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opening extract from

The Five Lords of Pain: The Lord of the Void

written by

James Lovegrove

published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd.

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The Lord of the Void

James Lovegrove

The Story So Far

The Contest takes place every 30 years. It's a series of duels between five demons and a single human champion. What's at stake is nothing less than the fate of the world.

The human champion is always a member of the Yamada family. The task of defeating the demons, who are known as the Five Lords of Pain, is passed down from father to son. It has been that way for many hundreds of years.

Tom Yamada is the latest in line to face the Five Lords. Tom is only 15, and his Contest isn't due to start until he is 30. Something has gone wrong, however. Now Tom finds himself having to fight the duels long before he is supposed to.

Dragon, Tom's martial arts trainer, knows his young pupil isn't ready for the Contest. Jane Yamada, Tom's mother, thinks the same.

But Tom has helped set their minds at rest by winning the first duel. He has beaten the large, sumo-like creature called the Lord of the Mountain.

Two months have passed. Now Tom is preparing for the next duel . . .

Chapter 1

The Face at the Window

There was a scream.

Tom ran to the bathroom.

His mother was standing at the basin, in her bathrobe. She was about to have a shower, and had been taking out her contact lenses.

Now she was staring at the bathroom window. Her whole body was rigid. Her eyes bulged.

“What is it?” Tom asked.

“I – I’m not sure,” said his mother, her voice quivering. “I thought I saw something. Something out there.”

She pointed to the window.

“It was . . . a face,” she said. “A face, right there. Up close to the glass. Looking in. Looking in at me.”

Tom felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle.

There couldn’t have been a face at the window. *Couldn’t* have been.

Because he and his mother lived on the third floor.

“No, you’re wrong, Mum,” he said. “You’re being silly. It must have been something else.”

“It was a face,” his mother insisted. “It was wrapped in this kind of white cloth, a bit like a turban. The cloth covered its nose and mouth, but I could see some of its skin. The skin was pale. And the eyes . . .”

She shuddered.

“The eyes were completely white,” she said, almost whispering. “Like the eyes of a dead fish. And they were staring straight at me!”

“OK, now you’re really creeping me out, Mum,” Tom said.

“Well, excuse me,” said his mother. “I just had the wits scared out of me, but oh no, we mustn’t creep *you* out, must we, Tom?”

Ignoring her waspish tone, Tom went to the window. It was small, no more than 50 centimetres square. The face would almost have filled it – if there had been a face at all.

The back of the house looked out onto a large park. Tom could see nothing out there but trees. Their branches swayed in the darkness.

He opened the window nervously. Even more nervously, he poked his head out.

The moon was full and bright, giving plenty of light to see by. London, anyway, was never truly dark at night. The sky above the city glowed from all the streetlamps and house lights.

Tom peered up, down, to the right, to the left. Above, all he could see was the next floor up, and the gutter that hung below the eaves of the house. Directly below him there was the rear garden, with its lawn, pond and decking. To either side there were houses, identical to this one, tall and sturdy Victorian buildings. That was all. He couldn’t see a person anywhere.

Could somebody have climbed up to the window?

No. It wasn’t possible. The back of the house was a sheer brick wall, with very few gaps big enough to slot your hands and feet in. A drainpipe ran down it, but you would have to be a monkey to get up that, and not a very big monkey either. The

drainpipe was made of plastic and so were the clips that fixed it to the wall. It would have broken if a human tried to put their full weight on it.

Besides, less than half a minute had passed from the time Tom's mother screamed to the time he opened the window. There was no way somebody could have got back down to the ground in half a minute. Not unless they'd just let go and fallen. And then they would be lying in the garden with at least one leg broken, more likely both.

"Well?" said Tom's mother. "Do you see him?"

"Yes, he's floating out there, with a big rocket pack on his back."

"None of your lip, Tom! There *was* a face. I swear it."

Tom turned round. "Mum, do you have your contacts in right now?"

"No."

"So you didn't have them in when you saw the face?"

"No, I'd literally just popped them out."

"So how can you be sure that what you saw even was a face?"

"My eyesight isn't that bad," his mother said. "Things are a bit blurry without my lenses. But even so, a face is a face."

"You didn't perhaps catch sight of the moon," said Tom, "and mistake it for a face?"

"No."

"You don't sound a hundred per cent certain."

"Well, now that you've said it . . ." His mother frowned. "I suppose there's a chance it was the moon. I only had a glimpse of it before it disappeared in a flash. I

was bending down like this." She leaned over the basin. "And I spotted something out of the corner of my eye. So I turned my head, and . . ."

She gave a thin smile.

"And look," she said, eyeing the window. "There it is. I can see it from this angle. The moon."

She straightened up, puffing out her cheeks in relief.

"God," she said. "What a twit I am. Of course it was the moon."

"Case solved, ma'am," said Tom, like a detective on a TV show. "A simple matter of mistaken identity."

"What an idiot I am," said his mother. "Damn it, I'm just so twitchy these days. Jumping at shadows the whole time. The Contest – it's got me so worried. The black Element Gem has started fading out. So there's not long left till the Lord of the Void issues his challenge to you. I keep thinking about that. I can't get it out of my head."

"Relax, Mum," Tom said. "It's going to be all right. I took down the Lord of the Mountain, didn't I? Without breaking a sweat. And it'll be the same with the other four Lords of Pain. Trust me."

Tom sounded confident, but he wasn't really, not deep down. His victory over the Lord of the Mountain hadn't been as easy as he liked to make out.

Still, he *had* won the fight. There was no question about that. And since he'd won one of his five duels, that gave him good reason to think he could win the rest.

"If you say so," said his mother. "Now, close the window, would you? There's a draught coming in."

Tom leaned out to pull the window shut. As he did so, he noticed something.

It was a set of marks on the windowsill outside. Four tiny holes in a row, close together. As though somebody had dug something, a tool, maybe a large fork of some kind, into the sill.

Tom touched the marks. He pulled off a few splinters of painted wood from around the marks. The splinters were sharp and fresh. The wood they exposed was bright, not dull with age and weathering.

The marks weren't old. They were brand new.

"Tom? What is it?"

"Nothing, Mum."

"Well then, close the window. The wind's going right up my bathrobe."

Tom shut the window.

"Have a nice shower," he said, leaving the room.