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Opening extract from

Shadowsmith

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For Mum and Dad

Thank you forever

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Opening the Door

There were two men in the graveyard, under the stars.

Both were very tall and unnaturally thin, and wore black suits and long black coats. They walked through the oldest parts of the church grounds among overgrown weeds and tombstones so decayed that the names of those buried beneath had been lost forever.

"This way," said the first man, who was bald and had a large crooked nose. He led the way through a tangle of trees to a wild patch of ground covered by long grass. "Here."

The second man had a face full of sharp features and a head of straggly dark hair. "You're sure?"

"Positive," said the bald-headed man. "Unconsecrated ground. There's witches here. I can smell 'em. Have you ever known my nose to be wrong?"

The dark-haired man looked around, and smiled. "I do like a good graveyard," he said. "Don't you just *love* a good graveyard, Brother Swan?"

Brother Swan, the bald man, rubbed his hands together. "I do indeed, Brother Swift. Reminds me of the old days."

"Quite so," said Brother Swift. "I mean, I remember a time when we had the power to turn countries and kings against one another just by whispering in their ears. How I long for the days when we sent plagues crawling around the world just by blowing into the wind."

"All that lovely red blood," said Brother Swan. "All that delicious pain and suffering." He licked his lips. "But look at us now, brother – reduced to sneaking about in the shadows. Mother would be turning in her grave. If she had one."

"We won't be sneaking much longer." Brother Swift shook his greasy head. "No. Soon we'll stand proud, and we'll unleash hell."

"Lovely." Brother Swan stepped forward, reached into his long black coat and pulled out three black candles. He crouched down and twisted each waxy stem into the ground. Next he struck a match and lit them, casting a soft yellow light on the surrounding trees.

Then, together, the brothers began to speak.

If you had been there, in the darkness of the graveyard, you would not have understood what they were saying. The words they spoke were a strange collection of sounds, some soft and hissing, others sharp and cutting. All of the words were ancient.

As Brothers Swan and Swift spoke, the air around them became heavy and crackled with static. The yellow flames flickered and danced and turned blue, then green, then red, bright as a flare. And then the red flames changed to black. If you could burn a shadow, this would be the colour of its flames.

They waited.

They did not move, did not speak.

The candles went out.

In front of Brother Swan and Brother Swift a long, thin crack appeared. Not a crack in the earth, in the mud and the stone. No. A crack in the *world*. A crack in *everything*. And on the other side was a faraway darkness so deep it made the night in the graveyard grow heavier. Thousands of creatures scuttled out of the crack in the world, tiny and inky-black, as if someone had lifted a stone and disturbed them.

And then the witches came.

Three shadows dragged themselves up and out of the fissure, and stood in the moonlight in front of the two brothers.

Brother Swift twisted a lock of greasy hair around a skinny finger. "You'll do," he said. "You'll do nicely."

Brother Swan looked the shadows up and down. Their shapes shifted and warped in the dim light of the moon. "Be still, my dears," he said. "Be easy. We've brought you back. Back to the world that didn't want you, the world that tormented and killed you."

One of the witches tried to speak, but her voice was nothing more than the sound of the night breeze in the long grass.

"Be calm," said Brother Swift. "Your strength will come back. And when it does it will be your turn. Your turn to get revenge, to make them suffer."

"We have a job for you," Brother Swan told the shadows. He smiled. "Now listen carefully, my dears, while I tell you all about the Shadowsmith…"

The Girl at the Window

Kirby lay on his bed and stared at the spider on the ceiling.

It's watching me, he thought as the spider twitched its legs. *It's actually watching me.*

The spider was about the size of a fifty pence piece. It was blacker than black, the colour of a nightmare.

And it had been following him.

He knew it sounded mad. But for the last week it seemed like the spider was everywhere he went. Even when he couldn't see it, he could sense it. And when he thought about the spider, inside his head felt like the air just before a rainstorm, heavy and dull and full.

He was beginning to wonder if it was really there at all. Maybe it was a trick of the mind, his brain's way of distracting him from real life, from the awful thing that was happening to his family.

Two weeks had passed since the storm.

When you lived by the sea you got used to storms. They were a part of life, as normal as shopping or homework or the threat of gull droppings on your ice cream. But this one had been different. Nobody had predicted that such a violent storm would strike at the start of summer. Kirby could still hear the roar of the wind through the winding streets of Craghaven, still see the rain smashing against his classroom window. He could hear his footsteps echo in the empty school corridors and see the frightened look in his dad's eyes as he waited for Kirby in the office.

Two weeks.

The summer holidays had begun since then. His classmates were out playing in the streets or heading off on holiday with their families, full of nervous excitement at the thought of starting high school at the end of the summer. Repair work had begun on the storm-damaged buildings. The world was still turning. Life was going on.

But not for Kirby or his dad.

For them, the world would not turn again until the moment Mum woke up.

The dread of never seeing her smile again, never hearing her voice or feeling one of her hugs

had consumed Kirby, filled him up until there was room for nothing else.

Until the spider had arrived.

Clack!

Kirby's gaze left the spider, flicked to the window.

Clack!

He sat up just as another stone – *clack!* – bounced off the window pane.

There was a girl in a yellow plastic raincoat down on the pavement. When she spotted him peering out at her, she smiled and waved, and motioned for him to open the window.

Kirby slid the rickety bottom half of the window upward, letting the fresh sea air into his room. The summer nights were stretching, but it was late enough that the vast sky was turning a dark, rich blue, and the reflection of the moon was molten silver on the waves.

Kirby poked his head out into the night. "Who're you?" he said. Then, trying to sound stern like his dad, he added, "What you playing at?"

"I'm Amelia," said the girl in the raincoat. "Amelia Pigeon. And I'm not playing. I'm not playing at all." Amelia Pigeon half closed her eyes. "Are you brave?"

Kirby frowned. *Am I brave?* What a weird question.

Funny though – he'd been asking himself the same thing a lot lately.

"Dunno," he said. "Hope so."

Amelia Pigeon smiled up at him, all front teeth and freckles. She looked about twelve, the same age as Kirby. "That's a good answer. Usually I find it's the ones who strut around with their chests puffed out that aren't brave at all. Not when it matters." She tilted her head to one side. "You've seen the spiders, haven't you?"

Kirby's breath caught in his throat. "There's more than one?"

"Course there's more," said Amelia. "When did you see one last?"

"A minute ago. It's gone."

Amelia shook her head. "Not gone. Never gone. Just watching."

"Watching what?"

Amelia scratched her nose. "You. They want *you* gone."

"You do know that's mental?" said Kirby.

"Think that if you want," said Amelia with a shrug. "Won't make the slightest bit of difference. Can anyone else in your house see them?"

"Don't think so. Dad hates spiders. If he'd seen one I'd have heard him swearing at it or trying to kill it with one of his shoes. When you say they want me gone…"

"Dead," said Amelia matter-of-factly. "They want you dead. I said gone because it sounds less scary."

Kirby was not usually the type of boy to be left stuck for words. But now he thought for a moment and opened his mouth, and all he could say was, "*What*?"

Amelia Pigeon reached into her yellow raincoat, and when she pulled out her hand she was holding a rough, barky twig about the length of a ruler. "Take this," she said, and she tossed it up to the window. Kirby missed it. Amelia Pigeon gave him a sharp look and tossed it again. This time he caught it.

"What is it?"

"Hazel. Picked at midnight. Simple, but it works."

Kirby examined the stick. It looked like every other stick he'd ever seen.

"They'll come soon," said Amelia. "Don't know exactly when. But they'll come. And there'll be lots of 'em."

"Lots of spiders?"

"When they come, use the hazel," Amelia went on. "Like this…" She pulled another twig from the depths of her raincoat, touched the tip to the ground, and drew an imaginary circle around herself. "They won't come inside the circle. Whatever you do, don't step outside it. And don't panic."

"But—"

"I have to go. Things I need to do. I'll be back."

"If you say so," said Kirby. He glanced at the hazel twig in his hand, and when he looked back the girl was gone.

