

This is a sample chapter from The Todmorden Tales

The Dog, the Cat and the Ugly

“Look Norton, let’s get things straight before we start, right? I am the Initiated Witch and you are the apprentice High Priest. I tell you what to do and you do it. Right?”

Norton looked down apologetically at the knife he was holding between his knees.

“Yes, all right Persephone, you don’t need to shout. It gets a bit irritating after a while you know. You’ve been trying to put me down ever since primary school.”

“Oh stop your whinging and listen. That’s not a dagger you’re holding, it’s an ATHAME!” (She had a way of speaking in capital letters, though no-one ever worked out how). She spelled it out. “Aah-fay-me, it’s a symbolic thingy. You know, like your male thingy”. She glared pointedly in the rough direction of the thingy in question, which Norton was trying to cover with a black handled kitchen knife. He was wearing his brand new robe but he felt naked. He felt as if she was looking right through it and she didn’t seem at all impressed with what she was seeing.

Effie Bagpuss, resplendent in a huge purple flannelette nightie, painted a sympathetic look on her battered old face and said “Ignore her Nort, she’s just a bit power drunk. I’m sure she’ll grow out of it once we ‘ave the coven up an’ runnin’ proper. First she changes her name ter Persephone d’Ofey and then promotes herself to High Priestess. Just ‘cos she’s the only one as ‘as enough room for a temple....”

Persephone tried to interrupt, but Effie simply ploughed on. “What was wrong wi’ bein’ Sharon Duffy anyway? An’ as fer that silver, crescent-moon tarrara thing... well I ask yer!”

Ivy Shepherd grinned at her. “Let’s face it Effie, if you were going to be High Priestess wouldn’t you want something a bit more witchey-sounding than Effie Bagpuss?”

“Oh? An’ what’s wrong wi’ me name, may I ask? Effie was me mother’s name and Bagpuss goes all the way back ter medieval times - Oxfordshire Bagpuizes as we were then! A proper important land-ownin’ family wi’ a country seat ter match. But it were taken over by the RAF during t’ war an’ we never got it back.”

At that, Ivy snorted. “Your Bagpuss granddad was disinherited for running off with an actress and all he ever owned was a fleapit theatre in Manchester. Leastways that’s what I heard.....”

“Which your drunken granddad set fire to, while ‘e was tryin’ to burgle the place. Leastways that’s what I ‘eard!” She was grinning like a Cheshire cat as she said it; the two of them had made it their life’s work to snipe at one another at every opportunity.

The four strong coven was sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor of the living room of 92, Lumbutts Lane. They were bickering, as they always had done, every time, since their first coven meeting (or moot, as Persephone/Sharon insisted it should be called).

Persephone slammed her flat hand down on the floor, the intended explosive effect spoiled by the carpet.

“DO YOU THINK WE COULD JUST GET ON WITH WHAT WE’RE HERE FOR?” Even she herself noticed the capitals this time. She took a deep breath. “I despair sometimes, I really do. I’ve seen more adult behaviour in Prime Minister’s Questions on the telly.”

Ivy glared at Effie, took a deep breath and opened her mouth.

“DON’T!” Persephone shouted before things got really ugly. “Let’s move on and open the circle. Norton, on your feet.”

The scrawny young man scrambled awkwardly upright, wishing that his black nylon robe wasn’t so short - it only reached to his knees. When Ivy had sold it to him she had assured him that it

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was a proper magician's robe. "It's what Chinese magicians wear - they're all a bit short of inches over there!" she'd told him cheerfully.

"This your big moment Norton, so remember what I told you." Persephone continued. "You can do all four quarters yourself for this first time. You go round to face each of the cardinal compass points and summon the proper element - East is Air, South is Fire, West is Water and North is Earth. The idea is to bring all the ancient elements into our circle, making it a special place - separate from the ordinary world - where they can protect us, right? ."

"I know all that Persephone, but how do they protect us and what do they protect us from?"

She wasn't too sure about this bit, so had to momentarily pause to check her inner Users' Manual. Unable to find the right page, she decided to go with what she had got and look it up later. "You don't need to know that at this stage Norton. We'll talk about it afterwards, alright?"

Norton nodded, held out his arm and pointed his knife (*No, it's an athame!* he reminded himself) and adopted what he hoped was a seriously High Priestly expression. Then he ruined it by making it obvious he hadn't a clue which way he was facing. He was supposed to start from East - where the hell had East gone? He looked around, starting to panic. Effie took pity on him and waved towards the window. "That way. Norton."

"No, this way," from Persephone as she took Norton's extended arm and walked round him, pivoting him like a weather vane, until his extended arm was pointing towards the sideboard.

Ivy, smugness personified, burrowed down under her blue cotton robe and produced a miniature compass. "Bought half a dozen of these last time the sales rep. came round. I thought one might come in handy tonight.... That way, Norton."

"That way" was facing a framed picture of fluffy clouds in a blue sky. Persephone only hesitated a nanosecond. "Oh, of course! That's why I put that there, silly me. East is Air and that picture's a metaphor for Air - just remember that, Norton." She shot a triumphant look at Ivy.

Norton faced errr... East and threw his arms theatrically in the air again, inflicting fatal stab wounds on the paper globe lampshade above his head with what he now knew to be his athame. BANG (or, since it was Norton) pop, and all the lights went out.

Persephone sighed. "All right Norton, go and get the vacuum cleaner from the understairs cupboard and get all that glass cleared away before you step in it."

Half an hour and a calming pot of tea later, the four of them re-convened in the living-room-cum-temple. Small table lamps provided the lighting this time, placed at all four compass points, well out of Norton's reach.

He resumed his place and took a frantic guess at East (His memory was even shorter than his robe). "Oh great and mighty guardian of the errrr East, Element of um... Water, no! Fire, no! AIR, I summon and call you... thee up to witness our rites this night and I bid thee errr... Hail and Welcome."

"That was.... Well, quite good, Norton. Lots of room for improvement but you're getting there." said Persephone encouragingly. "Now for South... no, that's Widdershins. You have to go Deosil - that's right..."

"I wish you'd make up yøur mind. Is it right or is it wrong?"

"Goddess give me strength. I mean you turn right, not left."

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“So why don’t you say so. And what’s all this diesel and widow’s shins stuff?”

“I did explain all this last month but you just don’t listen, do you? So, once more, with feeling. Deosil is clockwise and Widdershins is anti-clockwise round the circle. What’s so difficult about that? Now, get on with it.”

In spite of Persephone’s bad tempered prompting he managed to get all the way round to North, stumbling and stuttering all the way, until he could slump down in his place with a sigh of profound relief.

Persephone took charge again, flounced her multi-coloured, multi-layered lace and silk... well let’s call it a gown. It was far too elaborate to be anything as common as a robe. “I think, since this is our first attempt at a real working ritual we might try a bit of scrying. Now, we haven’t got a real crystal ball or a proper scrying mirror so I’ve filled my biggest saucepan with water, which I think will be just as effective. Of course a cauldron of water would be more Wiccan but we haven’t got one of those either.... So, we all gather round and gaze into the pan, let our eyes go out of focus and see if anything interesting appears in the water. I’m hoping we might learn something about the future of our coven. And then, Ivy, we’ll get on with the real business of getting your Tracy to dump Ug.”

Eyes down. Long silence..... lots of heavy breathing.

Ivy: “I’ve a couple of nice ones in the shop.”

Effie: “Nice what?”

Ivy: “Crystal balls.”

Persephone: “Does everything have to be business, Ivy? *Concentrate.*”

“Girl’s got to make a living.” said Ivy, testily. “Look, I’ll give you a good discount. Only cost you a fiver each. It’s got a nice mahogany-effect base too. I’ve only got plastic cauldrons though. Takes months to get real iron ones all the way from Taiwan.”

Effie: “Yer can’t boil up frogs toes an’ stuff in the plastic ones. They melt.”

“WE ARE NOT THAT KIND OF WITCHES!” Persephone bawled. “There will be no boiling of frogs’ bits or anything else while I have any say in the matter”.

“I’m doing mail order too now, through the internet. There’s a huge market out there you know.”

“/VY!”

“Sorry.”

Pregnant silence, more heavy breathing. A boy racer with a big bore exhaust roared past outside. The water vibrated, ruining reception for a moment.

Still more silence....

“Something moved!” Norton’s startled squeal rattled the windows, putting an end to any further deeply esoteric discussion.

All three women jumped and there was a chorus of yelps, along with a ripping sound from Effie’s ‘robe’ as she instinctively flexed her biceps.

Norton pointed to the saucepan. “There, in the water!”

Needing to avert his eyes from the horror of the parts of Effie the newly enhanced hole now revealed, he fixed his gaze firmly on the saucepan again.

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The water seemed to be bottomless and black. The frightening part of it all was that the more he looked the more he seemed to be drawn forward. He felt he was about to fall in, head first. He dragged his eyes away and shuddered.

"I, I... I think it was a dog. A big St. Bernard!"

"What, a dog in a saucepan?" Effie scoffed.

Norton pointed a trembling finger. "Look for yourself..."

The old woman leaned over the pot, her robe sliding perilously forward, gaping and sagging. Norton shut his eyes.

"Oooh... Bigger me...." he heard her murmur. She straightened up, looked around.. Y'know, "I think t' lad's reet."

Ivy snorted. "You're imagining things, yer daft old cow...."

Ivy was the proud owner of Todmorden Occult And Demonic Supplies on Bacup Road (known to all the local wags as Toads 'R' Us) and she was inclined to be a bit of a know-all.

"I buggerin' well am not...!"

"Language!" Persephone jumped in. "Ladies, this is a sacred place...!"

The three women leaned forward again in perfect unison, banging their heads together over the water. Ivy yelled in pain as the pointy bit of Persephones crescent moon headband took a small chunk out of her forehead.

Norton, resisting the urge to suggest it was 'a meeting of minds' was still not quite able believe what he had seen. He leaned forward for another look.

He failed to notice, until too late, that his glasses, which hung as always, from a loop of string round the back of his neck, had hooked themselves under the handle of the pan. He sat back....

Persephone screamed in fury. "That's one fitted carpet you owe me Norton Standish! Look, go and get the mop from the kitchen and get it all mopped up."

Persephone declared the ritual closed with a profound sigh of relief. "Well, I suppose it could have been worse." she said, but 'could have been worse' did not mean perfectly. Far from it.

Effie had suspended hostilities with Ivy long enough to help Norton clear up the mess. He hadn't stabbed anything else and all the furniture was still intact.

For her part, Ivy had originally only turned up for the tital after thinking long and hard about it and eventually deciding that Worthington (a.k.a. The Cat out of Hell) could safely be left on his own for the evening. (Fortunately she would never know how wrong she was).

Persephone d'Ofey, after this, her third monthly moot, was becoming more and more confident in her role as High Priestess of the little coven. There had been some real energy stirred up here tonight! And with a real purpose.

She and Ivy chatted away as they cleared up all the paraphernalia.

"The thing to remember Ivy is that you'll need to be patient. You can't expect Tracy to dump her boyfriend overnight. These spells take time to work."

Ivy nodded. "If it works at all it'll be a miracle. I've tried everything I can think of to make her see sense but you know what teenagers are like."

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Persephone, nodded sagely. It was only a couple of years since she'd been a teenager herself but the headiness of being a High-Priestess had left her feeling wise and mature far beyond her years.

Then she remembered a bit of unfinished business. She swung round to glare at Norton who was sitting on the sofa trying very hard to be invisible but failing. In the normal way of things he would expected to go unnoticed but this time he knew he'd blown it and it was only matter time before the sky fell in on him. *Here it comes* he thought.

"And as for you Norton Standish." Persephone yelled, All block capitals and ear splitting decibels, "WHEN WILL YOU EVER LEARN THE PROPER FORM FOR SUMMONING AND DISMISSING THE ELEMENTS?" More capitals. "Yes, I know you burned your finger snuffing the candle to banish Fire but don't you think 'Oow, buggger it' lacks a certain teeny little something as farewells go. These are ELEMENTALS and they should be treated with a bit of respect. We've probably got one running round the neighbourhood now, completely out of control!"

Norton blushed scarlet and fidgeted with his glasses desperately looking for a way out. He considered pleading 'the intention' but he knew he'd worn that one out at least a moot ago. Instead, he decided to keep his head down and hope it would all go away.

"Nothing to say then have we, Norton?" She let him squirm for a while.

"Right then, I want you to go home and practice your SUMMONINGS and your BANISHINGS until you're word perfect every time. **HAVE YOU GOT THAT?**" she ended, bawling for added emphasis.

Norton simply nodded (well, what else could he do?).

She's worse than Miss Eccles in first year primary he thought, though to be honest, some of the other feelings she aroused in him - well... let's not go there.

Effie Bagpuss had more mundane things on her mind now the witching bit was over for the night.

" 'Ow did it go wi' the fireworks, Ivy?"

Being a bit of an entrepreneuss Ivy's latest get-rich scheme just had to be a winner. On the 6th November last year she'd bought up all the unsold fireworks within a twenty mile radius at - dare we say it - fire salvage prices. She'd wrapped them in plastic bags and stored them in her garden shed ready to be brought out this year and sold in the shop at a huge mark-up. Couldn't go wrong!

Effie, though, had been taken with the strange notion that a fireworks display would be a great way to round off a Yule celebration. She tried to justify this by suggesting to Ivy that it would be as good a way as any of reminding the Sun that it was time for him to be getting his act together ready for spring.

Ivy, however, was having none of it, "Effie, for the last time, That's stock, that is. There'll be no fireworks at my expense." She said firmly, closing the subject and putting a padlock on it. She was reluctant to admit that she still had a lot left.

Meanwhile, back in town, Ivy's cat Worthington had found a nice doggy to play with and was happily herding the unfortunate beast up Ivy's garden path in the certain knowledge that home advantage was worth at least a one goal start.

Prince Hamlet XXXIII of Mankinholes was an extremely well bred Great Dane with an

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impeccable pedigree registered with the Kennel Club. He was, to put it mildly, 'big with it'. His owners called him Butch (more in desperate hope than expectation) and he was not in any mood for play. In fact, he was terrified. He hated ordinary cats but Worthington came straight out of his worst nightmares. With eyes rolling and froth flying from his swinging tongue he shot up the garden path, seeking escape, or, failing that, somewhere to make a stand. A half-open shed door at the end of the path beckoned.

The dog didn't dare look back, but he could feel something dark and horrible, like the shadow of death, looming right behind him. Putting on a last desperate burst of speed, he hurled himself into the promised sanctuary.

The exact sequence of events from that point on is a little confused. Certainly there was a great deal of crashing and an equal amount of banging from inside the shed. There were also human screams (female) competing with a string of very naughty words and angry shouts (male). Clouds of dust rolled lazily from the door.

The Prince, finding that the only way out was the way he came in, bolted out again. Trying to salvage some small amount of pride for both royal blood, and dogdom in general, he shot up the garden with Worthington's claws buried satisfyingly (for the cat) in his rump and disappeared over the raised bank of the River Calder which ran along the back of the property.

Inside the shed Ivy's daughter Tracy had been - to put it as delicately - 'entertaining' her boyfriend, a Neanderthal Nouveau known to the world as Ug. They had been enjoying a post-whatever-it-was smoke when the circus hit town and, during the ensuing melée, Ug's cigarette had gone the way of everything else in the shed - floorwards.

It was while she was bending down to retrieve an essential garment that Tracy heard the hissssss of the first fuse. Drawers, but nothing else, now firmly in place she exited stage left at something close to Mach1, followed almost as quickly by Ug wearing just his Halifax Town football socks. While she headed for the house and safety, looking like a sackful of juddering buttocks, he made entirely the wrong choice and dived over the flood defences on the river bank. There he came nose to nose with Worthington, just above the waterline.

By this time the show was in full swing and the cat, having wistfully watched his playmate swim off to safety, was enjoying the pretty colours and listening to the surrounding hills battling the explosions back and forth between themselves. Eee, it were reet grand!* Rockets, Bangers, Mortars, Thunderflashes, Roman Candles and airborne Catherine Wheels were going off in all directions. Except, strangely, towards Ivy's house. Ivy, like most occult shop owners, knew a thing or two about protection spells and fireworks knew to leave her well alone. (They aren't totally mindless, they just have a very short attention span.)

Ug and the cat turned and looked cross eyed at each other as a rocket screamed between their noses with nothing to spare. To his credit Worthington tried to bat it out of the air as it fizzed past but he was a fraction too slow and had to content himself with watching it smack, in a shower of bilious green stars and a huge explosion, against the wooden wall of the Boy Scout headquarters across the river. The hut shrugged its shoulders and all the windows fell out.

This might have been a fitting finale to the incident had Tracy not stored her camping stove in the shed after her last trip to the Lake District. But she had.

Now, there are explosions and there are EXPLOSIONS. They only ever get one shot at it and this one had decided to make it a big production number. This one was going to emulate the original going-out-with-a-bang bang. With a mind numbing woooooomp the shed, along with a large part of the local geography, just ceased to exist. It didn't 'disappear' - that takes time - it simply wasn't there anymore. But a split second later a truly impressive crater thumped down to replace it. In the thunderous silence that followed Worthington climbed onto the bank and strolled nonchalantly over to investigate the stunned worms, beetles and other crawly beasties that were running about in the bottom of the pit wondering where the hell the roof had gone.

* 'E were a Yorkshire cat!

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At that point Ug reappeared and staggered up the garden, his ears still ringing. Blearily, he located Tracy, now fully dressed and grinning at him from the back door of the still intact end-terraced house.

She looked at him as he stood shivering and floodlit in the light from the doorway. She really saw him - shaven head, no neck, wearing nothing but his football socks. And, below his navel, a big and highly detailed tattoo of an elephant's head - complete with a not-very-impressive trunk. No, this wasn't the hunk of her dreams any more; he was just a ridiculous boy with a ridiculous tattoo.

To be fair to the girl, she tried not to laugh. Oh how she tried. She wriggled, and she squirmed and she belched a couple of times but in the end the pressure was too much. She exploded and she howled and the tears streamed down her face. She wasn't sure but she thought she might have had a bit of an accident too. She just couldn't stop. She was still braying and honking like a donkey when....

One look at Tracy's purple face and streaming eyes was far more than his fragile ego could take. Shielding his shrivelled modesty with two giant hogweed leaves grabbed from the river bank Ug stormed off, never to return.

The sap of the giant hogweed does have quite a bite, as he quickly found out. For days afterwards there were parts of Ug that he wished were parts of someone else. If anyone knew about Fire he did, though lacking Norton's expertise(?) he didn't know how to shift it.

Out at the Observatory on the hill towards Bacup, a young student astronomer sat alone peering through the eyepiece and randomly sweeping the firmament. Perhaps this would be his night, the night that would deliver a previously unnoticed meteor shower, a new comet or a new Plutonian moon. Something that would make his name, like Lowell, like Halley, like Barnard or like Krach errr Kerc errr that Russian bloke as discovered that there pulsar. It might just be his night.

It was a pity therefore that he was looking North when he should have been looking South and completely missed the short-lived nova that blazed across the entire sky a few short miles down the valley.

In a quiet back lane out towards Lumbutts, Constable Ackroyde, one of Todmorden's finest, brought his patrol car to a slithering halt, climbed out and faced the impossible. The flickering, eye burning, searingly bright 'Thing' that filled the road ahead.

"Bloody 'ell," the constable groaned "Not you again." Standing straight backed and full of the authority of his uniform he tried to look the 'Thing' in the eye. (A bit futile really as it didn't seem to have an eye and it was far too dazzling to look at anyway).

He addressed it firmly. "Look, you and your mates gave me enough trouble last time. I just happened to mention, back at the station, that I might, just possibly, have seen something that looked a bit like a soddin' UFO sittin' in the road. An' yer know what they started sayin' about me? Yer know what got written about me in the Courier? What the police psychologist suggested to me? Yer know how many nutters turned up on my doorstep wantin' ter know what the little grey men had done to me. Eh? EH?"

Blazing mad now, he advanced on the 'Thing', which seemed to decide that a short step(?) backwards might be expedient. "Right then, so THIS time," he shouted, brandishing his extendable baton, (or truncheon, as it was once known) in a manner that would have earned the admiration of those gentle souls in the riot squad, "**SO THIS TIME**" he repeated, "**JUST BUGGER OFF! RIGHT NOW! BACK TO MARS OR BEETLEJUICE, OR WHEREVER THE HELL YOU CAME FROM!**"

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Fire, being a very experienced Elemental, knew a proper dismissal when it heard(?) one and it obeyed with alacrity. *"Blimey, will these mortals ever make up their minds?"* it muttered to itself. *"They invite me their party but they don't know what to do with me when I get there. So, what am I supposed to do? I start doing my own thing (well you do, don't you?) and just when I'm getting into my stride and having some real fun they chase me off.... And even then they can't decide where to send me."*

"Then again" it mused *"I could call on Beetlejuice. Not seen him for a while..... Mixes all sorts of exotic things with methanol."*

And off it went

The student astronomer really did miss his big chance that night. He might have been able to report the first ever reversing meteorite as Fire took his leave in spectacular fashion. But then again, did he really want to be remembered for 'Barton's Aberration?'

Ivy, cycling haphazardly homeward, slightly the better for the post-ritual booze and other interesting things she had ingested and inhaled, was owlishly wondering what all the commotion was about. Two fire engines and a couple of ambulances roared past, blue lights and nee-naws shattering the otherwise peaceful night. Coming in sight of home she was amazed to find the focus of all the kerfuffle. They were all outside her house. She was still trying to take in what she was seeing when Tracy, dishevelled but only slightly singed, rushed out of the crowd. "Don't panic, the house is alright," she said as she reached the safety of her mother's arms "It's just, well, all your fireworks went off and...." She proceeded to give a carefully censored account of the evening's events.

"So, where's your boyfriend now then, Trace?" Ivy asked, noticing the absence of shaved heads from the chaos of firemen, police and evacuating neighbours.

Shock finally caught up with Tracy (she was, after all, a very sensitive girl). Her full bottom lip quivered and her blues eyes filled with tears. "Oh mum," she sobbed, ignoring the running mascara. "He was completely useless. He ran awaaaay!" She gratefully blew into the proffered tissue. "I could have been bu-burning to death and he just r-ran awaaaay. He didn't c-c-are about me at all....Oh, muuum."

Ivy pressed her daughter's head onto her shoulder and smiled quietly to herself.

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