**Extract from *Lord Loss* by Darren Shan**

I don't know what's going on, but now that I know I'm not set to go toes-up, I'm determined to see it through with them. I don't care what sort of a mess they're in. I won't let Mum, Dad and Gret freeze me out, no matter how bad it is. We're a family. We should face things together. That's what Mum and Dad always taught me.

Padding through the streets, covering the six kilometres home as quickly as I can. They could be anywhere, but I'll start with the house. If I don't find them there, I'll look for clues to where they might be.

I think of Dad saying he's scared. Mum trembling as she kissed me. Gret's voice when she was on the stairs.

My stomach tightens with fear. I ignore it, jog at a steady pace, and try spitting the taste of cod-liver oil out of my mouth.

Home. I spot a chink of light in Mum and Dad's bedroom, where the curtains just fail to meet. It doesn't mean they're in - Mum always leaves a light on to deter burglars. I slip around the back and peer through the garage window. The car's parked inside. So they're here. This is where it all kicks off. Whatever 'it' is.

I creep up to the back door. Crouch, poke the dog flap open, listen for sounds. None.

I fish under the pyramid-shaped stone to the left of the door and locate the spare key.

The kitchen's cold. It shouldn't be - the sun's been shining all day and it's a nice warm night -  but it's like standing in a refrigerator aisle in a supermarket.

I creep to the hall door and stop, again listening for sounds. None.

Leaving the kitchen, I check the TV room, Mum's fancily decorated living room - off-limits to Gret and me except on special occasions - and Dad's study. Empty. All as cold as the kitchen.

Coming out of the study, I notice something strange and do a double-take. There's a chess board in one corner. Dad's prize chess set. The pieces are based on characters from the King Arthur legends. Hand-carved by some famous craftsman in the nineteenth century. Cost a fortune. Dad never told Mum the exact price - never dared.

I walk to the board. Carved out of marble, ten centimetres thick. I played a game with Dad on its smooth surface just a few weeks ago. Now it's scarred by deep, ugly gouges. Almost like fingernail scratches - except no human could drag their nails through solid marble. And all the carefully crafted pieces are missing. The board's bare.

Up the stairs. Sweating nervously. Fingers clenched tight. My breath comes out as mist before my eyes. Part of me wants to turn tail and run. I shouldn't be here. I don't need to be here. Nobody would know if I backed up and...

I flash back to Gret's face after the rat guts prank. Her tears. Her pain. Her smile when she gave me the Tottenham kit. We fight all the time, but I love her deep down. And not that deep either.

I'm not going to leave her alone with Mum and Dad to face whatever trouble they're in. Like I told myself earlier - we're a family. Dad's always said families should pull together and fight as a team. I want to be part of this - even though I don't know what 'this' is, even though Mum and Dad did all they could to keep me out of 'this', even though 'this' terrifies me senseless.

The landing. Not as cold as downstairs. I try my bedroom, then Gret's. Empty. Very warm. The chess pieces on Gret's board are also missing. Mine haven't been taken, but they lie scattered on the floor and my board has been smashed to splinters.

I edge closer to Mum and Dad's room. I've known all along that this is where they must be. Delaying the moment of truth. Gret likes to call me a coward when she wants to hurt me. Big as I am, I've always gone out of my way to avoid fights. I used to think (fear) she might be right. Each step I take towards my parents' bedroom proves to my surprise that she was wrong.

The door feels red hot, as though a fire is burning behind it. I press an ear to the wood - if I hear the crackle of flames, I'll race straight to the phone and dial 999. But there's no crackle. No smoke. Just deep, heavy breathing... and a curious dripping sound.

My hand's on the door knob. My fingers won't move. I keep my ear pressed to the wood, waiting... praying. A tear trickles from my left eye. It dries on my cheek from the heat.

Inside the room, somebody giggles - low, throaty, sadistic. Not Mum, Dad or Gret. There's a ripping sound, followed by snaps and crunches.

My hand turns.

The door opens.

Hell is revealed…