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RIVERS OF SHADOW

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For my parents



VISITORS

One of the things I learnt last year was that life doesn't give you a friendly warning when everything changes. There's no five-minute call before the ice breaks under your feet. The first time you realise everything's about to change will be when it's already happening.

My secret life starts again one Monday morning, in second-period maths. I'm not even pretending to pay attention, looking up at the ceiling, imagining that the brown water stains above me are the map of some uncharted islands. It's spring; exams are breathing down

the back of our necks, and the teachers won't let us forget it. The sun, making a rare guest appearance in north-east England, is shining through a gap in the clouds. The room is too warm. On the desk in front of me: textbook, worksheet, a pencil capped with a bacon-pink eraser. My shadow is hard-edged and vividly present. The girl on my left-hand side has her head propped on one hand. She hasn't moved for a good five minutes. It's not a room where anyone's expecting something exciting to happen.

Mr Hallow, our maths teacher, has one of those pale, awkwardly proportioned faces that look like you're viewing them through the bottom of a dirty bottle. He's drawn a triangle in green pen on the whiteboard, and he wants someone to find its angles. Since I made the mistake of meeting his gaze while I was thinking about how weird his head looks, he chooses me.

'Luke Manchett. Can you find the way out of this dilemma?'

'Sure,' I say.

I stand, my chair's rubber-tipped legs making a high squeal on the floor tiles. The only one of my classmates looking at me is Kirk, and when he catches my eye he quickly looks down at the floor. I'm treated as an embarrassment, an inconvenience that everyone's determined to pretend isn't here.

It wasn't always like this, hard as it may be for anyone to believe. I started Year 11, September of last year, in a great position, ready to play a winning hand. I was on the rugby team, best mates with Mark Ellsmith and Kirk Danknott, went drinking in the park with the Dunbarrow High A-List. I even had a shot with Holiday Simmon, though I doubt she'd be willing to admit that now.

All that changed last October. I'm a freak now and everyone knows it. I'm a freak with a freak girlfriend, and I have a freak mum and a dead freak dad and a freak dog and I live in the Freak House at Number One, Freak Street. Kirk and me used to be close as anything, friends for years, and now he won't even look me in the eye.

It does hurt, but after what happened last Halloween I can't totally blame him. I am a freak. I'm not like Kirk, not like Holiday or anyone else, and I never will be again.

Mr Hallow holds out the green felt-tip as I approach, appraising me gravely, like I'm a young squire hoping to be knighted. I take the pen, clammy and warm from his touch, and stand in front of the whiteboard. I haven't listened to a word he said all lesson, but fortunately this doesn't look like an especially tricky problem. The classroom is bright, sunlight pouring in through the back windows, and the whiteboard is slightly

reflective. I can see a dull mirror image of myself, the class behind me visible as slumped silhouettes. Half of them are asleep, or close to it.

I touch the pen to the board.

'Mr Hallow?' comes a voice.

'Where have you been?' he asks, irritated.

I turn and see Holiday Simmon, Queen of Dunbarrow High School, stood in the doorway. Holiday being late for class is rare enough, let alone missing a lesson and a half. She advances into the room and stops just in front of Hallow's desk, followed by a strange girl.

'This is a visiting student,' Holiday tells Mr Hallow. 'I'm supposed to guide her around this month.'

Nobody's paying attention to me now, so I decide I'll hold off on uncovering the mysteries of Hallow's triangle. The boys in my set are all definitely awake now, and they're looking at the new arrivals like caged dogs anticipating their meat ration. Holiday is, by anyone's standards, a beautiful girl. She's tall and blonde, always expertly groomed, with the easy confidence that comes from knowing you'll never be second-best. She even, somehow, manages to make our shapeless grey school jumpers look stylish. Taking all of this into consideration, Holiday still seems commonplace compared to the girl who came into class with her.

The visitor is more striking than beautiful, but she holds everyone's attention as she stands beside Hallow. She's minute, barely up to Holiday's shoulder, with a delicate-looking face and slim tanned arms. She's not in uniform: instead she wears a white sundress and white Converse All-Stars, only needing a visor and racket to look completely at home on a tennis court. An optimistic outfit for an English spring. Her hair is daringly short, more white than blonde, the kind of white you'd normally associate with ninety-year-old women. A silver ring glints in her nose. Her grin targets everyone in the room simultaneously, and her teeth are even and bright.

'Hello, everyone!' the new girl says, like she can't imagine being anywhere more exciting than maths in Room 3G on a Monday morning. 'My name's Ashley Smith, but you can call me Ash? I'm sixteen years old, I'm from California, and I am so excited to meet you all?'

'What is this about?' Mr Hallow asks.

'Sir, this is Ashley,' Holiday explains again. 'She's an exchange student. She's living here in Dunbarrow with my family, and I'm her guide at school too.'

'Exchange programme?' Hallow splutters. 'Miss Simmon, there is no exchange programme. What are you talking about?'

'I'm here as part of the William Goodman Foundation's

American-European Cultural and Educational and Enrichment Program?' the visitor, Ash, tells him cheerfully. She has that thing where your voice makes every statement sound like a question. 'It's for teenagers with challenging backgrounds, to help us get perspective and aid us on our personal journeys? And it's really super-great on college applications? I come from Marin Country in California, and I was real lucky to be able to come and visit here for a month, to live in your beautiful and historical town?'

The idea that someone would be willing to give up life in California, even for a month, in order to travel here, Dunbarrow, north-east England, and not only that but that they'd be excited about it, seems to baffle Mr Hallow so much he can't form an objection.

'We've got a note from the Head,' Holiday adds. 'She said to bring Ash here because she'll be taking all my classes with me.'

It makes sense that Holiday would have exclusive early access to this glamorous stranger. Ashley Smith just doesn't fit in this room, this maths lesson. It's like seeing a zebra galloping in a supermarket car park.

'This is extremely irregular,' Hallow sniffs. 'An exchange student, arriving near the end of spring term, with exams just around the corner… I suppose if the

Head agreed with this, I can't… Who is the lucky student we sent to Marin?'

'He's called Mark Ellsmith,' Ash says. 'I never actually met him, as he left a few days ago. But we talked online – I gave him some good spots to go visit.'

Mark used to be one of my really good friends, along with Kirk. I don't think we've spoken since Halloween. He's Holiday's boyfriend now, still captain of the rugby team, with the body of a Greek statue that got a spray-tan. He'll get on just fine in California, I'm sure.

'Well, I see. Good for Mr Ellsmith,' Mr Hallow says. 'Girls, I really think you've taken up enough of our lesson already. And Miss Simmon, I do wish you'd told me about this earlier if you knew you were going to miss half a period. Speak to me at the end.'

'Of course, sir,' Holiday says.

'Anyway, I'm sure Mr Manchett is dying to get on with the problem I set him. Aren't you, Mr Manchett?'

I'm not sure if Hallow thinks calling us 'Miss' and 'Mr' is funny, or what. Nobody ever laughs. I'd say he's got at least a decade to go before he retires, so whatever keeps you sane, I suppose.

'Can't wait,' I say.

Holiday brushes past me without saying a word, without looking at me – I've come to expect it, her acting

like we've never laughed together or flirted, like she never invited me up to her room – but Ash looks me in the eye, smiling. Her eyes are a strange grey, I see as she passes.

'Nice to meet you, Luke,' Ash says cheerily, and follows Holiday to some spare seats right in the middle of the room. They settle themselves down, a beam of sunlight striking them, making Holiday's hair glow like amber and Ash's white head shine in a way that seems lunar, unearthly.

'Mr Manchett, if we could move this along?' Hallow says again.

'Sorry,' I say, turning back to the board. I try to focus on maths, collect my thoughts, but something strikes me: how does Ash know my name? She called me Luke. Mr Hallow always uses our surnames. She didn't hear anyone call me Luke.

Maybe Holiday already told her about me: she gave Ash a first-day briefing on who not to sit next to at lunch. That's probably it.

I look at the green triangle, scrawled on a white background, and that's when it hits me. There's a sudden roaring in my ears, blood rushing to my head, bursts of colour and light in my eyes, like the spots you see after you've looked into the sun. Behind it all I can hear a high ringing sound, like someone struck a glass bell.

I've seen this triangle before. I've seen every triangle before – I've seen them all, last Halloween, every combination of three lines. In the *Book of Eight* I saw every shape we have words for and some that we don't. They're all coiled up inside my mind, waiting for a chance to come spilling out like vomit. They were in the Book and they're in me now as well. The shapes and sigils flow over everything.

I've seen the Book and I saw other things too. A grey silent shore. My mother standing over me holding a knife. I've seen eyes as black as tar and I've seen eyes that burned like the heart of the sun. I've met a man with unlined palms and I saw my dead father walking in mist. I've met a baby without face or name. I met the dead and I spoke with them too and I saw where we all go in the end, the darkness behind a pale green door.

The ringing noise fades and I find I'm lying down. Someone's put a soft object, a school jumper I think, under my head. I'm looking at the ceiling of the classroom and about a dozen frightened faces. Mr Hallow is leaning right over me, clicking his fingers.

'His eyes just moved,' someone says.

'Luke—'

'I never seen nothing like that!'

'…messed up…'

'Luke,' Mr Hallow says loudly. 'Luke Manchett. Can you hear me?'

'Yes,' I say.

Everyone's looking at me like I grew an extra head or something. I can't see Holiday or the new girl anywhere.

'What happened?' I ask.

'Can you tell me where we are?' Hallow asks.

'Maths,' I say. 'School. What happened?'

'You had some kind of…attack,' he says.

'What exactly did I do?' I ask.

Mr Hallow swallows. His eyes flick to one side, seemingly without realising he's done it. I turn my head slowly. When I see what happened to the whiteboard my heart skips a beat.

The original maths problem is still there, somewhere. It's almost impossible to see underneath everything else that's been drawn on the board: magic circles, sigils, spiky incantations in a language I don't recognise. There's a design like an eight-pointed star, and a symbol I last saw tattooed on the palm of a ghost's white hand. There are layers upon layers of letters and symbols, all drawn with scary precision.

I close my eyes, but when I open them the writing is still there. This will be all over school. This might even make the news.

'You were talking as well,' Mr Hallow says. 'But we couldn't understand what you were saying.'

'How long…'

'Ten minutes,' he replies.

I don't reply. I sit up, and bright spots flash in front of my eyes again. I feel like I might faint, but don't.

I thought this was over. I've had dreams, sure. I've had dreams nearly every night, since Halloween, since I shook hands with the Devil and sent my dad on to wherever he went to. Sometimes my dreams are just pages of the *Book of Eight*, and sometimes I wake and find I'm sat at my desk writing words I can't understand. But it's never been like this before. Never in daylight.

'What…what's going to happen?' I ask.

'I don't know,' Mr Hallow says. 'I don't know.'

It seems clear to everyone that I can't go to morning break, so they sit me down in the nurse's office while someone calls Mum. The office is small, with pink walls, and smells of antiseptic. There's nobody else here. The nurse checks my eyes with a hand-held light, asks if I feel sick, then gives me a glass of water and goes somewhere else. I'm not a medical expert but it seems like a pretty low standard of care.

My name is Luke Manchett and I'm still sixteen years