

SHIMMER

(Continued...)

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CHAPTER 3

Liana bypassed her second floor bedroom and climbed the stairs to the third floor, a converted attic that served as Thalia's studio. Her older sister spent most of time, day and night, on the third floor, sitting at her easel with pencil or paintbrush, depending on her mood, alone in the muted light cast by fringed lampshades. She never tired of her studio and only came down at Liana's insistence.

When Thalia hummed a broken, haunting melody, it seemed that she was almost at peace with her life. Other times she would talk to herself, a confused, rambling, solitary discourse for extended periods, sometimes punctuated by fits of glossolalia. On rare occasions, her apparent non sequiturs held meanings which, though not immediately clear to the Walkers, eventually proved prophetic in nature. But she also suffered bouts of agitation, and these episodes usually coincided with violent rift activity. And that was how Liana found her, in the early morning hours after the first Hadenford incident.

Wearing her paint-spattered smock over her floral blouse and white wraparound skirt, Thalia stood before her sketchpad, uttering a repeated sound, an uncomfortable sound of apparent emotional distress, "Uh—uh—uh..."

Liana hurried to her older sister. "Thalia? What's wrong?"

Thalia had attempted to pull her long blond hair back with a ribbon, but loose strands fell in front of her face, obscuring her hazel eyes. With a pencil gripped in her white-knuckled left hand, she was

making forceful vertical strokes on the sketchpad. Liana caught her hand, but Thalia continued to stare at the drawing. “Dead. Dead. Dead.”

Liana looked at the drawing. Trees, a forest of trees like elongated skeletons, bare limbs terminating in clawed arboreal hands. At the bottom of the page, she’d drawn the boxy shape of a car crumpled against the base of a tree, bracketed by two stretched human faces, contorted in agony, reminiscent of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. Thalia had made slash marks through both faces with her pencil, gouging furrows in the heavy bond paper. “Thalia... did you see this?”

“See? See?” Thalia shook her head. “Nooooo!” The sound was a pitiful howl. “Darkness. It’s the Dark again. Blood. And darkness.”

“It’s over now, Thalia.” Liana assured her. “It’s all over.”

“No—no—no!” Violent head-shaking. “It’s just beginning.”

Liana pried the pencil from Thalia’s fingers and placed it on the easel’s narrow shelf. She held her sister tight and whispered in her ear. “It’s okay now, Thalia. Let’s go to bed.”

“There’s more,” she said. Her body was rigid. “More. Always more.”

“We’ll take care of it tomorrow,” Liana said. “Enough for today. Okay?”

Thalia nodded, but tears streamed down her face. Liana wrapped an arm around her sister’s shoulder and guided her to the narrow staircase. In the bedroom they shared, Liana helped her undress, then slipped Thalia’s white nightgown over her head and led her to her bed. Thalia stared at the ceiling while Liana changed into her nightclothes.

Moments after Liana turned off the bedside lamp, she wasn’t surprised to hear Thalia climb out of her bed and join Liana. Thalia draped an arm around Liana’s neck and whispered in her ear. “I still hear them screaming.”

Liana felt a lump in her throat. She stroked her sister’s hair.

“Make them stop,” Thalia whispered. “Please? Sing ‘little star.’”

Liana took a deep, tremulous breath and sang softly, “Twinkle, twinkle, little star...”

CHAPTER 4

Laramie, Wyoming

In darkness, Gideon Walker sat in a kitchen chair in his rancher, a tumbler half filled with scotch held in his hand, staring through the bay window into the night. Although he had excellent night vision, his gaze was unfocused at the moment, his attention turned inward. He'd made a life for himself here, far from all of them—he even owned a small construction business—but he still experienced days that made him feel as if he'd never left. Premonitions that all was not right in the world. Reminders that he'd once had a part to play in righting the wrongs, a role he'd abandoned when he realized the cost was too high and that he was no longer good enough. Being born to a job didn't exclude the possibility of resigning. Free will, choices, all of it, told him to move on. He'd served his time, paid his price. He had nothing more to offer.

His left hand rose to that side of his face, almost touching the furrowed scars that flowed from his forehead down to his neck... almost. No need for physical contact. He'd memorized every twisted runnel. For a moment, his fingers paused over the black cloth patch and the useless socket it concealed. The facial scars, while unpleasant, were basically superficial, but the missing eye was a real deficit. No amount of pride or self-esteem could overcome that loss. It had changed the shape and course of his life.

Let others pick up the gauntlet, rush into the fray.

He whispered into the darkness, his voice a grim rasp. "I did my time."

Nevertheless, he'd felt the old stirrings today. Something was coming. Something big. He'd cut himself off, but would never be completely free. Not without some radical form of gene therapy, a complete revision of his doomed DNA. The family had a young douser,

somebody who sensed the trouble ahead. In contrast, Gideon sensed the aftershocks. Not a very useful talent by any stretch, but one likely to give him nightmares or toss his stomach.

Can't live with them, he thought in resignation, can't live away from them.

He leaned back in his chair and reached for the phone—a moment before it rang—an anticipatory response he'd stopped questioning a long time ago. It was part of the phenomenal reflexes ability he shared with his brother, Barrett. Instead of a greeting, Gideon said, "How did you get this number, old man?"

"I don't know," the familiar, amusingly befuddled voice said. "Just came to me, I imagine. Were you expecting my call?"

"Had a feeling," Gideon said and stood. Never comfortable talking on the phone while sitting. Nervously, his free hand spread the stack of newspapers across the round oak kitchen table. He'd folded each paper to the story of a missing or murdered child. Authorities had recovered three bodies, hideously mutilated. Two children were still missing. Gideon knew it was only a matter of time before they found the bodies. "Been one of those days."

"Quite," Ambrose Walker said. "Anyway, I'm glad you're awake."

"I recall asking you not to call me."

"Right," Ambrose said and cleared his throat. "So you did. Ah, but desperate times call for long distance measures."

"It's a big family, old man," Gideon said. "Flip to the next card in your mental Rolodex."

Ambrose sighed. "Gideon, we have lost so many..."

"I'm not lost," Gideon said. "I have a new home." He glanced around his Spartan surroundings. Utilitarian was the word for it. No plants, living or artificial. No framed photos or paintings adorned the walls. It was a house but not a home. A rest stop for the determined recluse, a way-station for the psychically weary. The only comfort of his Laramie home was distance, but looking down at the spread of newspapers, he had to admit that distance was relative. "I have a life here."

"So you do," Ambrose said. "And I sincerely hope you continue to enjoy that life, Gideon. Please pardon my interruption."

With a soft click of disconnection, the conversation ended.

Gently, Gideon lowered the cordless handset into the receiver, thinking of the unasked questions that had been swirling around his

mind. “*How’s Barrett?*” They hadn’t spoken in months. “*What’s the nature of the desperate situation?*” “*Have you called anyone else for help?*” And, more importantly, “*What happened today, Ambrose? What happened thousands of miles from here that made me want to vomit?*”

Gideon’s pride had muted those questions. He’d slipped into his defensive mechanisms, justifying his new life and his abandonment of the family. Ambrose’s soft words still rang in his ears. “*I sincerely hope you continue to enjoy that life*”

One idea his father had drummed into Gideon during his training as a Walker child, an expression, came to mind, “*far-reaching consequences.*”

Gideon whispered into the night, “How bad is it, Ambrose?”

As he sipped his scotch, his hand trembled.

“Never mind,” he said. “Don’t want to know. Don’t care.”

Gideon looked down at the scattered newspaper articles and scanned the statements by the police and members of the task force. No suspects. FBI pursuing leads. One comment seemed to jump out at him. Two words. “*Inhuman atrocities.*”

“God help me,” Gideon said as he slumped into his chair. “I don’t want to care anymore.”