, a steady swift beat that caught the mind and took it travelling.

Tom caught a movement off on the other side of the hill. A band of teenagers were staggering up a sheep track, carrying cans of lager and a beat-box, giggling and telling jokes. As they approached the summit, they hesitated, as if they suddenly realised it wasn't such a good idea to have a party up here on one of the coldest nights of the winter. Tom didn't blame them. The more he looked around, the more he could see, hear and sense. Was it his imagination or were there eyes staring out of the dark? The air throbbed with the beating of huge wings and occasionally a growl, deep and throaty, echoed round the ruined chapel. The teenagers looked nervously at one

another and, with one accord, turned and hurried back down the hill, stumbling over the uneven clumps of grass.

No other humans came near the hill but Tom realised with a shiver that other things were hiding in the shadows. They kept their distance but that didn't stop them watching and listening. He could sense cold eyes and somehow knew they belonged to creatures of scale and slime and ancient menace, like those that had pursued him through the tunnels of the Wambarrow. They didn't attack and somehow Tom knew they could not get closer while the other creatures prowled and hovered. Nor could they harm. At least not yet. But they could watch and report from a place where, for now, their masters still could not tread.

'It's no use. There's something blocking us.' The tall woman opened her eyes and the drumbeat faded away.

'We must find it soon,' said a younger woman, rubbing her eyes. 'This place can't hold the power much longer. I can feel it ebbing away beneath us.'

'I just don't understand,' said the tall woman again, pulling her coat around her with an irritable shrug.

'We need more strength,' said the old man. 'We need the younger guardians with their fresh green growth. What about your grandson, Eden?'

Ah, of course, it was Eden. He should have known. He started to smile but then Eden's laugh barked like a dog-fox, 'The boy knows nothing. Nothing. He obviously has no talent or Tabitha would have trained him. No, it's sad but true, the lad loves all Belial's distractions and he's jam-packed with the anger and denial of Ahriman.'

Tom frowned. No talent? How dare she? What did she know about his mother anyhow? They hadn't seen each other for years. Belly-all? Aahryman? Rowan had called the guy under the Wambarrow something like that. Who the hell were they?

'Eden!' the younger woman interrupted. 'Don't say those names. Not here. Is there no chance for the boy? We had such hopes.' Her voice drifted away.

'No hope at all. Not a chance. We must find the new place ourselves – or die trying. What other choice do we have?'

Their voices rose and fell through the night, arguing, debating. Tom gave up trying to follow. He felt angry and confused. What did his mother have to do with these losers? How had he gotten mixed up with this?

The wind was howling by now and the temperature had dropped further still. He could almost see the frost creeping along the blades of grass, chilling them in a casing of ice. Yet Eden and her buddies sat there like they were having a cookout on a summer day. He could clearly see the forms of the four creatures around them now – a bear, a dog, an otter, and an owl – like they were protecting the people somehow. A buzzard with the wingspan of an eagle circled above them. There was a shadow of some other creature too, yet it remained hidden behind the chapel, keeping an eye out back, Tom supposed.

As dawn finally broke and a weak winter sun filtered through the clouds, the circle broke, the vigil ended. Tom watched the five figures making their way cautiously down the winding path. They looked exhausted and they didn't seem aware of the slithering things disappearing into the shadows. Tom however could feel them, sense them, burrowing underground and slithering through the hidden pathways to the

drains of the town. Couldn't Eden see them? Didn't she realise they were sneaking off to tell tales? Maybe she didn't know everything after all, he smirked.

Tom woke to the sound of tapping at his door. 'Yeah, it's open. Come in,' he muttered, rubbing his eyes. 'What's happened? What's the matter?'

'Time to get up, dozy.' It was Rowan.

'But it's still pitch dark.'

Tom blinked irritably. He felt exhausted, as if he had spent the night playing basketball or something. 'Go away, it's the middle of the goddamn night.'

'No it's not,' she said primly. 'Come on. There are animals that need feeding. Eden won't be back today, so we need to sort them out.'

'When did you talk to Eden?' said Tom, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. 'I didn't hear the phone.'

'Not on the phone, silly.' Rowan laughed. 'I journeyed to talk to her. You know, like we did on the Wambarrows. Shamans can do it to get information.' She shook her head as if this were kindergarten stuff.

'She and the other guardians are trying to find the new power place but they're not getting anywhere.....'

I could have told you that, thought Tom, but he didn't see why he should tell Little Miss Know-it-All. Rowan's voice broke off, 'What's that? She jumped across the room and picked up the rattle like it was some kind of holy relic.

'Oh that,' said Tom, trying to make his voice sound casual. 'I found it in a hole in the bed. I guess it was my mom's when she was a kid.'

Rowan stared at him in amazement. 'But how did it get broken?' She planted her hands on her skinny hips and looked for all the world like his sixth grade teacher.

Tom felt awkward, a bit embarrassed. But he wasn't going to let Rowan have the satisfaction of being right. If it was his mother's rattle, it was surely his now, and so what if he did break it? Yet he couldn't quite bring himself to tell Rowan the truth, not when she was staring at him like that.

'Er, it's like I dropped it and it just, well, smashed. Hey, it's pretty old. Stuff doesn't last forever, does it?'

'But it's deer-hide, Tom. It can't be broken like glass or pottery. Only anger or hate can smash deer-hide. Oh Tom.'

She cradled the rattle like it was a baby.

'It's just a stupid goddamn rattle,' Tom's voice had an unpleasant tone now. 'What's the big deal?'

Rowan didn't say a word. She spun round on her heel and ran out, slamming the door behind her. He could hear her trying not to cry, as her footsteps crashed down the wooden floor of the landing.

Tom glared at the door and then turned over with a grunt. At least he could get back to sleep now. But he couldn't get Rowan's face out of his mind. Try as he might, however much he tossed and turned, he was wide awake. Damn it. It wasn't even dark anymore. Rowan was right, it *was* day, regardless of the gloom.

Tom shrugged himself into his clothes and tied up his sneakers. Despite his best attempts at scrubbing them, they were still disgustingly dirty. Tom liked his sneakers gleaming white. Goddamn place, he muttered, kicking the door and half-wishing it was Rowan or Eden or anyone who could feel it and hurt. I hate it here, I hate it.

Creeping down the dark stairs, Tom wondered if he could get out of the house without seeing Rowan. Maybe he could walk down to the village, find a cyber café or something. OK, so that was dumb, but there must be some kind of drugstore or gas station. The way he felt now even a Snickers bar would cheer him up. But as he sidled along the hallway a delicious smell wafted past him. Hot toast.

Tom was ravenous. He couldn't help himself; his feet and stomach almost walked him to the kitchen all by themselves. He stood on the threshold and frowned. Rowan was wielding something that looked like a metal snowshoe. Sandwiched between it were two slices of thick toast, unevenly speckled. He breathed deeply, inhaling the scent.

'Toast,' said Rowan, with a hint of frost in her voice. She slid them off onto a plate and nudged it towards Tom. 'You *are* hungry?'

Tom nodded, careful not to catch her eye as he slid onto a chair and spread butter onto the toast. It tasted as good as it looked and he wolfed it down. He caught Rowan trying hard not to smile as he accepted another plateful. Tom didn't mention the rattle and, to his relief, neither did Rowan. The two of them sat eating in a companionable silence.

'I've sorted the animals,' she said after a while. 'And the housework can wait. I think I know exactly what you need.'

Need? She sounded like his teacher again. Why did she have to be so darn prim? Was it some English thing or just her?

'Hmm?' Tom's mouth was still full of toast but she was obviously waiting for some kind of response. She *had* cooked him breakfast, the least he could do was listen to her, even if it was more of the same old nonsense.

'Soul retrieval.'

'What the..?'

'Look at you, Tom Greenway,' she said. 'Any shaman worth her salt would see the signs. Let's face it, you're grumpy, you're irritable....no, let's not mince words, you're angry as hell. It's as clear as the nose on my face, you need to find the lost parts of your soul.' She crossed her arms with a kind of 'so there' look, pursing her lips and widening her eyes. Tom wanted to punch her. She was like some kind of junior league Mary Poppins.

'Oh, sure,' he said. 'Let's go to Walmart or whatever; check out the deals..... "Soul Parts on sale – buy one, get one free".'

'Ho bloody ho,' said Rowan. 'This is serious, Tom. I can help you. Eden has taught me this stuff.'

'I don't need your help. I don't need anyone's help. Just leave me alone.'

'Really?' Rowan's voice quivered a bit as if she was trying very hard not to cry or yell. She breathed in deeply and glared at Tom, eyes glinting.

'Fine, live a half-life if that's what you want.' She picked up the toasting snowshoe thing and slammed it on the table, crumbs flying everywhere. 'See if I care if Belial gets you. Go on, numb yourself with stupid bloody TV shows, stupid computer games. Go live in a mall or whatever. He's just waiting for you to do that, don't you know, you stupid, *stupid* little boy.' Tom opened his mouth to reply but she waved her hands in front of his face, biting her lip with fury.

'No, you just listen to me. In fact, if you're going to do it, do it properly, why don't you? Get pissed out of your head; take crack or whatever, dope yourself into

oblivion. Oh go on, kill yourself if you think you're so bloody clever. That'd take the pain away.'

Tom stared at her blankly. The walls were closing in, his protection slamming into place. 'I don't have any pain,' he chanted like a mantra, feeling a sensation like a band around his chest.

'Oh right.' Rowan laughed, a hollow sarcastic laugh. 'Like your dad dying wasn't painful. Like your mum dying wasn't painful. Like almost dying *yourself* wasn't painful. Like living a plastic shrink-wrapped existence when you were born to be a shaman wasn't painful. Yeah, yeah, yeah, or whatever you say in the good old US of A.'

She stalked out of the kitchen and slammed the door behind her.

Great. I've got her pissed for the second time today, thought Tom, and that's the second door slamming too. But she shouldn't interfere. What the hell does she know about me? What does she know about anything? Growing up out here, in this goddamn place in the middle of timewarp England. Cut off from the real world. Nothing to worry about in her perfect little world, has she? It's not like she's lost her parents, is it? She's got it just fine. Stupid goddamn girl, full of weird shit.

'Tom!' A strangled shout came from outside. 'Tom, come quickly.'

What now? Tom hauled himself to his feet and pushed open the heavy door, ducking under the lintel with a shiver.

'What's the problem?'

'I'm here. Come here. Please, be quick.' Tom followed her voice through the yard to a hedgerow bordering a scrubby field. Rowan was sitting on the ground, her lap cradling the head of a deer. The creature was barely breathing, its flanks scarcely moving. Tom crouched down and looked at the deer. It seemed to switch its gaze to stare deep into Tom's eyes in some kind of acknowledgement. A prickling tingled the back of Tom's neck.

'I've seen this kind of deer before,' he said, shaking his head. Why was it so familiar?

The deer was dying. Its eyes were dulling and Tom could see blood around its mouth.

'What happened?'

'I don't know. Something attacked her,' said Rowan pointing to a wound in the deer's flank.

There was a movement behind Rowan and Tom snapped his head around. 'What was that? I saw something move in the trees.'

He peered but couldn't see anything. Then, again, there it was. It was as if the trees were caught in a sun-haze – yet there was no sun. Tom blinked as the hedgerow seemed to shiver and then a man was standing in front of them. Tom shrank back in horror, his mouth going dry. It was a man, yet not a man. He was tall, somewhere over six feet, with skin that was a rich hard brown, the colour of burnished wood. His limbs were long and sinuous, his feet bare and ending in long curved toes, almost like claws. Tom snuck a look at his hands and his fingers too were more like talons, the nails sharp and curved. Every nerve in Tom's body was begging him to run yet he remained frozen, like a rabbit caught in the gaze of a snake. He stared helplessly at the figure.

His clothes looked like they were made from some combination of leaves and skin, and his hair was long and tangled, like wild honeysuckle caught in brambles. A swift lashing movement caught Tom's eye and he drew in his breath sharply – a tail flicked from side to side, like a cat's does when it's angry. But this tail was thin and scaly, like that of a rat.

'Leave this, beast-slayers,' he hissed, showing sharp, almost feline, teeth. Tom jumped back at the venom in his voice but Rowan seemed unconcerned.

'We didn't do this,' she said mildly, nodding at the figure.

'It is always the *banas*, the slayers' doing,' he said, clicking his tongue which was, Tom noticed uneasily, long, pointed and a pale sickly green.

'Who caused *dolh-wund* to the hind?' He didn't pause for an answer. 'Which *bana* is driving the wild beasts from the deep safe places, and our kin with them?'

His voice was bitter and harsh, the words spitting out.

Rowan sighed. 'When we find the new Kashebah, it will get better, I promise.'

'Your oaths, your *behatten*, mean nothing to us, slayer. We want nothing to do with your race, your foolishness and your *besmitan* gods. I will take the hind for *byrignyss*, for burial.'

Tom couldn't control his breathing. He was gasping for air, adrenaline sending shivers up his spine, every muscle in his body twitching and ready to run. Yet Rowan didn't seem scared. She didn't even, he realised, seem her usual know-it-all self. She sighed and very gently set the hind's head on the ground. Pulling herself to her feet, she moved away.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'We are trying.'

The figure didn't even look at her but gathered the deer into his arms. Crooning a lullaby of whispering leaves and gently falling rain, he lifted her as if she were no more than a puppy. Once again, the hedgerow shimmered and then there was nothing to show they had ever been, except for an indentation in the frosted earth.

'What the hell was that?' started Tom, letting out a breath with a huge gasp and rummaging in his pocket for his inhaler. He glared at Rowan who stood shivering, her head bowed and gazing at the ground. She might not have looked frightened, he thought, but it wasn't every day you met some weird creature like that. She must be terrified. He knew he was. He put an arm clumsily around her shoulder.

'Come on, you're freezing. Let's get inside.'

'Ferish,' said Rowan, her teeth chattering. She had put on one of Eden's jumpers, which brushed her calves while her skirt dried on the AGA.

'What?'

'You'd call them fairies.'

'No way. Fairies are like, cute; like Tinkerbell with little wings and stuff.' Tom paused, 'Not that they exist...duh.'

'Well, think again,' said Rowan. 'Forget Tinkerbell. Forget the flipping Flower Fairies. Ferish are as large as humans, often larger and they're the worst kind of enemy – cruel and unforgiving. They hate us and, to be honest, who can blame them?' She gave a shrug.

'All we do is wreck their home and kill the animals. Eden says that in the old days shamans would have Ferish as guardians or you could journey to ask them stuff. But it never happens anymore. It's a real pain, actually. From what I've read they're really powerful and might be able to help us with the new temple and all.' She paused

and her shoulders slumped. 'But that's probably the first and last Ferish you'll ever see.'

Tom couldn't pretend to be sorry. In fact he was more than relieved. The fairy man had been, frankly, terrifying. Almost more terrifying than Belial and his slither brigade. But the dying hind, on the other hand, had touched him in a way little had in a long time. Her beautiful, trusting face. Her golden brown eyes misting into death. They reminded him of sad places, hidden places, hurtful places. Tom sighed. Much as he disliked to admit it, maybe Rowan did have a point. He didn't like feeling so angry and miserable. It took too much effort being this unpleasant all the time. Before the accident he hadn't been a bad person. He had never been the most popular kid in class, what with the asthma and not being good at sport, and the foul-ups on stage. In fact, now he thought about it, he had never really fitted. He'd never been one of the gang, no matter how hard he'd tried. It had always felt as if something was missing; that there was a piece of the jigsaw out there he couldn't find.

'Rowan,' he said. 'Look, don't get the wrong idea about this, OK? I'm not saying you're right about this soul finding ritual thing. But if you wanna do it....' He tailed off, watching her face for any sign of triumph, ready to change his mind in a second. But she looked seriously, at him. 'Look, what I'm saying is, give it a go, OK? Hey,' he laughed hollowly, 'it might, you know, be just what I need.'

CHAPTER SIX: Singing the Soul Back Home

We can all lose parts of our souls. It happens quite naturally when we suffer a loss, a hurt, a grievance or wrong. Often people lose parts of their souls when they have an accident or bad illness – it's as if part of us cannot bear to stay and watch and so it literally 'goes away'. The effects of soul loss are easy to see: people are often listless, lacking in energy. They feel depressed or anxious or irritable and angry. Life doesn't seem worth living. The job of the shaman is to journey to find the lost soul parts and bring them 'home'. It should be undertaken with care and with the help of your guardian spirits.

Leaf and Stone – First Lessons in Shamanism by Tabitha Greenway.

The beat of the drum filled Tom's ears. He lay on the deer-hide rug, watching Rowan out of half-closed eyelids. She had told him to keep his eyes shut but he couldn't resist seeing what she was up to. She was dancing, a sinuous dance which seemed to take her over, as if she was *being danced* in some weird way. Eden's cat, Jasper, watched from the chair, sitting alert with the hairs on his back slightly raised. Abruptly Rowan stopped and stood still, as if listening. She raised her hands around her mouth and uttered several staccato cries, as if she was calling something, or someone. There was a flash of black and Tom blinked in amazement. Rowan wasn't quite Rowan any more. He shook his head but the illusion remained, her eyes were widening and he caught glimpses of black fur. If it weren't totally stupid, he'd say she was turning into a big cat. Ridiculous, he told himself. Be rational, take a proper look, but the drumbeat was so hypnotic he found it hard to keep the crack in his eyelids open. Next time he managed to squeeze them apart, it was Rowan again and she was kneeling down next to him.

'Just relax, Tom,' she whispered. 'You don't have to do anything. Just lie back and rest.'

He felt her settle herself beside him, painfully aware that her hip-bone was grazing his. He pulled away slightly but Rowan placed her body close again so they were touching at shoulder, hip and ankle. He felt the blood rush to his face and bit his lip in annoyance. It wasn't like he was soft on her or anything. Good job she couldn't see: at least he hoped she couldn't.

The drum beat changed and for a few moments Tom just lay, listening to Rowan's breath deepening, becoming slower and slower until he began to worry whether she would stop breathing altogether.

A whooshing noise filled his head. The drum was fading and instead he could hear the sound of a roaring wind. He couldn't feel the rug beneath him any more; instead it felt as if he were floating in thin air. Cautiously he opened one eye, then the other, and gasped. He was flying way up in the sky, clouds wafting tendrils past him, his cheeks damp and his arms clamped by his sides like a damn superhero. Fighting

panic, he looked down and, far below he could just make out a plain, desolate and empty. Another figure was flying ahead of him. Rowan. She looked thin and vulnerable, a scruffy bird against the sky.

Rowan turned in the air current and dropped like a hawk that has found its prey. Tom followed. The wind rushing into his face almost took his breath away – it was like standing at the front of a boat trying to breathe into the wind. He felt the exhilaration of a bird in flight before realising they were headed on a collision course with the largest mountains he had ever seen. Peak after snow-capped peak rose before them, stretching as far as he could see.

‘Rowan!’ he shrieked, but his voice whistled past him and vanished. The rocks loomed nearer. His heart pounded and he instinctively shut his eyes and flinched, waiting to smash into them. Nothing happened. Wincing, he opened his eyes and realised he was slowing down. Glancing below he saw Rowan heading for what looked like a building carved into the mountain. Seconds later he landed behind her.

Tom peered over the stone balcony and felt his head spin. They were thousands of feet high in what seemed to be a monastery or temple.

‘Tom. What on earth...?’ Rowan spun round, a white flower in her hand. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Tom. ‘One moment I was lying next to you and the next I was flying.’

Rowan furrowed her brow. ‘I was the one who was supposed to have journeyed, not you.’ She shook her head, like a horse dislodging flies. ‘Well, you’re here now. We’ll worry about it later. I’ve come to see the lama, one of my guides, and I suppose you’ll have to come too.’

She turned on her heel and stalked towards double wooden doors, carved with patterns and figures. They were beautiful but disturbing - bizarre creatures, half people, half animals - twirling in sinuous embraces. Tom hoped Rowan hadn’t noticed.

The doors swung open and Tom stumbled in behind Rowan, blinded by the darkness after the snow-light outside. His hands brushed the walls, sending up clouds of dust and he fought the urge to sneeze. Funny, still no hint of asthma in this other world. Holding his breath, he followed Rowan through the corridor and was relieved when it opened out into a circular room. He coughed – dust had been replaced by the sweet scent of incense. Hundreds of candles flickered, lighting up golden statues – of gods and demons. The room seemed to shimmer as if it might break apart at any moment. Rowan placed the white flower in the fingers of a seated Buddha and bowed. ‘Follow me,’ she whispered.

He walked behind her through another door. The sun on snow was blinding and Tom blinked furiously. They were standing in a cloister – a long narrow balcony clinging to the side of the mountain. A stone balustrade was all that separated them from thin air and Tom’s stomach lurched. The oldest man Tom had even seen was sitting silently, seemingly contemplating the view. He was tiny, his cross-legged limbs almost child-like; his hands and feet gnarled like the roots of trees. His face was the colour of chestnuts and his eyes were... ..indescribable. Tom flinched and inspected his fingernails with embarrassment.

‘Sit,’ the man said in a soft voice.

Rowan sat opposite and kissed his hands. He patted her head with what looked like tenderness. Tom slid behind Rowan, hoping he wouldn't be seen.

'You've brought a friend to visit, my Rowan.'

'Not really, Rinpoche,' she murmured using a gentle voice he hadn't heard before.

'He shouldn't be here. I'm trying to find his soul parts but,' she shrugged, 'he just came along too.'

The lama smiled and nodded.

'I knew you'd bring him one day, my dear. It's clearly the time.'

Rowan looked puzzled, 'I don't understand, Rinpoche.'

The lama laughed softly.

Then he blinked as an owl might do and laid his hand on hers, ancient and gnarled meeting young and smooth. 'The Cave of Lost Children, my Rowan.'

Rowan groaned and slumped. 'Not there, Rinpoche, not there. Surely somewhere else? Please?'

But Tom could see she didn't expect him to relent.

'I suppose I knew that really. OK, not much point sitting here, is there? We'd better get on with it. Come on, Tom.'

She stood up and then bowed to the lama. 'Thank you, Rinpoche. I'll come again soon, I promise.'

The lama smiled and gently waved her away. Tom followed, grateful that he had been overlooked.

'Tom.' The voice was suddenly young and strong. Tom turned.

'Come here.' Tom obeyed. He tried hard not to bow but his head seemed to dip of its own accord. This was ridiculous, he wasn't religious: he didn't pray to anyone or bow to anything.

'Look after Rowan. Keep her safe. Protect her.'

Tom was puzzled, like how could *he* protect Rowan – she was the one with all the knowledge; she was the goddamn shaman. But no point in upsetting the old guy. He nodded absent-mindedly, 'Sure thing. Well, hey, I'll try.' His eyes slid away.

'Come on, Tom,' called Rowan. He backed away from the lama. His back hit cool rock and he grasped for the balustrade, his stomach lurching once more at the emptiness below. No way was he going to pitch himself over that, into the void, whether he was dreaming or what. But, before he knew it, he felt himself lifted up and wind filled his ears once more.

He could hear drumming and, gently shifting, felt Rowan's body against his. They were back at Wambarrow Farm. He tried to open his eyes but they were shut fast, as if someone had stitched them tight. Again, Rowan's breathing settled and deepened and Tom found himself slipping away once more. He simply had no choice.

This time he joined Rowan instantly, sitting next to an animal hole in a bank. Stiff stalks of bracken lay flattened around the hole. Tufts of grass were bleached to a sickly yellow, against frost-tipped earth. Only the acid-green mats of moss were vibrant. As Tom looked at the hole, it started to shimmer, like a heat-haze in the desert. Then Tom felt the weirdest sensation, as if he were being sucked down the hole, like a piece of trash plucked off the carpet and into a vacuum cleaner. Had the hole gotten bigger, or had he gotten smaller? Was this some kind of Alice in Wonderland thing? Colours flashed past him as he torpedoed down into the earth; sometimes it looked like there were glinting jewels embedded in the soil, and he reached out to grab one, but it was impossible. Then everything went black. He dropped, his heart thumping, remembering stories that if you died in a dream you died

in real life. Was he crashing into oblivion? It was funny really – he had wanted to die for so long yet now it seemed possible, he was hanging onto life. With a thud, he crunched into the ground, landing painfully on his hip.

‘Ouch. That hurt.’

There was no reply. But he knew he was somewhere completely different even before he dared opened his eyes. He was breathing in heat, thick humid heat that tickled his lungs. The dank stench of rotting vegetation was overlaid with the sickly scent of blossom. He opened his eyes and blinked. It was a jungle. Birds called overhead and the shrill cries of animals pierced the air. Tom looked around, his mouth open in amazement, until he nearly swallowed a bright red fly. He watched the flash of feathers as parrots swooped through the trees. A troop of monkeys cackled, hanging from lianas. There, just behind that bush, something black and....

‘Hello, Tom.’

Tom jumped and spun round. Comer was watching him with amused eyes.

‘Welcome to the Lower World.’ He twitched his tail as if showing off the place. The panther had the kind of voice you heard on the old black and white movies his dad had loved – all sort of precise and posh. The kind of voice that made you want to sneer and poke fun – if it hadn’t belonged to a huge panther with teeth like switchblades.

Rowan flung her arms around the panther’s neck and he licked her neck. Gross. Though Tom had to admit she had a pretty nice neck really, straight and long and soft. Rowan wasn’t paying any attention to Tom though.

‘We’re going to the Cave, Comer,’ she said. Comer sighed heavily, ‘I detest that place. But I suppose it was inevitable.’

Rowan swung her leg over Comer’s back as if he were a horse. Then she reached out a hand to Tom. Tom hesitated a moment, peering back where he thought he’d seen the shape. Nothing. He shrugged and clambered up. As if this could *get* any weirder! Comer seemed immense and his fur was so thick and soft, it felt like clambering into the most comfortable chair. Tom wondered how to hold on. He didn’t want to clutch onto Rowan’s waist so he tentatively placed his hands behind him, hoping to balance his weight, like when he’d ridden pillion on a Harley once. With a bound the panther was off and Tom lurched backwards. Before he knew it, he was clutching Rowan, his arms wrapped right around her skinny frame. Tom winced. *Not* cool. *Not* remotely cool.

Comer moved so fast Tom became dizzy watching the land pass by. So he shut his eyes and tried to relax into the loping movement. Once he got his balance, he gingerly removed his hands from Rowan’s waist. If he wasn’t careful she’d be getting all sappy on him. It wasn’t like he didn’t like girls, or Rowan even. But the last thing he needed right now was a girlfriend. Instead he tried to figure out what was going on but his mind just shied away from it. It was all too peculiar. Maybe he was having a breakdown, he pondered. Maybe he’d wake up and find he was back in the hospital. Tom winced. No way. That would be too cruel.

The air around them was changing. Tom could no longer feel the cloying air of the jungle but something cooler, thinner. He felt meanness, menace, something cruel. How did he know that? Was he suddenly getting all telepathic or psychic or something? Nah, no way. Comer seemed to be slowing down too, as if he also was reluctant to arrive at their destination. Tom opened his eyes. They were passing

through the most desolate landscape he had ever seen. Everything was grey, as if someone had switched a screen from colour to monochrome. Bare rocks punctured dust. Tom coughed as the dust settled in his mouth and nose but, once again, it seemed like his asthma couldn't touch him in this other place, this other world. It might be scary but it was incredible not worrying about breathing, or rather *not* breathing.

Ahead of them, Tom could see a mound, a little like the shape of the Wambarrows. Oh God, no, not there again. But, as they approached, Tom could see it was different. Rough stone surrounded this place; it was more like the opening to a cave.

Comer's steps became slower and slower, as if he was forcing himself to take each pace. Like those dreams where you try to run but your legs are stuck in gunk. He noticed Rowan stroking the panther's neck and the great cat pushed on until they arrived at the opening to the cave. They slid off his back.

'Well, we'd better do it,' said Rowan. Tom stepped forward and felt as if he was being sucked into the cave, into the sticky darkness and a feeling of crushing hopelessness.

He plodded forward. Comer muttered in Rowan's ear and she nodded, pulling something out of her pocket. A cool white light broke the gloom and Tom could see she was holding a crystal that sent out a pale but clear gleam. Tom wasn't sure it was better seeing where they were going or not. The walls of the cave pushed in on him; they looked spongy and slick like uncooked liver. Tom couldn't shake off the feeling that something was behind them. He kept glancing backwards but the shadow seemed to melt into the rocks. This was horrible – he didn't like the idea of what they were going to find if they went on, yet he didn't dare turn round and go out in case whatever it was nabbed him.

Great, just great, he thought and felt a sudden spasm of irritation against Rowan and this whole situation.

What did it matter to him if the deer were dying? So what if the 'guardians' or whoever they were couldn't find this new power place or whatever it was. So what if he liked games and didn't 'get' the nature stuff? Surely it was horses for courses – some people liked all that dolphin and otter business and some were, like, urban. Why didn't he just go back? He could do it. There probably wasn't anything behind him anyway – just his silly imagination. He started to turn when a cry broke the silence.

'We're here,' said Rowan, her voice sounding small and uncertain.

He followed her through a narrow opening. In the half-dark he could just about make out figures. He peered, scrunching up his eyes, and realised they were children, hundreds of children, huddled in groups or slumped alone. Some crouched on stone ledges, others lay as if asleep on the bare rock floor. One little girl of no more than five was trying to comfort two babies. A boy of about his own age peered at him, eyes sore with weeping.

'What is this place?' Tom whispered. 'It's horrible.'

Rowan nodded. 'This is where the lost soul parts of people live. The parts they lost when they were babies or children. I dread coming here.'

'So why don't we just, like, go?' said Tom, wincing as a small hand reached out towards him.

'Because you're here somewhere.'

Tom was about to kick out with a sarcastic remark but he swallowed it and followed Rowan as she moved through the cave. She stopped and knelt down in front of a girl

who was painstakingly drawing spirals in the dust and whispered something in her ear. The child pointed towards the back of the cave and Tom felt a weight settle in his stomach as they drew nearer.

Lying alone, in a hollow, was a baby. No more than a few days old, it was barely moving. Tom noticed its tiny hands and feet, the dark circles under its eyes, the down of hair on its head. A shallow pulse throbbed at the top of its head.

‘This is you, Tom,’ whispered Rowan.

‘I know,’ said Tom, tears springing to his eyes.

‘Pick him up,’ Rowan nudged his arm.

Tom knelt down and scooped the baby into his arms. It barely weighed anything at all. The little eyes opened and gazed at Tom in wonder. He felt a burst of love in his heart and clasped the minute body to his chest. A sigh came from its lips and Tom felt warmth spreading over his body.

‘You’re home now, baby, it’s all right,’ he crooned. ‘It’s all right little one, it’s all right.’

Tom had a vision of his mom and dad leaning over a crib. Mom was sobbing and Dad reached to comfort her but she shifted away. ‘I have to do it, John,’ she said. ‘I have to do it, for Tom’s sake.’

‘I know, my darling,’ said his father, tears streaming down his face. ‘Maybe it’s for the best.’

‘Never,’ cried Mom. ‘But what choice do I have?’

The vision faded and Tom was back in the cave, but his arms were bare. ‘The baby. Where is he?’ He glared at Rowan.

‘The baby is back where he belongs – reunited in your soul, Tom,’ said Rowan, nibbling her nails.

‘Inside me?’ He realised she was telling the truth. It was as if something he had always missed had come home.

‘Let’s leave this place, dearest girl,’ said Comer, his lip curling with distaste. ‘We have completed our task. Climb on.’

‘Wait,’ said Tom. ‘Surely we can do something for these other children? We can’t just leave them here, can we?’

‘There’s nothing we can do, Tom. Or, if there is, I don’t know how.’

She shrugged. ‘I sometimes come here to retrieve individual soul parts but there is no way I know to take them all back.’

‘Well, we’ll have to find a way,’ said Tom, his lip quivering with emotion. He had the feeling he was going to burst into tears and the thought of the others seeing him do so was unbearable.

‘Go on, I’ll join you in a minute.’ Comer tactfully nudged Rowan and they walked away.

Tom sat on a rock, his head in his hands, blinking back tears. He felt as if someone had turned on a tap inside him. He had never felt so vulnerable, so open. He was feeling emotions he didn’t think he had ever experienced.

A low growl broke his reverie. Warily, Tom turned around. Comer?

‘Yeah, alright, I’m coming.’

The growl came again. No, not as throaty as the panther’s grumble. A shiver slithered down Tom’s spine. The black creature? How could he have forgotten?

'Rowan,' he tried to cry but the words froze in his mouth as he saw the timber wolf stalk stiff-legged towards him.

It walked closer and closer until Tom could see its fangs dripping with saliva, see its amber eyes glinting, see the bristles of its coat standing up on end like a punk.

Tom raised one hand, as if he might ward it off, but it was pointless. With one leap the wolf was at his throat, teeth ripping into his neck.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Goss

Glastonbury is one of the great power places of the world. The ancient settlement was originally an island amidst the marshlands and waterways of the Summer Lands. At its heart is the Tor, the mysterious conical hill with its chapel atop, dedicated to St Michael. Jesus is said to have visited Glastonbury with Joseph of Arimathea. It has guarded Earth through the Age of Pisces, the Fisher-King.

The guardians say, however, that its power is waning. Corruption and greed will come to Glastonbury. In the days to come, we will need to find and consecrate a new power place.

Leaf and Stone – First Lessons in Shamanism by Tabitha Greenway.

The wolf tore and ripped at his body until there was barely anything left. It picked him up and tossed him through the air like a dog playing with a bone. Tom knew his body lay torn like a pile of bloody rags on the cave floor yet he sensed no pain. He could feel the animal's teeth tearing and pulling but it was as if he were anaesthetized. Any moment now, he thought, the adrenaline will wear off and it will be excruciating. Hell, it's going to eat me. But the wolf didn't. Instead it looked long and hard at Tom before starting to lick him. Gently and methodically she (he just knew it was a she) licked him from head to toe. It felt good, as if he were her cub. If this was how he was going to die, it wasn't such a bad way after all. Licked to death? Hey, why not?

'I hardly think so.' Tom caught the words in his head and wondered who had said them.

'I did, you silly cub.' Tom looked up at the wolf and she nodded. Tom barely dared move but tentatively he raised an arm, expecting to see a mangled mess. It was quite whole, not even the hint of a bite.

'How?' wondered Tom.

'Who is a better question,' said the wolf, with a sniff. 'I've been following you for years and you've never bothered to find out who I am.' She had a deep treacle voice, real Southern, the kind that picked up words and chewed them a while before letting them slide out like honey.

'Just lately you've started to notice me, which is something, I suppose. But then you just run away.'

'I thought you wanted to eat me,' said Tom. 'And I got that right, didn't I? What was with all the chewing?'

'Call it tough love,' said the wolf, slobbering as she spoke. 'You needed to be pulled apart before you could be put together again. We do it quite a lot.'

'We? Who's we? In fact, who the heck are you?'

'Oh at last, praise be.' The wolf rolled her eyes. 'I'm your power animal, honey; your one true friend. Everyone has one, of course, but it's only you shamans who talk to us and use our power. Pretty dumb really as we're darn useful. You can call me Goss, by the way.'

'Er, hello Goss.'

The wolf turned and nibbled at her back, then swung her muzzle back to Tom.

‘Well, aren’t you going to dance? It’s customary to dance with your animal once you find it, you know.’

Tom looked blankly.

‘Oh, forget it. We’ll do it later some time. I think your friends are returning.’

Rowan and Comer raced in, shouting. ‘Tom! Are you all right? What the.....’

‘It’s OK. I’m fine. This is Goss, my, er, my power animal.’

Rowan stared at Tom. ‘But we didn’t do a power animal retrieval. How did you do that?’

‘I didn’t do anything. She found me. I’ve been seeing something following me for ages but I thought it was dangerous and kept running.’

Rowan shook her head. ‘You *are* a shaman, Tom, you really are. There’s no other explanation. We’ve got to get back and talk to Eden.’

They interrupted Comer and Goss who were deep in conversation and, without any further to-do, scrambled onto their animals. The panther broke into a loping stride and the wolf kept pace. Once out of the cave they soared up through the air. Then, once again, there was the sense of moving through earth and through time, before Tom felt himself back on the floor at the farm.

The rhythm of the drum altered. Seven staccato beats then a pause, then seven more. Tom felt Rowan shift beside him, felt her get up and puff quickly at his chest and again at the top of his head, where he had seen the baby’s pulse beating. He felt a shiver run through his entire body, as if he had been doused under a shower. Every part of him was tingling. Without warning, rattling jolted his ears and he could sense Rowan moving around his body, the sound of the rattle fading in and out. Then the drum beat faded away entirely and there was silence. He felt something gently licking his hand and opened his eyes expecting to see Goss. But instead it was Sparrow, her liquid amber eyes gazing steadily into his.

‘Goss,’ he whispered, and the dog seemed to laugh, her pink tongue lolling.

Tom sat up and smiled at Rowan. She looked nervously back at him, ‘How do you feel, Tom?’

‘Better.’ He shook his head in puzzlement. ‘I really do. I suppose I feel a bit vulnerable, as if the part of me that feels and can be hurt has been returned.’

‘I wonder what caused your baby self to split off so young?’

Tom remembered the scene with his parents but something stopped him telling Rowan. He shrugged.

‘I don’t know.’

They talked and talked, over thick wedges of omelet, stuffed with potatoes, onions and herbs. Sparrow lay with her head on Tom’s feet.

‘Are there other parts of my soul still missing?’

‘Quite probably,’ muttered Rowan, or at least that’s what he thought she said though it was hard to tell with a mouth full of omelet.

‘I thought we’d find an older part of you, the one that must have disappeared when you had the accident.’

Tom flinched but didn’t snap. Instead he thought, struggling to remember something.

‘There was something,’ he said slowly. ‘I can remember a place. A beautiful place. It was like nowhere I’d ever seen before. But now I’m wondering if it’s somewhere round here.’

Tom described the valley and Rowan listened intently, her head slanted to one side like a bird.

‘Hmm.’ She pursed her lips. ‘It could be almost anywhere around the edges of the moor, except for the church bit. There is only one place which fits that description and that’s Kitnor.’

A shiver ran down Tom’s back. ‘Kitnor? Where is it? Is it far? Can we get there?’
‘Well, it’s not that far, if you’ve got a car. It would take all day to get there on foot. We’ll just have to figure out a way.’

The phone rang: an alien shriek in the farmhouse. Tom looked at Rowan and she nodded to the phone. ‘It’s your grandmother’s house, not mine,’ she said.

‘Hi, er, Wambarrow Farm,’ Tom said, half-expecting Eden’s crisp tones. But instead he heard a soft, faint voice. ‘Hello, you must be Eden Greenway’s young grandson.’

‘Er, yes ma’am.’

The voice tinkled with laughter, ‘Nobody ever called me ‘ma’am’ before. Is Rowan with you?’

‘Yes...’ Tom paused and missed out the ma’am, ‘Er, yes, she is. I’ll fetch her.’

‘No, don’t bother. Just tell her I’ll be over to pick her up in about ten minutes or so. I have to go to Glastonbury.’

‘Er, who shall I say you are?’

The voice giggled, like a small child, ‘Oh, silly me. It’s Mrs Summerhill, Angel Summerhill. Rowan’s mother, dear.’ The phone went dead.

A shadow seemed to fall over Rowan’s face, her skin paling to a dark sickly grey.

‘Oh God,’ she groaned. ‘That’s torn it.’ She sunk her head in her hands. Tom hovered over her, not knowing what to do, when she suddenly brightened up.

‘I know, you can come too. If you’re going to be a shaman for real, you will need stuff. A drum, a rattle.’

She gave Tom a beady look and he shuffled uneasily, remembering his mother’s rattle. ‘We can get them at Glastonbury. Have you got any money?’

Tom nodded. ‘A bit. But won’t your mother mind me coming?’

‘Mind? She probably won’t even notice. And she’s not even my real mother either; I’m fostered.’

Her brow furrowed; she suddenly looked far older. ‘Anyway, Eden may still be there, so we can’t miss the chance.’

Rowan’s mother arrived in an ancient red Volvo and a spray of mud as the near-bald tires skidded into the farmyard. Rowan locked the front door with an enormous key and tucked it on top of the stone head. ‘He’ll keep it safe,’ she said with a wan smile. They clambered into the back of the car, pushing aside crisp packets, juice cartons and old magazines. Rowan seemed visibly to diminish as she sank back into the seat and fastened her seat belt.

‘You’ve brought your friend, sweetheart,’ Mrs Summerhill’s voice tinkled like wind chimes. ‘How nice.’

She seemed to have forgotten who Tom was and he gazed in amazement at the back of her head, a hayrick of yellow-blond hair with dark roots teased and tousled into an enormous cloud.

She turned the car around with much screeching and they left Sparrow looking sorrowful outside the barn.

It was impossible to talk. Mrs Summerhill turned on a New Age chant and sang along the entire hour and a half it took to get to Glastonbury. Instead Tom watched the countryside with interest. He could tell the moment they were out of Exmoor, but the countryside was still hilly and beautiful as they drove along what Rowan yelled were the Brendon Hills (so that's what they were and yes, they *were* still misty). She said that below them was something called Taunton Vale and, as they came down through the cloud line it spread in front of them like a magical land of plenty, all open fields with the glint of far-off houses. Then they were climbing again into more hills, this time ones that sounded something like the Kwontox. Bridgwater was an urban sprawl with a foul smell as they went past some kind of factory and then the country became tamer. Flat fields, many flooded, lay either side of the ridge along which the road ran.

England was a curious place, Tom pondered. The land changed so quickly, unlike the US where everything was so much bigger and the countryside took its time in gently shifting. The tape squeaked to a halt and the radio kicked in, a strident English voice barking out the news.

'Unusually high tides and excessive rainfall have contributed to flood warnings around the country. Scientists report unusual weather conditions around the globe, fuelling fears of rapidly increasing climate change.'

Mrs Summerhill turned the radio off with a snap.

'They do love to worry us, don't they? If it's not global warming, it's a new Ice Age. I don't know.'

Without waiting for a reply she pulled out the tape and poked it back in to play the other side.

The road turned and up ahead Tom saw a hill. Conical in shape, it rose out of the flat land around, with a tower perched on top. He'd seen that hill and tower before.

'What's that?' Tom bellowed in Rowan's ear. Before she could answer, her mother switched off the music and half-turned to Tom, long beaded ear-rings swinging.

'That, my love, is Glaston Tor, the most sacred place in all England. Breast of the Goddess, Holy Temple of Avalon...' Her voice was rapturous.

Tom looked at Rowan who merely rolled her eyes.

'Now, you children can help me with my altar pieces and then you can run off and play for an hour while I have my chakra healing session.'

They parked outside The Nurturing Womb, on double yellow lines. Mrs Summerhill seemed blithely unaware of the irritation of motorists trying to negotiate the narrow street and her appallingly parked car. They helped to haul out various statues, all of heavily pregnant women with blissful smiles on their faces, decorated with swathes of red wool, stones with holes through them and odd bits of lace and beading.

'Total tat,' whispered Rowan with a sneer. Tom couldn't see they were any worse than the other stuff in the shop – it all looked as if it had been made by first graders let loose in the craft room. Misshapen candles rubbed shoulders with crystal 'wands', bound with bits of copper wire. There were bumper stickers with sayings such as 'My Other Car is a Broomstick' and 'Life's a Witch and then you Fly'. Tom quite liked 'Doctors make me sick' but Rowan pulled him away.

‘We’ll see you back here. It’s 3pm when you finish, isn’t it?’ Rowan said and Mrs Summerhill nodded vaguely and waved a hand, laden with silver rings. With a deep sense of relief Tom followed Rowan up the main drag.

Tom was amazed by Glastonbury. Rowan told him it used to be a sleepy market-town, its cross-hatch of streets littered with the usual everyday needs stores. Now only a few remained. He noticed a bank, a baker’s and a delicatessen but virtually every other shop was a New Age emporium. If you wanted a crystal or a book on Reincarnation, you were spoilt for choice. If you needed a ball of string or a pound of peas, you’d be lucky to find it.

The people were weird as well. Tom had already passed what looked like several full-blown versions of Gandalf, flowing cloaks and all. Everyone, it seemed, was dressed in tattered rainbow-colored clothes (unless they were all in black) with rings and studs poked through every available bit of bare body. Children tagged behind with painted faces and dogs tugged at strings. It should have had a carnival feel but it felt all wrong. Nobody was smiling and Tom was often barged and pushed. A sickly smell hung on the air – probably pot, thought Tom. They walked up past a church, dodging trails of dog excrement and kicking aside garbage, and Rowan pulled him quickly past the rag-taggle of people sitting huddled on the bench. But he couldn’t help noticing their vacant eyes.

As they reached the top of the hill, the shops petered out. Rowan dragged Tom down an alley and along a tree-lined street before diving through a stone arch, pushing back the trailing ivy. It was like stepping into another world. It was still winter but the garden was beautiful. The hedges were clipped into the shapes of animals and Tom noticed, with pleasure, a wolf next to a bear and, beyond that, an eagle spreading its wings. A formal square pond beckoned and Tom ran his hand along the back of a stone carved bench.

‘You should see this place in spring,’ said Rowan. ‘There are bluebells and primroses and the whole place is filled with birdsong.’

‘Who lives here? Why are we here?’ said Tom, following the winding path towards the old stone house.

‘This is Mr Twitchen’s house. He makes the most wonderful drums and rattles. He may also have fresh news of Eden.’

Rowan seemed happy for the first time since the phone call back at Wambarrow Farm. Her step lightened and she almost danced up to the front door. Before she reached to tap the stag’s head knocker, the door swung open. Tom jumped back but Rowan smiled.

‘He always does that; it’s so clever.’