

2. Pitt's Playpen

“Those that are most asleep think they are most awake,
being under the power of very vivid and fixed dream visions,
so that those who are most ignorant think they know most.”

Theodotus

“It was a dare, sir, a stupid dare. I didn't mean any harm.” The Head was pacing round the cell they had brought her to, circling the hardback chair where Amber sat rigid. His footsteps stopped behind her, but she hadn't the nerve to turn and look at him. His voice suddenly rasped close to her ear, making her jump.

“I will ask you again, for the last time, who dared you?”

“I can't say, sir.”

“And the codes, Amber, who gave you the codes?” His breath was warm, shifting the hairs on the back of her neck.

“I can't tell you... I just can't tell you.” And then she broke. A pain in her throat rose and overflowed as huge tears which splashed, embarrassingly, onto her hands.

“Very well,” he said, his voice changing from bullying threat to business-like brusqueness. He went to the door and beckoned two guards to enter. “Watch her, but let her rest,” he ordered, gesturing towards a narrow bed by the wall. “— for what remains of this god-awful night,” he added angrily. “Bring her to my office when I call.”

He left, slamming the door behind him.

Amber refused the food she was given, and she refused to lie down on that narrow bed as well. It was not right that a sixteen year old girl should be guarded by two men; she would tell them it was not right; she would complain.

But then Amber remembered – nothing was right now. Not after what she had heard.

Not after what she had *seen*.

She hugged herself, rocking gently to and fro on the chair, closing her eyes to bring the impression of Pitt's Playpen back, that glimpse inside before Dr Pitt had hauled her away. She examined the image. At first it seemed like any other lab – just a load of boring technical stuff. But there was something else. Behind Dr Pitt, as the door had opened, she'd caught sight of a huge screen showing the fuzzy image of a cell. *Like this one*, she thought, her eyes springing open. That other cell even had a chair in the centre, *like this*, though it was a black padded chair with lots of metal hoops. And there was something on the chair. No, not *on* it, *tied* to it; and this thing was alive and writhing.

Amber shivered, Khiza had been right. This was evil.

She hugged herself harder, feeling the back of her neck smart where a guard had grasped her too tightly. She glanced at them. They slouched in chairs either side of the door, leaning back against the wall. One of them caught her eye and grinned, his mouth working at some chewing gum with exaggerated insolence. She looked away, quickly. The other was tapping the skirting board with the back of his foot, an uneven beat which sent her thoughts spinning. She frowned, trying to reel in the pieces, trying to concentrate. It was already morning, and she would have to face Dr Pitt again. She must get her story straight. If he had any inkling what she had seen, then she knew she would never come out of this alive.

A sudden crackle made her look up. One of the guards reached for his radio and flicked a switch, filling the room with the Headmaster's voice, smooth and silky, even when squeezed through that tiny electronic box: "Bring Amber Brigantia to my office. Now."

As she stood, Amber caught sight of herself in a mirror over the bed, her green eyes wide with fear. She raised a hand automatically, trying to smooth her long hair which glinted auburn in the overhead lights. But as the guards joined her, she noticed something else. Despite her thin frame, which appeared even thinner against their muscular heaviness, she

was still taller than either of them.

Amber felt, somehow, cheered by this. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and stretched to her full height, lifting her chin defiantly. She was ready. She could do this. She could face Dr Pitt.

As soon as she stepped into the Headmaster's office, Amber noticed the light. The rising June sun glared through the picture window behind Dr Pitt, turning his seated figure into a black silhouette. She tried to read his expression, but it was in darkness; he was giving nothing away.

Amber looked down at the floor, and for a long time the Headmaster held that moment, making her squirm.

Suddenly he broke the silence, "Sit down Amber, my dear, you look exhausted."

His voice had changed; his words were now mellow and soft, dripping over her like heated treacle. She was taken by surprise. He was back to his normal, gentle self and she didn't know how to react. Her feet felt stuck to the floor.

Dr Pitt rose, touched her lightly on the shoulder and guided her to a chair. "Come on, my dear, sit."

The gentleness and touch were too much, too unexpected after all that had happened. Part of her wanted to give in to his soothing voice and pretend none of that night was real. She felt her false confidence dropping away with each slump of her shoulders; and that lump in her throat was back. But no, she would not give in, she couldn't, not now. She sat, head bowed, hiding her face behind long ripples of hair.

The Headmaster didn't go back to his swivel chair behind the desk; she heard him pull up another and bring it close.

"Amber," he said gently, "I cannot deny that I'm disappointed. I had thought... I had

hoped after all we've done you might repay our kindness a little better than this."

She knew what he was up to – using false compassion to create a thin crust of normality. She raised her head to look at him, and instantly she was pinned by his hard brown eyes, that sharp stare cutting like a pain.

You bastard, you lying bastard, she thought, trying at the same time to look contrite. But it was that thought, and all the anger that went with it, which finally jolted her into that different state of consciousness – into Second Time.

..... Reality gave a lurch, and Amber's vision blurred for a moment before crystallising into vivid colour. There was a buzzing in her head as sounds re-assembled into low drawls felt by the bones and heavy with resonance.

The world had slowed down. Everything but her was now beating time to the ticking of a slower clock.

It was his voice she noticed first; it had taken on a slurred quality like a badly slipping tape, dropping down the scale into unintelligible bass notes. Then she saw his face caught in a succession of instants, like images jerking frame by frame over a screen, his mouth opening and closing, slowly as he spoke, very slowly, like a fish.

Amber was elated. It was that familiar sense of power and freedom she thought she had lost. But it had returned. Now she had a weapon – now she could fight back.

Forcing herself to keep still so he couldn't tell what was happening, she examined him carefully. His mouth was stretching to a thin slit, the skin unpeeling to reveal perfectly regular white teeth. It was a smile, yet there was no answering smile in his eyes which glowed hard like marbles, piercing and examining.

I know you, she thought. *My mother was right about you all along, and now I know it.*

A shock of understanding passed through Amber. Her mother had been *right* – yet no one had believed her, no one, not even her own daughter.

A rush of guilt at that thought wrenched at Amber's body, and she felt herself being squeezed out of Second Time. She was helpless as the universe righted itself with a sickening stagger.....

The Headmaster's voice continued, quite normally now. "So, you won't tell me how you got hold of the codes?" He paused.

"I can't, sir," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "I can't get my friends in trouble. I'm responsible. It's all my fault."

"That's very noble of you Amber," he replied. "But you have transgressed a fundamental law of this school. The research we conduct here is priceless. Security is paramount and you have breached it. You will have to be punished."

She looked down, hooding her eyes, "I'm sorry, I'm so very sorry, sir. It was just a game... I didn't know." As she uttered these words, tears began to fall again, but not with shame or guilt – just hatred and impotent anger. *You liar, you murderer.*

"And there is another reason that compound is out of bounds..." He lifted her chin and forced her to look at him. "Some of that equipment is radioactive; you may already have suffered a damaging dose." He let her go and sat back. "When you leave here you will not go back to classes but to the medical wing - I want you to have a thorough check over."

"Then... I'm not to be expelled?" *He can't expel me. I know too much.*

"Expelled...?" A slight pause as if he were considering the idea. "You certainly deserve it." He looked stern again before his face softened. "However, you are relatively new here. How long is it since your father died and you joined us? Three months? Perhaps we can make allowances." He got to his feet. "You can go. We will have another chat... later." He smiled, a charming white-toothed smile which flashed like a threat.

The interview was over and a different guard arrived to escort her out, another burly young man with a vacant, slab-sided face. She was guided past the secretary's desk and down

the stairs where she met Mrs Fedorowicz, the Security Controller, coming up. Amber averted her eyes, a sudden stab of fear chasing away all relief at leaving that office.

The Headmaster waited a moment after Amber had gone, then he reached over and pressed the intercom. "Tell Mrs Fedorowicz I want to see her immediately."

"She's already here, sir."

The door opened and Mrs Fedorowicz came in, breathing heavily from her climb up the stairs. She was a large woman, but tall, like him, almost on his level as he rose from behind his desk.

"She knows, Bernadette, she knows," he said. He paused, thoughtfully. Then his voice came out flat and emotionless. "Amber Brigantia will have to be dealt with."