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# THE HOLLOW PEOPLE

B R I A N   K E A N E Y



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Also by  
Brian Keaney

# **JACOB'S LADDER**

THE  
HOLLOW  
PEOPLE

B R I A N   K E A N E Y

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*Those who have crossed  
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom  
Remember us – if at all – not as lost  
Violent souls, but only  
As the hollow men*

**TS Eliot, *The Hollow Men***



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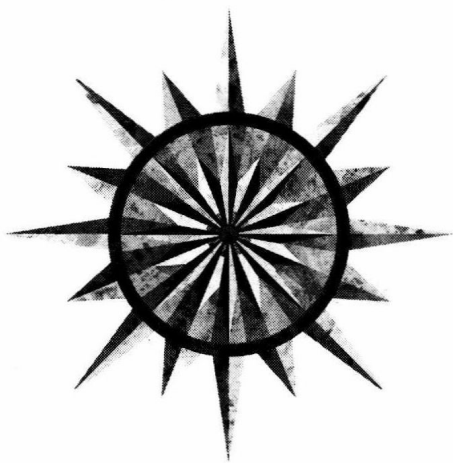
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**Part One**  
**TARNAGAR**



*In dreams begins responsibility*

**WB Yeats**

## **AN ACCIDENT IN THE KITCHEN**

When Dante Cazabon used his shoulder to open the double doors of the kitchen, he was concentrating on the mountain of soup bowls he carried on a tray in front of him. He was thinking that the bowls had been scraped so clean by the inmates of Corridor Y, they scarcely needed washing. This was because the inmates of Corridor Y, like every other inmate in the asylum, received only as much food as was considered good for them. Whenever Dante arrived with their meals, therefore, they regarded him with a hungry and accusing look that made it very clear they wanted more. Unfortunately, Dante could only follow orders.

Following orders was Dante's life. Some people gave orders; others followed them. That was the way things were done in the asylum. There was a very strict chain of command. At the top was the director. The ordinary workers only caught an occasional glimpse of his pale, thin form, gliding about the corridors, surrounded by secretaries and bodyguards. Beneath him were the medical staff in their white coats. Then came the administrators, carrying their clipboards and checking their watches to make sure that everything was as it should be. Next in line were the functionaries who oiled

the wheels of the machine and made sure its great creaking structure continued to work on a daily basis: the cooks and cleaners, carpenters and plumbers, gardeners, groundsmen and jacks of all trades. Below them were the security staff, burly men and women in their blue uniforms, who guaranteed the safety of the outside world by ensuring that neither staff nor inmates ever went beyond the walls of the asylum without permission. And at the very bottom of the pile was Dante.

He was the lowest of the low – the child of an inmate. And not just any inmate. His mother had been one of the asylum's most dangerous and unpredictable patients. She had thrown herself from the top of the Great Tower when Dante was just a baby. Her smashed body had been found on the cobblestones below in the early hours of the morning. As a result, Dante had been brought up by asylum staff, and from his earliest days he had been taught to be grateful for the privilege.

His childhood had not been an easy one. No one had ever picked him up and cuddled him, telling him that he was their own little darling. Treatment like this was reserved for other children. Dante had learned to be thankful for any crumb of affection that was thrown his way but, on the whole, not very many were. He had been granted his own tiny room above the kitchen, and just enough food to live on. In return, he was expected to do the jobs that other people didn't like to think about.

If a violently disturbed inmate improvised some kind

of weapon and managed to spill her own blood, it was Dante who cleared up the mess. If someone was found hanging from the ceiling by the cord of his pyjamas, eyes bulging and tongue sticking out, it was Dante who cut him down. If there were slops to be emptied, stains to be removed, unpleasant sights to be swept away, Dante was given the task. And he was not expected to whine about it.

So when a foot snaked out just as he was stepping through the kitchen doors, tripping him up and sending forty-seven soup bowls flying through the air to land on the hard stone slabs and shatter into a thousand pieces, Dante did not complain. He went sprawling forward, hitting his knee against the great wooden bench that ran down the middle of the room with a force that sent waves of pain running up and down his leg, but he still remained silent.

A gale of laughter from the other kitchen workers was followed almost immediately by a string of curses from Mr Cuddy, the portly catering manager.

'You clumsy fool!' he shouted, hitting Dante as hard as he could with the flat of his hand.

Dante's head rocked backwards and stars burst into life before his eyes.

'Clear it up!' Mr Cuddy barked.

'Yes, sir,' Dante muttered. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the lanky form of Jerome Mazarin, the cook's first assistant, lounging against the wall beside the doorframe, his hatchet-face contorted into a grin of delight. Jerome took considerable delight in making life

difficult for others, particularly Dante. On a ledge outside one of the kitchen windows he kept a glass jar with a little honey smeared inside it, to trap insects so that during his leisure time he could pull off their wings or their legs. Dante sighed. Ignoring the pain in his knee, he began to collect the broken soup bowls and put them in the bin.

If he had paused, looked up from the broken shards of crockery and peered out of the window, he would have seen a tall girl, with dark wavy hair cascading down the back of her long white dress. She was walking determinedly across the lawn of the asylum's West Wing under the shadow of the Great Tower, clutching a leather-bound book in one hand and frowning sternly.

Beatrice Argenti was thinking, as she often did, that the asylum was a particularly ugly and dispiriting place in which to live. The Old Clinic at its centre, with its gargoyles and turrets, had a certain style, though it could never have been described as beautiful, but it was surrounded by the most ramshackle collection of buildings imaginable. Rows and rows of mean little houses in which the medical staff and administrators lived, then the larger communal halls of residence for the more lowly workers. These gave way to a great jumble of offices and workshops, garages and outbuildings that straggled down to the woods. Beyond the woods, the Outer Wall encircled the grounds. The whole thing was like some dreadful, nameless beast, squatting in the centre of the island, its poisonous tentacles stretching out to encompass every blade of

grass and every last inch of rock.

If Bea had been able to choose a life for herself it would have been quite different. She would not have been born in an asylum on the remote island of Tarnagar. She would not have picked two very dull and dutiful junior doctors for her parents. And there would have been no coming-of-age ceremony.

She made a face as she contemplated this. The thought of the ceremony troubled her mind like a splinter troubles the body. If she could talk about how she felt perhaps it would be easier to bear. But who was there to discuss it with? Her mother would just smile patiently and tell her that every young person feels nervous when the great day approaches. 'It's perfectly natural,' she would insist in that infuriatingly calm voice of hers. 'Once the ceremony is over you'll feel quite different.' Her father would probably treat her to a long and tedious lecture about the importance of developing 'a positive attitude'.

She had crossed the lawn by now and was making her way among big, old trees, following the little stream that ran through the asylum's grounds and out under the wall. Bea envied that stream. It could go where it chose ,unhindered by rules and regulations.

She sought out her favourite tree, an ancient willow so bent over that its branches grew parallel to the ground and were low enough to sit on. There she opened the leather-bound book and began to read aloud the words she was supposed to have learnt by heart: 'Dr Sigmundus has promised us that where there



was uncertainty, there shall be reassurance, where there was anxiety, there shall be peace.'

She closed the book again. How tired she was of hearing what Dr Sigmundus had to say! Involuntarily, she glanced about her as she thought this. It was dangerous even to think such things. Sometimes she felt sure that other people could read her mind and see the treacherous sentiments she nourished there.

Why was she so different from all the other young people she knew? Francesca Belmonti, who had been born on the same day – barely two hours earlier in fact – was looking forward to her coming-of-age ceremony with a ferocious intensity. She talked about nothing else but the dress her mother had ordered from the mainland, the party that was being planned to celebrate the occasion, the food that would be eaten at the party, which guests would be invited and which would not. Bea, on the other hand, had told her mother she did not want a party. She might as well have saved her breath. Her mother had simply nodded as if she agreed perfectly with what her daughter had said. 'We will just have a little party,' she told Bea. 'Only our closest friends will be invited.'

The very idea was ridiculous! There was no such thing as a little party on Tarnagar. Whether Bea liked it or not, all her parents' colleagues would come with their dreadful sons and daughters in tow. The adults would stand around talking about work. Their children would try to outdo each other with stories of how much had already been spent, and how much was still going to be