



Vampire Temple of Atazoth

of the

Sinister Pathway Triangle Order

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The Meaning of Sinister Initiation: An Initiates Perspective

Order of Nine Angles

With two short dark stories

Black Rhadley

Brenna, ONA.

Raven-Made

By Annia Ashlet, Seven Stones Coven, ONA 1996



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Foreword

The Meaning of Sinister Initiation: An Initiates Perspective

Order of Nine Angles

From "OTONEN – A Guide to the stage of Initiate"

The Sinister Path

For many non-initiates and, unfortunately Initiates (an indication perhaps of the current state of the 'Occult world' itself), it is often misunderstood that the performance of a Rite of Initiation will bring forth immediate psychic, that is, Magickal change. Practical experience reveals that this is not usually the case however. There are of course exceptions to this 'rule'. One is that an immediate psychic change is noticeable in the individual; this itself will most likely be due to the intensity of the Rite of Initiation. But whether such change has a lasting effect is another question, it being more likely that such immediate change will slowly evaporate as time passes. Another exception is that although there will have been no real or genuine inner change the Initiate will fall prey to one of the many delusions of the Abyss and believe that a change has occurred against all indications that tell otherwise (q.v. The Deceitful Occult Ego). So, although immediate change within the Initiate is possible, a more balanced and natural approach is to perceive Initiation as a process. It may be – and often actually is - psychically desirable for the beginning of this process to be symbolised by the outer form of an Initiation Ritual (be it hermetic or ceremonial).

Along the Seven-Fold Sinister Way these Initiation rites (for in one sense all the rituals involved during the various stages of the Sinister Way are initiation rites in themselves) are primarily concerned with presenting the Darkness or acausal component of the psyche in the conscious world, or mind, of the Initiate. This enables the consciousness of the Initiate – as he or she slowly progresses along the Path - to develop from that of non-Initiate (that is, where the individual is largely controlled by unconscious desires and impulses) to that of Initiate (where the Satanist begins to comprehend and interact consciously with these previously unconscious components) and then on to Adept hood where these energies are consciously understood enabling a certain balance to be attained between causal and acausal.

The Path of the Initiate

As each new Initiate progresses along the Sinister Path, it is expected that individual insights will add to the Tradition as a whole (the Heir to the Tradition adding significantly). Whether this does or does not happen is really dependent upon the Initiate and the quality of his or her contact with the Sinister Tradition. If the Path is genuinely followed, that is, if the Sinister is being actively pursued during the daily life of the Initiate (such pursuit or questing being a continuous act, and thereby a development of individual Will) genuine occult transformation will begin to occur. With this transformation it is possible that variations on some Sinister Rituals may arise whereby the Initiate finds a more powerful method of manifesting the acausal during the rite.

The rituals that are of primary concern for the Initiate are the Dark Pathways and the Sinister Pathworkings. Besides these rituals – which will already, if followed continuously, begin to dominate the Initiates consciousness – there are the individual sphere chants to be learnt, the undertaking of the physical training, the study and practice of the Star Game, the study of Order texts and correspondences, the collation of incenses and the purchasing of specific implements for the future Temple. In regard to this latter aspect, by undertaking such actions these actions themselves will or may (dependant upon Individual Destiny) aid to the manifestation or creation of a Sinister Temple. That is to say, that by purchasing or making items that are specifically for a Sinister Temple, the reality of that (future) Temple is becoming presenced in the causal life of that Initiate.

Further to previous Order guide-lines, a new method of Initiate development advises that the Initiate begins with the Dark Pathways themselves (instead of the Sinister Sphereworkings). The aim is to invoke one Dark God per week, meditating each night leading up to the ritual for no less than fifteen minutes on the respective sigil whilst slowly repeating the name of the Dark God or the Word of Power. Combined with this the Initiate should aim to reduce sleep and food until the night of the ritual whilst also locating the respective planetary incense (taken from the bark of the respective tree) and burning this, during the ritual. Once all Dark Pathways have been experienced, the Initiate may then undertake the Sinister Pathworkings, performing the nightly meditations. The following of the Sinister Path in this manner, implies that the Initiate has already re-created or made conscious the Tree of Wyrd within him or herself, by consciously invoking each of the fundamental archetypes into consciousness. This conscious presenting of the archetypes then being further developed by the Sphere Meditations themselves.

Initiate Tasks: Other Aspects

Besides the primary rituals that are required for the completion of Sinister Initiation, it is advisable that the Initiate purchases - or contracts a jeweller to make - the relevant piece of jewellery to be worn (ring set with quartz for males, quartz necklace for females). The wearing of such an item of jewellery further stimulates the Initiates awareness that he or she is a member of a Tradition, one that is far more important and potent than the frankly rather pathetic past-times that most people take as an interest or hobby. This ring or necklace becomes for the Initiate a 'Mark of Satan', a symbol of the Initiates quest and a constant reminder of the Sinister in the Initiates life, that is the Initiate is constantly aware that he or she is wearing an outward symbol – that others can see – of his or her Sinister Quest.

When all the different factors or tasks of Sinister Initiation are combined the Initiates entrance into the Sinister becomes a very potent force, one that is active (by virtue of the fact that the Initiate is consciously realising or making real the Sinister in his or her life).

The practice of the chants is, as mentioned previously, a further task of the Sinister Way. Although this does not necessarily have to be undertaken during the stage of Initiate, it is advisable to begin to learn these so that once the Grade of Professed Brother or Sister is attained, the Sinister Magickian may be a little more prepared for the running of a Sinister Temple. By virtue of the fact that there are a number of chants that will need to be learnt for use during Sinister ceremonial ritual it is usually advisable that the Diabolus is the first chant to be learnt. Besides this the sphere chants are probably the next most important (the Agios Lucifer chant being ideal to begin with) since they provide a foundation for a number of rituals, and can be - and have been - used during the Dark Pathways Invocations.

There are of course a number of other tasks that are suggested, some new and some more Traditional aspects. One of the older and more secretive tasks is for the Sinister Initiate to gain some hosts from a Nazarene place of worship and desecrate these either during or after the Rite of Initiation. If one is seeking to join an existing Temple it will be necessary to have attained these prior to Initiation for use during Initiation, such an acquisition further proving the worth of the candidate.

A more recent addition to Tradition is that whilst the Initiate is undertaking the Dark Pathways, he or she draws a Tree of Wyrd in his or her Magickal Diary or 'Sinister Book of Shadows'. This map however should only be added to once a Dark Pathway has been concluded. Thus, the Initiate begins by drawing the seven spheres, in appropriate sphere colours. Then, once the Noctulius Pathway is completed this is drawn in, then the Shugara Pathway is drawn in and so on.

This in itself adds (albeit in a minor way) to the conscious integration of the energies being brought forth as enabling the Initiate to see - in physical terms – how the Pathways are connected to the spheres and one another.

Self-honesty and Sinister Occult Development

It is important to remember that, as an Initiate you have made a pledge to Satan and the Dark Gods to follow the Sinister Way:

‘Now receive as a symbol of your new desire and as a sign of your oath this sigil of Satan. This sign shall be the Power which I as Master wield shall always be a part of you - a symbol to those who can see and the Mark of our Prince.’

‘I (state name chosen) am here to begin my Sinister quest! Prince of Darkness, hear my oath! Baphomet, Mistress of Earth, hear me! Hear me, you Dark Gods waiting beyond the Abyss!’

(The Black Book of Satan)

It is easy in times of anger or tiredness to say to oneself that it doesn't matter too much if a meditation is missed, or you don't have a ring, or you don't bother with the physical aspect, or that the Initiation Rite doesn't need to be undertaken, or the Grade Ritual of External Adept isn't really too important. That, because you know you could do it, it isn't necessary to prove it to yourself. And so on and so forth. And yes, it is easy to say such things because it means that you don't have to make an effort. But, the Sinister Path is hard and demands commitment. It is only with this commitment, with this continuous effort, with this continual personal act of Will, of individual defiance, that such changes will occur. So in the context of Sinister Pathworking:

‘... faithful repetition is important, because by following the procedure exactly the required changes in consciousness are produced.’ (Naos)

How easy it is to miss these simple statements that describe the very means to achieve Sinister Adeptness. Perhaps if more Initiates actually did what was said by virtue of an act of Will then there might be more Sinister Adepts in the world. But things are as they are and human weakness is usually the cause of a waste of life, of potential. So, it is necessary, if the Sinister Initiate truly seeks an understanding of the Sinister that runs deeper than mere words, but is a wordless understanding that cannot be taken away from him or her, to follow the way as stated in numerous Order mss. It is necessary to face the challenges that are set before the Initiate. At this stage there is no need to look too far ahead. Rather it is better to keep ones mind and thoughts on the current stage, because it is by following this stage now, and then the stage of External Adept, that the heights of the stage of Sinister Adept may finally be approached.

Thus, with all this in mind although the Initiate may have a tendency to say that it is not necessary to meditate upon the sigil of the Dark God each night prior to the Dark Pathways Invocations, such meditations really do enhance the energies brought forth and, after an unspecified amount of time has passed (dependant of course upon each Initiate) the Initiate will start to feel the acausal body surrounding the causal body.

From Sinister Initiate to Sinister Adept

The Sinister Tradition, as has been stated previously, does not grant titles or adepthood through friendship or money or sex or for any other reason. The title of Adept and that which is beyond must be fought for, must be pursued actively, now, during the present, because it is from this point in time that the desired future may eventually become a present reality. This is true of the esoteric nature of the Sinister Way, as it is also true of the Aeonian imperatives that are being strived for by Sinister Adepts and Masters. For each stage of the Tree of Wyrd is a Tree of Wyrd in itself. That which is within is without and that which is without is within. Just as the Sinister Tradition is a Tree of Wyrd, so also are the individual Initiates self-contained Trees of Wyrd and so inherently each stage of the Way contains the seeds of all the other stages.

Why are there so few Sinister Adepts today? Is it perhaps because the tendency is to write and talk, just as the typical armchair Qabalist might act, or rather, not act. Is it because those who seek to make the Great Work a reality in their own life do so only in their dreams; 'I wish I was...' For the Satanist the wish is just the first impulse. Perhaps this impulse might be unconscious at first, but such is the Satanist way that it and many other things will become conscious and thereby understood. Such is the method to gain Wisdom through practical action, through experience.

Perhaps also, it is true to say that when, and if, one reaches the final stage of External Adept it is a far easier option to say that one does not need to undertake the Sinister Retreat, that it isn't really necessary in order to become an Adept. But is this really so? And, does it not really speak volumes about those few genuine Adepts who have undertaken the Sinister Retreat that they have at least not lied to themselves, but have undertaken the Rite, with all the terrifying implications and inner fears that it brings forth...

*Yet even now I do not know what lies ahead
Now is my time to seek the glory of my Gods
That I may one day walk with Satan
In His world,
With His Bride
And that I may also Become*

*Something far greater than the mortal
I am leaving behind,
The mortal that must die
That a God may be born.*



Black Rhadley

Brenna, ONA.

Ruth gazed from her window to where the black leaves spiralled in the advent of rain. For some reason, that image brought a recollection; an echo of the pattern of events which began following the first blissful year of her marriage ...

"But it's just what happened two weeks ago, Adrian," Ruth said woodenly. "You say you'll be back so we can enjoy an evening alone together - you assure me that will be the case - so I spend ages making you a lovely meal, put the clothes on that you like me to wear and then you don't turn up until well past midnight! I mean ... I haven't seen you all week. You make me feel as if you don't want me at all sometimes, as if you don't really need me and wouldn't miss me if I just disappeared and never came back one day. Why did you marry me if all you wanted was a house-keeper?"

"Oh come on. It's not as bad as all that! I've told you I have to work long hours sometimes - and yes, part of those long hours, of necessity, involve entertaining clients; socialising with them in the evening. I've explained all this before, haven't I? I work bloody hard you know, and you wouldn't be kept in such luxury, if it weren't for old Ade ... You know that kitten, don't you?"

A spasm of frustration and pain swept across Ruth's face. Her brown eyes accused him.

"It depends what you call luxury, Adrian. Is it luxury to spend six and a half days keeping house, doing the washing, ironing your interminable shirts, rattling around on my own in this damn house? Never being able to get you on your phone because you've switched your mobile off! I mean, I don't know why you bother having a mobile - you're unavailable half the time anyway!"

The tirade tumbled out, Ruth warming to her cause and relieving feelings that had been bottled up for a long time.

"Look, come on. I told you, I've been showing clients - important clients - around potential properties and building plots. I can't have the phone ringing all the time - it's not professional!"

"How professional is it to have strands of blond hair on your jacket - or is that some sort of kudos in the circles you mix in?" Ruth shot back, her anger spurring her on.

"Oh my God! A strand of hair and it means I've been shafting half the damn city! Don't be ridiculous. I've told you, in the wine bar last night, there was a bit of flirting - it was nothing! Honestly Ruth, I wish you'd keep things in proportion - if you're going to leap on a single hair and use that as evidence against me, that's taking things a bit too far! You're making something out of nothing. I don't need any other women. You're enough for me, always will be - I've told you. Look, we'll take a holiday in May. Somewhere hot and exotic, how does that suit you? Spend three weeks in the sun together, just we two, how about that then, eh? Come here, silly, and stop worrying about things that shouldn't be a worry at all. When will you learn to trust me, eh? Come here, kitten, and I'll show you how much I think of you."

Adrian was holding his arms out to Ruth, who, half-reluctant, went to him and sat on his lap, succumbing to his words and his presence once more. Why did she always do this? Give in? She couldn't help it. He still turned her on so much. It was like now; him nuzzling her neck and nibbling her in a delicious way, his strong arms around her, his hands squeezing her flesh. She still loved it, and became his she-cat. With her body, he knew he could do whatever he desired, and he held that physical power over her as a threat, a bargaining position, and as fuel for his ego.

But still she succumbed. How could she complain? She did live in ridiculous comfort: the house, four bed-roomed with an expansive garden and patio, the E-type Jag in the garage - a car that appealed to her vanity - the dishwasher, the microwave, the video and T.V. complete with satellite dish, the latest line in stereo and C.D. player; the good quality Habitat furnishings. Three years ago she had been living in a bedsit, trying desperately to save to buy her own car, to possess some security.

Then Adrian had swept her off her feet, dazzling her with his quick mind and smooth tongue, his electric hands ... As well as that, he seemed to represent some kind of power to her. She knew if she married him, her money worries would be over; he would protect her. He would raise her above the painful struggle against mediocrity, on a cushion of love and comfort, where she could bear his children, as it was her yearning to do. But Adrian hadn't wanted children. Not yet. Not for a while. Not now. Not ever it seemed.

When they married his family had sent them on an exotic holiday to Trinidad; a bliss-filled time. But when they returned - that's when it had started. Adrian's power games. They had an argument about the 'children thing'. She'd threatened to come off the pill, knowing she wasn't being fair. But then he turned the situation to his advantage, in typical style.

He began noting the dates of her periods, so he could calculate the times of ovulation and avoid them. He urged Ruth to come off the pill, pointing out the recent bad publicity it had had. Ruth thought it might be his way of giving in. But it wasn't. She was fertile and responsive, but he would never make love to her until it was the right times of the month - that is, when there was little chance of her getting pregnant. In a way, she had found it erotic, having to wait. But that was how he got to her, making her a beggar to his whim.

So it began. Some days he would tease her, caress her buttocks, tongue her nipple, kiss her all over until she tingled - a passionate mingling. Then he would turn over and say good night, whilst she was left hopelessly aroused, wet with unfulfilled lust, juices unspent, body taut and quivering. He seemed to enjoy the restraint on himself as well; get a kick out of it somehow. Oh, but he was clever. He didn't do it too often, just every now and again, with a multitude of variations. The base part of her responded, begged for more. Her higher self sensed it was not entirely healthy - perhaps even destructive. But he used her so skilfully, there were times when all she cared about was sensation. The sensations he induced in her. Her tingling flesh. His tongue in the moist cleft between her thighs, eating her up; her viscera twitching at the thought of it, reverberating throughout the days that followed. His fingers taking control of her, delving into her, giving herself up to his teeth; his lips, his mouth, feasting upon her ...

It was only later she began to discover there was a price to pay. He would switch the tables, get her keyed up, pushing her head down to his cock, urging her to take him in her mouth, sometimes or sometimes not, insisting she swallow his ejaculation. Then the roughness verging on violence that inevitably followed: the bruises that blossomed as the price of their love. His demeanour threatened her in a subtle way, so that she dare not risk his disfavour. Sometimes there was a barbarous glint in his eyes, that made her a little afraid. She knew there was a dark, hidden part of him, which was cruel, unyielding, slightly perverse. But there was a strange attraction in that also and so their relationship had formed and developed along these lines; a strong tension of sex, underlining their ordinary day to day dealings.

In a way, the first year had been exciting because of that. He was fun to be with, she sweetly adoring of him when he came back from work, playing the absolute housewife, making curtains and cooking, ironing his shirts. Selfless; devoted, like Melanie in 'Gone With the Wind'. And he had kept her blood hot for it, with lewd talk and fondling hands. On occasions insisting she serve him at mealtimes with only stockings and suspenders on. Making her do things she would blush at in the morning. Insisting she kneel down to provide a foot rest, his fingers exploring her, pulling her up spread-eagled, a moist mouth offered for his mouth to probe. The rest of her dangling down between his legs as he controlled her

lower half. All of her, all of her, she wanted him to have at times like that - to do just what he wanted with her. And so had their relationship become what it was.

It was like a dark addiction she couldn't do without. When he demeaned her, it only made her feel more erotic. She would try to consider her childhood, to find a clue. Insecurity. Not Daddy's favourite. Not A or B category but C, in the exam stakes. Just enough to know and yet not know. She was pretty, yes, she knew that. But she felt inadequate at times, frightened of appearing dim, frightened that she was dim. Adrian's love had enriched her at first, his public school education dazzled her. But then he began to play on those insecurities, teasing them out and making a subtle web of torture out of that understanding.

Adrian seemed to know her inside out - he anticipated her thoughts and actions uncannily at times. He did have a superior intellect. She conceded to him. Yes, he could run rings round her. What was he trying to prove? He was not obvious in the way he did this but all the same, she had come to realise he knew what he was doing and saying. It was not crassness or impatience or absent-minded irritation. He could say things that would squash her in an instant, make her want to curl up and hide away, unworthy, worthless. And he knew what he was doing when he said those things. But he tempered it. He still kept her eager for his presence.

More and more, work and the office intruded. At the start, they would have the whole weekend and early Friday afternoon together. He had whisked her off here and there for day trips and weekends away together; pub lunches, walks in the country, visits to galleries, stately homes, the finest restaurants. Making love. Yet even then, the dark games beginning.

Adrian was an ambitious man determined to rise and rise as manager of a building and property contractors. Fridays, he began to come home late or in the early hours; Saturday morning was spent on site, more often than not. Evening work became more and more frequent. She just accepted it at first, realising it was par for the course, a phase on the way to enjoying the dizzy heights Adrian spoke about attaining. But anxiety gripped her when he came home too tired to be fond or communicate with her much at all. She needed him and she felt like weeping when she hadn't seen him for any length of time in the past days or sometimes even merging into weeks it seemed. Then he would come back, monosyllabically eat his meal and go straight to sleep. At such times, she felt horribly purposeless; as if she was living in a vacuum.

The urge for children became stronger, and a series of rows and heated debates ensued - which just made him even more obstinate. He went and spent the weekend with a friend in Oxford, threatening further estrangement if she persisted. She couldn't win. He wouldn't budge. He was only 29. He didn't want children yet. He wanted her for himself, all to himself with nothing to intrude or

spoil their intimacy. At least for the moment, he hinted, keeping her hope alive on a subtle thread of promises; making her believe in a maybe that turned into the nothing of never-never. Only sometimes it didn't seem like he wanted her at all.

She would get so choked up about this that she would confront him with imagined infidelities and weep accusingly. She sensed these infidelities were not imagined at all, but she could not admit this to herself and wanted him to convince her it was otherwise. That's when he would take her and use her like she half wanted him to anyway. Coming up to her and grabbing a handful of her rich dark hair. Pulling her head back and quickly stripping her with his other hand, his grasp of her hair keeping her body arched, offered up to the indulgence of his appetite.

Bending her over the sofa, probing her orifices, experimenting with various devices and observing the effect on her; her spasms, her tremoring wet responses. The way her body curled and bent to accommodate whatever was his desire. A finger first. An asparagus tip. A specially slender dildo inserted in her arse, lifting her cunt up for his inspection and use. A trick with a banana. The possibilities were endless, he would tell her with a lascivious inflection.

He would keep her going for hours in a state of near-orgasmic frenzy, until she would do anything ... anything just so he would fuck her. All she wanted was to feel him thundering away inside her - setting her free at last. If he did not oblige, she would weedle round him, stroking herself against him, begging him to take her. Sometimes he would refuse point blank, taking her upstairs and locking her in one of the spare bedrooms, just to prove how superior was his control, to give himself some peace from her pleas so he said. Just to show definitively, who was in control.

He was a pig. At times like that she had stark moments of lucidity when she realised that actually in instinct, he was cruel. He enjoyed the experience of power such cruelty gave him.

She could tell it was an obsession that could grow or be diverted. She had tried to divert it but seemed powerless before him, unable to counteract his dictatorship, as he seemed to hold all the cards. He earned the money. He had the big-shot job. The public school education. He had the degree. He had the interests and the upper echelon contacts. The pulling power. He had it all. She knew he did. And what was she when he'd met her? A struggling temp., making a living with agency secretarial work, trying to establish her own independence, desperately wanting to be able to afford a car, having passed her test the previous year when she was 20. Then Adrian came and gave all of it to her on a plate.

But now she was discovering the price that went with all that. For a long time she'd been willing to pay it. But lately she was beginning to doubt if the price was worth it, if it was a price she was willing to pay anymore. She felt she'd been progressively stripped of her pride over the past few years, so that at times she was pathetically anxious to please, like some pet that had been neglected. She disgusted herself at the thought of it.

But then once again the wings of dark passion would take storm and whirl her around. The leather hand cuffs, the teasing scourge, the chains, the flimsy chiffon, the rent of the cloth, the orgasmic delivery, the dangerous height of such altitudes. In the aftermath it was like they'd both been charged up, energised by the process. And the air was warm and liquid electric between them.

But then business would take him away again and again, and certain pastimes he would not give up. His weekends away 'with the boys', his jaunts to the races, formula 1 rallies, evenings spent at the casino - necessities to cultivate his clients, he said. His rich life and interests belittled her. Most times he made it seem it wasn't appropriate for her to go with him to these trips because it was mainly business, so he told her.

So that more and more she became cut off from his high life. She lived a much more internal, subdued life in contrast to his highly-charged wheeler-dealer circles, the merry-go-round he claimed he was obliged to ride, to get what he wanted, to move forwards in an upwardly mobile manner.

She could see he would be ruthless in his ascent and in quiet moments this chilled and appalled her. She recognised something unscrupulous in him, that most would not see, so skilfully was it concealed beneath the smooth, charming exterior, the public school manner, the clever tongue. Those grey-blue eyes could become welcoming pools - when it suited him - in total sympathy with the other's persuasion, a glint of secrets and understanding drawing them in ...

His eyes of storm cloud blue flashing to burst upon her; his eyes like a laser on her soul, pinning her motionless, for him to come forward and slowly undress her. By the time she was naked she was wet and aching for him, whilst his eyes still pierced her, kept her his slave. The intoxication of his hands...

The leather collar whim. He had come home all excited a couple of years previously, after talking to a guy who belonged to the 'Pony Club', down in Surrey. There, the men literally rode naked women, inseting pony's tails into their behinds to make the experience even more authentic. Adrian had gone out and bought a collar and a leash and arranged for this guy to send him all the 'pony' gear for a fee.

He set her up so neatly, playing his arousal game, then refusing to fulfil her; keeping her on edge, waiting for his touch. Friday night; a good bottle of red wine. Adrian insisting she wear nothing but her white lace see-through body-stockings. The "accidental" brush of his hands across her nipple as she collected up the plates, feeling his eyes drinking her in, gloating over her.

He insisting she pour him a glass of wine. She moving round to do so. He, nudging the glass as she poured, blaming it on her, in anger or mock-anger - she was never sure which. He, ignominiously picking her up, a hand on her crotch, the other round her breasts. He sat down on an armchair with her body across his knee, face downwards, her buttocks swelling up at him. He had spanked her mercilessly with the flat of his hand until she was begging for mercy, close to tears.

Then he held up her arse, pressing his tongue into her vagina, putting his mouth against her labia, coaxing her, making her melt with desire and want to stretch herself wide open for him; anything, anything for him, her master, his slave!

And so had she progressively made herself his slave. She rarely saw any of his friends. It was as if he kept her in an ivory tower that had so subtly and deviously crept up around her, now she was so ensnared she could not find the means to break out of it. And also there was a part of her that gave in to the unreal whirlpool of it. Almost as if she herself was willing to go to the limits; just to see how far both of them could be pushed without cracking. But she knew she would be the one that cracked, not him. He was too slick, too in control, too wily ever to succumb like that. He was relentless, made of steel, and that was how it got to her more and more. In truth, that was what turned her on. Her own debasement. She knew it was bizarre but there was something so infernally delicious, so animal and subterranean about Adrian and his manoeuvres, the way they made her feel, that she succumbed and kept succumbing all these past three years.

By the time Adrian had melted her with his tongue between her thighs, making her forget the fact that her backside was burning from the beating he'd given her, he had then stripped her completely so she was naked beneath him, whilst he was fully clothed above her, still in control, still holding back, observing. Rolling her over, turning her round, grabbing handfuls of her willing flesh, pulling her towards him, kissing her on the lips, owning her mouth, turning her into a moaning, quivering wreck. His fingers pressing the buttons, her buttocks rearing upwards, opening out to him like a strange, exotic flower.

Adrian had breathed: "Just wait there, my hot, little bitch. Don't move an inch - you hear me? Not one inch! I'll be back." The threat in his voice had been apparent. She kept tilted on all fours, her buttocks raised, waiting for his return. By the time he came back the strain was beginning to tell. He, warning her to maintain it, whilst he undressed at his leisure. Her limbs starting to tremble with the effort, not daring to protest in case he took things in a direction she did not want to go in. Then he was kneeling down behind her, his hand on her cunt, the other cupping her breast and squeezing. "Now then, who's the master? Am I the master?" Adrian's smooth tones, her pathetic affirmation. Aching for his touch, for him to take away the agony of her pent-up needy flesh.

"My slave needs a collar then - don't you think? My hot little bitch needs a collar to keep her from getting out of control, what do you say?" His breath on her skin. A studded leather collar clicking into place around her neck. She unable to keep her position, collapsing into him, his hands beginning to explore again, his teeth shaping their appetite.

Often he would leave bruises. But he was devious. He kept just the right side of pleasure, so that the pain never overwhelmed the effect of the former. All the same he made sure he got his due of pain one way or another. She thought that's why he was so dastardly skilful a lover. In order to indulge his sadistic urges, he had developed the ability to play on the pleasure spots with a virtuoso's genius. So if he bit her too hard and savagely, he would make up for it by sucking her nipples and flagellating them between his tongue and his teeth or nuzzling her neck and nibbling her ears, so that erotic impulses took hold of her and only served to heighten the sexual climax that came later.

He had tied her to the bedpost that night on a leather leash, insisted she carried on wearing the collar for the next day. She protested, but Adrian was the one with the key to unlock it and only he could free her. She was forced to wear high collars and polo necks to conceal it, not daring to go out because she felt so ridiculous. All the same she would catch sight of it in a mirror and touch her fingers to it, feel her groin moistening despite herself. When she demanded he take it off, he laughed at her and said she'd have to pay a forfeit.

She was becoming familiar with this tack as something to be feared - the prelude to some new perversity or pain, remembering past such bargains. The pain of the whip, the chains making her into an article of furniture for him to eat his meal off, the experimentation with drugs at her expense... She had told him she wouldn't play games with him anymore, at which he'd laughed again uproariously, telling her she would have to keep her collar on then until she proved herself the bitch on heat that she was.

She tried the other approach - pleading with him, cooking him a beautiful dinner. Trying to be reasonable and treat it as a joke, one that he would eventually tire of. But Adrian enjoyed seeing her suffer like that. The tears of shame and helplessness in her eyes. She knew it turned him on.

And she saw herself slipping into it all until it was a pattern so firmly established she hadn't the psychic energy or will to change it. Her fault, she supposed - who else's? Her own weakness.

In the end she had agreed to Adrian's forfeit, if only he would take the collar off so her life could assume at least some semblance of normality. He had gone towards her grinning, taking hold of the collar and pulling her towards him, his eyes gazing at her with an intensity that still made her insides turn over, no matter how badly he treated her.

He had told her to strip. She knew she must oblige. She had held out for days, but now as always, Adrian played the final card. With a trick kept up his sleeve. Now she conceded that there was nothing she could do but go along with him, with everything, whatever it was he had in mind. Adrian, the winner as usual, Adrian calling the shots, giving the directions; she, in the sub-ordinate position she was becoming accustomed to.

She, naked with just the collar on. He, forcing her to her knees; a little twist of fear running through her.

"What's the forfeit Adie? Come on tell me. I can still back out you know, if I don't agree..." feeling like the prey that has been trapped, caught in the talons of its hunter, cursing her weakness now.

Adrian's voice sickening her: "I want to give you one up the arse, my love. I've been wanting to do it for ages. Just been waiting for the right moment, for the ripeness of timing if you see what I mean. Just to see what it's like my love, to see if you take to it, like the debauch little bitch we both know you are, eh my love? Just as a one off, we'll give it a try, eh?"

She had tried to struggle against him, but his hand was on her arse, a finger beginning to tamper there as he spoke. She'd never minded his finger there before, in fact it could enhance the pleasure, but this idea frightened her. She feared the pain.

"No Adie! Come on. I'm not doing that. This whole thing has gone too far. I won't do it I tell you. You can keep the collar on, I don't care. Don't, please, don't ..." Her, nearly sobbing and hysterical.

"Relax, relax," Adrian's voice soothing her. "It was an idea, just an idea that's all..."

He kept stroking her and stroking her, soothing and arousing her. He had been so subtly, so sumptuously tenderful, so unaccustomed gentle and indolent; taking his time, sniffing her and mauling her as if at his lazy leisure. She, a paradise land for him to poke around and prowling in.

The ice-cream scooped into her vagina so chilly cold; so exquisitely erotic. Adrian eating the ambrosia from the gash between her thighs. As if his teeth and tongue touched a part of her that could only ever obey the one who consumed her flesh and fluids in this way. One who knew so intimately her gaping desire to please, to give all of herself unto him to do with as he would. He knew she would soften. His fingers moving in and out of her cunt, of her anus, his mouth claiming her breast and nipple. Her body opening out, petals continually unfolding; sponge-like, absorbing sensations, always craving to soak up as much of the pleasure her body would hold.

He made her insatiable. Not touching her for weeks, not seeing each other, what with work and business ventures - then being interested and kind, a fond caress. A sudden whirlwind of sex. Then a teasing, long-drawn out fulfilment. Nothing. Something. Normality. Abnormality. That was how it carried on. Without a pattern, yet having some kind of organic life of its own.

That time she felt he had really over-stepped the mark. She was so wanton; for him to continue touching her, for him to continue doing something to her to satiate her burning flesh. So instead of his finger up her behind, his cock was there instead, ripping through her, creating a burning sensation, a peculiar unpleasant throb and shudder, continuing and continuing. Until he was through and she was left curled up and weeping, feeling as if she'd just been raped. She hadn't asked for that! Nor had she wanted it. She had told him afterwards if he did it again she would leave him, and at the time she had meant it. Now it seemed like a forgotten conviction that had faded as the terrible poisonous bloom of their love grew.

Her back side had been sore for a day or so after, so that she had pushed Adrian away, sickened by his disregard for her. She had almost hated him for it and he had responded solicitously, being concerned and caring and persuasive.

Needless to say, the collar came off and Adrian had been sweetly tender for weeks after that until she was lulled once more into a false sense of security, and the games began again. Though he never did do that to her again. About some things he kept his word, even if it was threatened occasionally. She thought he knew if he tried doing that, it would be the last straw and their relationship would crumble. She could take pain, as long as it was coupled with pleasure, but

pain alone signalled some sort of limit for her. He seemed to realise this and anyhow, he was too clever to lose her like that. So by and by, he made her feel thrilled with life and delightful for a while, because he had the power to do that if he chose. But the highs were always followed with a downward spiral that seemed to get ever more perverse and ever more lewd as time went on.

She so rarely went out with him in a business context, and when she did it was a special occasion. One time they had gone to York races. Adrian was entertaining clients from Hampshire to try and clinch a deal. Adrian had actually gone shopping with her insisting she try this and that dress until he made her buy one that showed off her figure in a stunning manner. He wanted the whole works for her; hat and everything. It was a novelty for her so she was glad to oblige, glad that she pleased him - though she realised his game, or so she thought. He was dressing her up like a doll to parade before his guests; showing her off to them. Part of her was flattered, part of her was unsettled.

She did look fantastic though, as Adrian kept telling her, with her figure-hugging maroon velvet dress, accentuating her curves, split to the top of her thigh down one side. She looked a knock-out and she knew she did. But when they were out this made her jumpy for she felt as if Adrian was watching her every move and response, watching for any incriminating move, the slightest flirtation.

They had gone up the evening before and spent a cosy, luxurious night in a very good hotel, with Adrian being sweetness itself to her. She should have known something was on the cards then, that he had something planned. But foolishly she lapped it all up as usual: his attentiveness, his charm, never guessing at the motives behind his method. As always, being the unsuspecting innocent - just how he liked her, in fact.

They had met the two men in the lounge bar. She had a glass of tonic on Adrian's instruction. One man was quite large, slightly over-weight; thick lips that smiled at her, as his eyes passed lasciviously over her body. The other chap was small and compact, a bullet directness in his manner; a steady unflinching confidence about him that showed he was accustomed to things going his way. She sat with her thigh showing because in that dress she couldn't help but do so; Adrian's graceful appendage, a painted toy.

The larger man's eyes raked her from time to time as they began the veneer of social converse, and undressed her whilst his tongue came out and ran itself across his lips. She tried to focus on the conversation, take some part in it, but they launched quickly into business arrangements as if to get it over with so they could relax and enjoy the rest of the day. Adrian, at what seemed a crucial point in the proceedings, asked her to go and get them all a drink, sweet-talking her, urging her with his eyes to comply. So she went off to the Ladies first, to give

herself some breathing space and gaze at her curves in the mirror, exaggerated by the lush sheen of velvet.

Adrian had insisted she wear no underwear. None at all, except stockings. Black fishnet ones. He made her feel cheapened, yet beautiful. A contradiction she had still not come to terms with. She looked at her long, rich brown hair in the glass, her wide brown eyes and neat little nose, the pouting lips. And she felt at last Adrian must be proud of her.

She bought them their drink of Jack Daniels and Coke, a glass of wine for herself - she could see Adrian had noted it down. In the circumstances she thought he wouldn't mind. She oozed voluptuously across to them, conscious of her breasts swelling out beneath the rich fabric. She sat back, crossing her legs so the top of her stocking showed. All the men's eyes were gazing at her, their eyes undressing her, she the focus of all their attention. She switched her legs over, crossed away from them so her leg was covered. Her face felt hot as she smiled at them in nervous acknowledgement, lifting her glass of wine as she did so and clearly not accustomed to the situation - Adrian had never allowed her to be.

They, enraptured, laughed and lifted their glasses to her, toasting the grace of a woman's body, and thus was she set on a pedestal. Just her curves, her assets they adored. Seeing her as some prize race horse, well worthy of the stud. Never enquiring into the state of her mind or ever interested in her views. She was forced to play their foil; a maiden to their lewd gallantry and ribald joking. Adrian making the others worse, drawing them out - oh, but it was only a bit of fun. It was only a bit of fun. Don't take it to heart so much, she was later consoled by Adrian. She knew she was a fool who deserved no better. Because each time she should have seen it coming, and each time instead of avoiding it, she became ensnared.

They had clinched the deal anyway in her absence, mysteriously quickly. And Adrian looked happy, charged up with success. And all the time he was watching - watching in that way he had, that cold lacertilian way, frightening her with his impenetrable will that also perversely turned her on. Oh yes, she allowed it, but it seemed each fresh time she was never ready for the variations. That's what threw her. The variety with which he spun his traps. She, foolish enough to play his willing victim, his willing sacrifice. She was weak, weak she knew, ever more reduced.

But there was an ebony flame in the midst of it, a twist of dangerous spice that compelled her. Like her adventuring had taken her in a different direction to most people, a whirling downward spiral, paralleled with orgiastic bursts of bliss and tender aftermaths that made it all worthwhile. It seemed their relationship

was kept enlivened by the elements of danger Adrian flashed into his love-making. But it was an impulse that had taken on a life of its own.

She in response developed her own protection - that was really no protection at all. One of purposefully inciting him; inciting a response, whether of anger or lust she did not care, so long as it was a response. Whether or not he did it on purpose she could never be sure. But at other times she could see he had spent days, making moves, manipulating her instincts and emotions, biding his time, getting her keyed up and under his thrall, having aroused her without fulfilment. She walked into it - hopeless sucker that she was!

But since she so rarely saw his work colleagues or had anything to do with his business life, she wanted to believe it was something different. She wanted to believe he was introducing her into his world of business, treating her as if she had a mind. It was a joke really. It was clear she hadn't, otherwise how would she have got herself into such situations?

She had felt sexy that day. She had enjoyed the men's eyes drooling over her. Not so much the two they were with, but other more handsome ones, who passed by and soaked her up with their eyes, drinking her in, appreciating the sight of her. She felt like a Sex Goddess then. Like some gypsyish Marilyn Monroe. She could not deny she had enjoyed that. She had got very excited when the horse she had chosen to back was coming close to the winning line. She had bounced up and down like a school girl, stirred by the atmosphere and the fact that her horse had come close to winning. She had looked down at her breasts; their shapeliness emphasised by their unrestrained movement beneath the fabric of her dress. She had felt her buttocks quivering in sympathy with her breasts as she brushed against Adrian to exclaim her loss of victory. But Adrian swiftly slid his hand inside her dress, slit side, and began fingering and caressing her from behind. In involuntary response she swooned at the sensation, leaning back against him unable to help herself.

The two clients had watched her delightful bobbling motions, savouring the sight of her body, but the compact one, when he saw where Adrian's hand had gone smirked and glanced away. They were right by the fence facing onto the course. The larger man gloated over her as she, unable to contain her body's quivering response, stifled a gasp, leaning back onto Adrian as he fingered her.

She suddenly saw through the weeks of preparation and realised she was the dupe; the dimwit Adrian made her believe she was, on those occasions when he chose to cut her with his words. Even as she recognised it she could do nothing about it for she was like the proverbial bitch on heat: randy enough to do anything just to get some satisfaction from this physical fever that gripped her. She amazed even herself. She had turned into a nymphomaniac for him of her own volition - just as if he orchestrated her responses. Which it seemed he did,

whilst she - fool that she was - allowed it to happen. She could not help herself and gave in to her animal cravings, willing to be as lewd as he liked, to fit in with his plans, to match his machinations with an extremity of her own. In this way she almost got her own back. Just as desperate to please for other men, even more slavish in her desires. This made Adrian scowl and added a flagitious flavour to the tenebrous brew that she saw was the pith of their relationship.

When she chose to analyse it, it frightened her. So she tried not to. She got into the habit of blanking the more unsavoury things out of her mind, refusing to dwell on anything that had got out of hand. Like Adrian said, she was best forgetting about it, leaving it behind, moving on. It was useless to dwell. Chart it down to experience Adrian advised, so she clung on. For what? She sometimes wondered.

They had got a taxi to the hotel where they were staying. Adrian had invited the two men into their suite for a night cap. In the taxi the larger one of the two men was pressed against her thigh, while Adrian was on her other side pulling her away from them so he could put his hand down her dress, bend his head to suck on her nipple, the velvet barrier between only serving to heighten the erotic charges that went through her. She was as bad as he was. It was the very blatantness of it that made her juices flow. So when the large man slid his hand where Adrian had had his earlier, under the split, fondling her crotch, she was already too highly charged to prevent herself responding.

She could feel his bulk next to her, though her head was turned towards Adrian; feel his fingers, bigger than Adrian's, inserting themselves into her wet cleft. Oh God, how she wanted it then! Truly if they had taken off her clothes and shagged her in the taxi, she would not have resisted, on the contrary she would have complied with abandon.

When they got out of the taxi they were giggling like naughty school children, with the effort of straightening their clothes and trying to look normal. She went up the stairs ahead of Adrian, who chose to follow her as closely as he could whispering: "You bloody tart! Whore! You bloody female lush. You're just a cavity between the thighs, aching to be filled up, aren't you?"

He was groping her arse as he whispered these things vehemently into her ear, so only she could hear. She was past the stage of being offended. She felt on heat; wanted to be touched and probed. A dark animal spasm inflicted her. She did not care about the outcome, she did not think about the next day, she only wanted some satisfaction from this burning itch that fluttered in her belly, sent darts of sensation down her thighs, kept her moist and craven, in readiness for penetration.

The men came in for a nightcap while Adrian played the host, drawing out her agony. There were whiskies all round. Adrian fed her whisky from his own mouth after he had pulled her to sit on his knee, tonguing the inside of her mouth as if it was her vagina and possessively, gratuitously, squeezing her breasts, rubbing his hands across them enjoying the sensation of the hardened nipples, threatening to burst through the velvet. Both the other two men watched appreciatively as if they were at a pornographic show, as if this was the accepted evening's entertainment.

"You see, gentlemen," boasted Adrian. "One can play a woman like one would a violin. With a woman, as with a violin, you have to have all the strings at the right tension, so to speak. The wood must be smoothed and mellowed, the keys in perfect alignment, engendering the desired pitch and tone, depending on the circumstances. Then the instrument will bend in a complimentary way to your will, sing for you ever and ever sweeter tunes. Here you have my wife, who is just such one of these instruments - aren't you my love? I get her so she'll do anything I ask just to please me - won't you my love? You see, really she's a closet nymphomaniac and has no self-control in situations like this. I can't keep up with her sometimes; hormones you know, make her abnormally randy at times - like now for instance. So every now and then I let her have a few fun and games just to mellow her out a bit. Otherwise she's like a bitch on heat, won't let me rest til she's been serviced a good few times. It doesn't happen often, thank God. Last time I had to take a day off work to recover; she wouldn't let me out of the bedroom!"

The two men laughed appreciatively taking it all as a joke and a treat. She could have sat up and called him a liar, fought with them, but if the truth be told her body wanted their tongues, their hands upon her, inside her. Adrian was caressing her tits, rubbing his hands up and down her body, lifting her dress up to touch her dark glistening cunt, revealed for the other two watching men. The fact that the two men watched only made her more turned on. She felt like Adrian had said: lewd, abandoned, at the mercy of her body's responses, quiveringly aroused. Whilst all the time Adrian played the observer, the manipulator, maintaining and drawing out his climax, watching her with his cool lizard eyes. It sent a shiver right through her to see him like that.

"Take your dress off Ruth," Adrian ordered. But Ruth stayed leaning against him, too bathed in erotic sensation to move. Adrian pulled her to her feet, unzipped the back of her dress and stripped it off her so that all she was wearing was her stockings and suspenders. Her flesh looked pleasingly soft and rounded. Flesh to sink their fingers and teeth into. Flesh to stroke and squeeze; skin like satin and silk, only warm and firm as well as soft.

Adrian was always telling her she had a fantastic body. She believed it. She recognised the effect she had on men - the only trouble was she never felt it was her they wanted, just her body, and she believed she was stupid - that the only way she had of getting any attention was through her body. But she also knew with men, how transient a thing was that physical desire; it didn't mean they would respect her - on the contrary the opposite was true. Thinking like this, believing this, Ruth had never learned to respect herself; she was so anxious to please, she always ended up being used. Adrian, of course was now trading in on this and making the most of this weakness in her for his own gratification and dark designs.

Standing before them thus, she felt like a member of a harem who had been ushered forth for their entertainment and leisure. She was aware of the increased temperature in the room, the other two men's lust. The larger man licking his lips again, purposefully suggestive. She wanted him to grab her thighs and thrust his fat tongue inside of her and she didn't care what Adrian did or thought.

"My wife, gentlemen." Adrian made her do a turn, whilst the big man came over and ran a hand over her buttock, grabbing it and keeping hold of it while he looked at Adrian. Ruth was keyed up between them, jellied into sensation.

Adrian smiled: "Just a ride Jeff, we agreed, remember? Just a viewing, a taster and one ride, those were my terms remember?" Adrian was grinning rakishly and as he said this he teased one of Ruth's nipples between his fingers making her gasp and moan.

"Aye, a ride - don't forget that bit my old chap. I'm waiting to see this gear you've told me about, sounds kinky if you know what I mean. Kinky kind of fun! I could do with a bit of fun. Where's the gear then? Let's have a look at it," said the big chap Jeff, as he squeezed the flesh on her buttocks, rocking her body gently towards and away from him with the hand that was fastened onto her arse.

The movements towards him, which leaned her against him, grew more prolonged until his other hand came round to caress her belly, rub the hairs on her crotch, cup her breasts. He also seemed to be holding himself back, like Adrian, drawing out the experience, making the most of it while it lasted. She the willing pawn, offered up for their dalliance, whilst they, the men dictated her moves and Adrian oversaw it all.

"I promised the goods and I'll deliver them. Daniel here can witness that. Just so long as the deal is clinched gentlemen, this is a little extra thrown in, a complementary freebie if you like. I'll just get the gear, retrieve a certain implement and I'll let you try it out on her. She looks willing enough, wouldn't you say?"

All three men laughed. The big man now had his hand on her anus and was massaging that area whilst his other hand pulled one of her nipples. She certainly wasn't going to disagree with them. By then she was incapable of doing so. Adrian left them for a minute, going to the bed to get a suitcase. Then the big man took his advantage. He consumed her breast in his mouth, sliding two fingers in and out of her until she became even more malleable. The smaller man had extracted his camera and began taking photographs of her. The large man bent her over his knee and spread her thighs, whilst the man with the camera took a close-up of her glistening vagina. The big man turned her round again, lasciviously handling her like a piece of meat he had part-ownership of, and pulled her buttocks up and apart for another close-up.

Adrian was in the background hissing: "None of her face damn you, otherwise I'll break the damn camera!" The man with the camera couldn't resist her either and soon his finger was inserted into the only orifice available; her anus, his mouth tonguing her other nipple. So it felt that every area of her body was being sucked, nibbled or probed. She was a big pie, they could all put their fingers into to scoop out the pungent excess she had to offer. She felt their hands and mouths, turning her over, licking her lower cavities. First the big man as if she were a haunch of an oxen, to be eaten caveman style; then the smaller one, darting his tongue in and out of her as if he were a humming bird quenching his urge for nectar.

She could hear Adrian chuckling softly and clicking away with the camera. He bent down and whispered in her ear: "Oh somebody's going to be in trouble when I get these pictures developed. Somebody's going to be in the doghouse then, bitch! You hot little bitch you!"

But by then Ruth was too far gone to care. His words only made her pant the more. She thrust out her buttocks for Adrian, her controller, her master, to squeeze and caress. He slapped her arse playfully which provoked the big man, who held her like a drum, one arm around her middle, his hand connecting with her buttocks as if he were thrumming a rhythm on the bongos. Then he bent down and tongued her anus, sliding a finger inside it and lifting up her arse for the smaller one to find her sopping vagina with his mouth, like the humming bird again, drawing forth more dripping honey.

Then the big man was eagerly growling. "Yes come on, let's have her in the goddamn bridle. Let's have a ponytail in this lovely arse just like you promised Ade old boy".

"Here it is as promised Jeff. You know I'm a man of my word!" Adrian laughed gleefully.

"Wonderful! Just the ticket! You're a genius Ade, pure genius. Lovely piece of flesh your wife. Here, let's see how she looks with a pony-tail".

The big man took his probing finger out of her rectum and inserted something slim and made of plastic, shaped like a cigar. The men laughed and slapped her buttocks, the big man twitching her hips from side to side so that the pony-tail swished behind her. She began to feel more and more like a racehorse mare brought out to be exploited, making the most of the instincts that overwhelmed her when they touched her so and so.

Adrian stuck his fingers in her cunt and wriggled the tail around, heightening the arousal, until she split herself, wanting to feel something substantial inside. Aching for the relief of violent sensation. That's how he did it. That's how he got to her time and time again. Adrian, handing some reins over to the big man, who took great delight in hauling her upright, rubbing his great paws over her breasts, fixing the specially-made leather harness so her breasts hung through. He pulled the bridle over her head so that then she was blindfolded with a piece of leather, and at their mercy, harnessed and tail-dressed as she was. But she didn't care. She craved the debauchery, sank into it, eagerly, willingly. She couldn't seem to help herself.

They toyed with her and posed with her as Adrian took photographs until the smaller man fucked her quickly and violently. Then the big man took over, squeezing and grabbing her flesh, licking her like a giant lolly, bringing her to pitch again until he stuck his engorged cock up her, making her cry out in a kind of ecstatic agony. A warm spreading blanket to be handled and torn apart as they willed.

All the time Adrian was clicking the camera, whispering, "Rutting bitch!" or "Animal. You fucking animal!". Sometimes she exaggerated her reactions to needle him, this time she didn't need to. She wanted to make him jealous, to provoke him to intervene, instead of him being always coldly in control, taking a sadistic pleasure in her debasement.

Then the men were lying back making appreciative noises, she still a mass of quivering flesh, stretched out on the bed between them. "Bloody marvellous mate," said the big man, smacking his lips as if he'd enjoyed a particularly good dinner. "Bloody marvellous, your wife," and he leaned over, pulled up the extruding pony-tail and took a lick of her cunt just to underline his words. Ruth shuddered in an aftermath sensation as he did this.

"Glad you enjoyed her Jeff. You Ruthie stay right where you are while the gentlemen dress and enjoy a nightcap. You hear me? Don't move a muscle til we're through".

Ruth knew by the tone of his voice she would suffer if she did not do as he said so she made no attempt to move. Adrian came over and wriggled the pony-tail poking from her rectum, making her tremor and stir once more. The men laughed together appreciatively.

She heard them dressing and going over to the sitting area. The jokes, the comradely laughter, the hands being shaken, the contract being signed, one last whisky, cigars all round. They were pleased with themselves, pleased they had come to a business arrangement in so novel a way. Just a harmless little orgy to clinch the deal. The other two men no doubt thinking they were glad their wives had their hormones under control; whilst, no doubt they were equally glad there were women like Adrian's wife, who couldn't control their sexual urges. She could tell by their tone, as she lay there with her arse in the air parading her pony tail still for all their benefit, could tell they were amazed and admiring of Adrian's suave acceptance of his wife's debauchery, the cool way he orchestrated the event. They may have had an inkling of how Adrian's relationship worked and while it enticed and excited them, it also slightly unnerved them. But they were not inclined to judge him, having just received a very welcome and very intense erotic experience, making them feel like emperors of Rome. Anyway, they were all men together - successful business men entitled to enjoy a little indulgence, a little harmless fun, now and again.

As they were getting up to go the big man, Jeff, commented on how well trained she was, lying there just as Adrian had directed; her backside complete with pony tail pointing at them provocatively, her legs straddled apart revealing the glistening-wet petal-lips of her vagina, the curves of her breast and flank still providing a visual feast for them. The men joked about their own wives, wishing they could get them to do the same. But Ruth could tell they didn't really mean it, despite the fact they envied him. They didn't have Adrian's satanic capacities nor the obsessive will or the utter conviction of superiority that Adrian had, nor did they have his good looks that gave him an advantage with all women, right from the start. In this paradoxical way, Adrian held her in his thrall, despite what he had just made her do, despite anything he might do when the two men had gone. She could not help herself. Despite his cruelty, perhaps because of it, he still made her melt at a touch.

"You don't have a collar and lead for her as well, do you Ade?" said the big man, joking, as he viewed her recumbent form; her arse and exposed cunt causing his cock to stiffen again.

"I do as a matter of fact," said Adrian smoothly. "Shall I show you?"

The two men were eyes agog. Ruth could tell by the prickle of electricity in the air. Adrian retrieved the collar from the suitcase, bent down and clicked it on her, then clipped on the lead.

"Come on, up Ruthie, on all fours and wag your arse for the gentlemen before they go!"

"Oh, yes please!" said the big man as the other one snorted appreciatively.

Ruth felt a flash of anger at Adrian's repeated abuse and contemplated telling him to go to hell. But that streak of perversity took her in the opposite direction. As he tugged on the lead, Ruth rose, rearing up and caressing her own breasts through the leather harness. Then as commanded she got down on all fours and began writhing in lewd voluptuous motion. She moved backwards towards them, as if offering herself to them again, straining the leash to brush against the big man's leg, his hand going down, wanting her again.

But Adrian hoisted her back saying smoothly but firmly, an edge to his voice only Ruth could distinguish: "Alright, that's enough now. Bedtime now you insatiable animal". He put his hand in her collar and made her stand up. She could not see them because the leather blindfold of the harness still covered her eyes, shielding her shame and allowing her to play her part. Again she felt a heat in the room.

With one hand on her collar, the other on her pony tail, Adrian walked her to the bed where he made her lie face down again, forcing her by means of the protruding false tail, to raise her buttocks high up and point her butt towards the door which she did. She moved her arse from side to side in swishes of desire, when Adrian walked away and the men joked about how they had better go or they'd want to do it all over again.

Adrian appreciated the joke whilst making it clear they had to go. She could tell he enjoyed their arousal, and their now unfulfilled desire, as much as he enjoyed inflicting the same state on her. He, as always, controlling and directing the dark flame of their chemistry, as and when he willed it.

They were shaking hands at the door, Adrian wishing them a warm good night, all chaps together again. When he closed the door he sauntered back to the bed and undressed in a liesurely fashion. Ruth had started to relax her position but he stopped her moving, with a "Naughty, naughty! I'm not a hypocrite you know. You do what I say whether anyone is in the room or not. You know that. That's why we work together you and I. You want to be told what to do. You want to be moulded and bullied. It turns you on doesn't it? You horny bitch!"

He was rotating the pony tail, shoving it further up her, and some touch on a G-spot made her juices flow, wanting him despite the sexual extravaganza that had gone before. It was him she wanted: he was her master; she, the willing slave. But her response was not enough for Adrian. He wanted to hurt her for her sluttish behaviour before the two businessmen had left. He wanted her to feel pain for the lewdity of her nature and as always he was the one to inflict the discipline. Something she began to realise he enjoyed as much as the sexual act itself. He had proceeded to slap her hard and repeatedly on her backside until her skin felt raw and she had not been able to prevent herself from crying for mercy and weeping.

This was what Adrian loved - to have her weeping and begging for mercy at his feet, whilst he, the superior male towered over her, with the power to crush her completely or not, as was his whim.

All the time he was slapping her, more and more viciously in crescendo with his words, he was hissing at her, "You dirty hot bitch! You're nothing but a bitch on heat! You disgusting dirty cow, you can't control yourself can you? A stroke of your cunt and you'll do anything for any fucker who comes along! You whore! You'd lift your arse for a dog, for a fucking goat if it licked you in the right way, wouldn't you? Eh? Eh? Wouldn't you, you bloody pussy! A hot wet hole that's all you are. You're incapable of controlling it aren't you? Well maybe this will beat some sense back into you, eh? Whore!"

And on and on until she was weeping and screaming for him to stop, pleading with him to forgive her. When he did stop his lips turned into sweet caresses, soothing, tonguing the pain away. Kissing her with a new tenderness that told her, he too was sorry for the way he used her, showing her that in spite of his treatment of her, he really did love her in his way. When his tongue and lips claimed the pink swollen lips between her legs, the erotic sensation was all the more intense because of the pain she had endured. His ravishment then was rendered deep, rich and sensual - a contradiction she feared being repeated and yet which fired her imagination and made her moist for days afterwards.

Then the gentler games with the reins and the tail were only part of the dripping potent mixture that made her feel orgasmically alive, more than ever like a mass of responsive juices triggered at the slightest touch or thrust. And it was erotic in a nefariously delicious way. The trouble was, Adrian got into the role more and more until he was utterly brutish whenever he chose to be. And she in turn became as easily, as readily pliant to his command as if she had been a radio-control android; if he wanted her defiant, she would be defiant, if he wanted demure she was the epitome of it. By doing this she was challenging him to go as far as he dare. She encouraged him but she could not help herself.

All she wanted to do was please him. Adrian manipulated this instinct in her - which he was well aware of - to do just as he pleased, and all the time Ruth acquiesced in his plans and his dictations. Little did she realise just how far he was prepared to go.

There was a period of calm after that episode, Adrian being sweet towards her, showing an interest in her reading, the gossip of her girlfriends. Life became treasured once more.

Then Adrian's work would encroach... long hours spent away... her boredom and frustration. So she took up pottery to amuse herself, which she quickly became enthused by. But Adrian, who could not stand anything approaching competition, interceded expecting all her time and attention; as soon as she found something remotely fulfilling he had to come and take it away or interfere, to see if it would be any threat to the thralldom he had established.

He would come and watch her work, moulding the clay to her design. Then seeing her absorbed and not taking notice of him, he would try and distract her, every time inevitably doing so with some new trick. Lying down looking up her dress as she sat astride the stool, his mouth tasting her boundaries, his fingers exploring her, pulling her down. Or he would be querulous, intent upon causing an argument, finding something to complain about. Or he would remind her of her duties as his wife, how it would go badly for her if she did not fulfil his expectations. There was always something. So she tried to make sure she pursued her hobbies when Adrian was not around, when she had time and breathing space to herself.

On their last anniversary he had presented her with an anklet. It was a strong silver chain with an identity medal which read: *owner: Adrian Spearman*. He had given it to her as a kind of joke. Like a deeper confirmation of the wedding ring and a turn on factor for both of them he had said smiling at her with the cheeky, charming way he had.

"Just for today" he begged her, "just when we're alone. Honest!" The collar episode flashed through her mind, but she could not resist pleasing him.

Adrian always bought things he could lock - desks, cupboards, wardrobes, the baubles he used with her all had locks and keys. The silver anklet also had a tiny lock and when Adrian clicked it into place, she felt immediately her status of slave-appendage, pet-owned, an animal to be pampered or beaten. And she let herself into that feeling, for in contradictory pattern she was seduced by it; something inside of her felt weirdly expanded by Adrian's svengali machinations. The way he used her, the way he dominated and dictated, was appalling she realised, in the cold light of day.

She felt strange facing her family. She was always bright and breezy but there was a brittleness in her manner that communicated itself. Occasionally she saw her mother watching her when she visited, a cloud of concern and confusion in her eyes. But Ruth could not say anything. How could she explain the dark maelstrom that was the centre of her life? How could they ever understand? Her father would say it would be just what he expected of her, she was too stupid to know better. Her mother would never recover from the shock, after all that good catholic upbringing. Her father would shake his head in disgust. How could she ever tell them what her life had become?

Similarly with her girlfriends who she went to aerobics with in winter and played tennis with in summer, she could never let on to them how things were between Adrian and her. Who would believe her? How could she explain without showing herself to be the weak, stupid person her father always seemed to think she was? She might go out for lunch, go to coffee mornings, supporting some cottage industry sale, the village hall funds, but Adrian rarely accepted dinner dates at her friends houses, so they very literally came to live separate lives. They would meet in the middle of these disparate existences for some violent clash of passion, some new and terrible proclivity, or for a remembrance of romance and tenderness which lent wings to her eager spirit after the vile things he did made her want to retch, determined to leave him.

But then he would sweet talk her, shower her with gifts, spend time with her, flatter her. And she would be his again, abandoned, forgetting that there would be a time when she would come to regret her ready forgiveness all over again...

The anklet. He was as good as his word. He took it off, kissing her ankle beguilingly and calling her his sweetest piece of snow-white peach, his dream queen. A scarlet kiss on her inner thigh, and so he continued, off and on being chivalrous, tender and appreciative. Until one weekend he 'innocently' asked if they could look after his friend Dave's dogs while he went away for a couple of days. She readily agreed for she liked dogs, enjoyed their friendly playfulness, admired their loyalty. She had actually looked forward to Adrian bringing them home. Plus she liked Alsations which both of them were, both male dogs, Adrian had told her, and thus better equipped to function as guard dogs. She had worried that they might be dangerous. But Adrian reassured her, telling her they were very well trained. He wouldn't have agreed to have them for the weekend otherwise.

When he brought them in, it was clear he had established a rapport with them. A recent hobby of his, the study of dogs. Ruefully she saw they followed his command to stay and sit, so she could stroke them; they obeying him just as readily as she did. Would they do it for her? She had asked Adrian. Of course if she was firm enough he had replied. One was larger than the other being nearly all black, whereas the slightly smaller sandy one proved the more eager to

please. The black one frightened her a little though she didn't confess it. But she saw Adrian glance at her as if taking in the non-verbals, as he called them.

She cajoled the black dog, speaking soothingly and sweetly to it, trying to soften it, but it just stood accepting her blandishments whilst at the same time gazing at her guardedly. So she gave up, feeling a bit piqued, and patted the sandy one which responded equably enough by jumping up and slavering over her. This provoked their laughter, and they took the dogs out for a walk before feeding them and settling them in the kitchen.

They retired to the dining room to eat their dinner and drink the wine. Adrian filled her glass, urging her to drink, saying he felt expansive because they had just clinched a great business deal, overseeing the building of a shopping centre in a green area outside of York. She, unaccustomed to his lavishments in this way, quickly became effected. He had made her dress in a very short leather mini-skirt that only just reached over her backside. She wore no underwear but sported the collar and the anklet. She had protested and tried to refuse wearing these items as had become ritual with her, but Adrian had reassured her in his charming way that all he wanted was to look at her like that, pointing out she hadn't indulged him like this for a while.

But the latent threat behind his words was there all the same. If she didn't comply he would force her. That was the bottom line. He would force her to do whatever he felt like doing. That was the craven weakness and betrayal of her flesh. That was the pleasure he got from proving again and again to her, that she was mere animal. That he was a superior being. That he was her dark lord, her god, who dictated her every move and kept her in clover just so she could leap to do his bidding. Just so he could use her to explore his ever more wild and perverse desires.

In the end she let him put the collar and the anklet on her. As soon as they had eaten, he took a handful of her breast and pulled her towards him, forcing her down to her knees, telling her to unbutton his trousers and take them off. She did as he demanded as sensuously as she could - for she knew if she was clumsy he might beat her. It had happened before.

His cock sprang out bending slightly upwards in the way it had. She took him in her mouth, he forcing her, controlling her motions. She sucked and gagged on his cock as he thrust it in almost choking her. Then she grabbed it and worked his cock in her mouth. She was surprised how quickly he came. Usually he could last forever taking a gloating superior pleasure in seeing her brought to a pitch, then hurt in some brutal or devious, but always imaginative, way. The pain he saw as necessary to the process of love-making and she found it came in very many forms, both physical and mental.

He bid her swallow his sperm, opening her mouth and licking it out with his tongue, his whole mouth covering and consuming hers until she felt she no longer existed except as a receptacle of pleasure and pain for him.

His grey-blue eyes shot bolts of intensity into her brown ones.

"Do you know why I came so quickly?" he whispered, "do you know what was turning me on?"

She shook her head and smiled, confused by his words.

"I'll let you know in a bit baby. Now as that was so nice, I'm gonna give you a bit of finger-licking good. Reckon my slave girl deserves her bit of scrummy after that, eh?"

He kissed her, drinking deep, and then unzipped and removed her skirt. He produced two leather garters with rings upon them, which he snapped around her thighs and fitted a chain around her middle, snapping on the leash as well as the leather handcuffs which he did not as yet fasten together. She stood like a manikin, feeling an ominous chord sound within her. But again it was too late. If she resisted now it would only make things worse and anyway, the base part of her responded to this treatment.

He led her upstairs calling her his pet bitch, his little slave girl, pointing out the anklet, making her read it, when they got to the bondage bedroom, as Adrian called it. This was a room rigged out especially for such an occasion. Iron loops on the floor, a hook on the ceiling, iron bed posts, a reversible headboard with rings in order to secure chains and leashes. Many times he had handcuffed her to the bedposts and her ankles to the lower posts. Then, with her spread wide for his delectation, he would finger and tongue her alive, fill her with those base instincts that so seduced her, penetrated her, held her there as his puppet for as long as he so desired. A puppet whose strings had only to be pulled or jerked or teased, for her to come to life in ever more wild and rampant ways.

After arousing her like this, he had unfastened her and led her where the rings were on the floor. He fixed her on her leash so that her face was close to the floor, only a short piece of thong preventing her from rising. This meant she had to, of necessity, tilt her arse in the air to keep comfortable. He put a blindfold mask on her and stroked her buttocks appreciatively, said he was just going to get something. She felt a sudden qualm of fear, a tremor she didn't want to think about or consider. She knew again she had walked into one of his traps. She was becoming inured to it now. Not so much crushed as accepting, each time wondering what next dark corner they would turn, how much further down he could go. While she played his willing accomplice; his weak and pliant toy.

Yet resilience did grow up in her. A resilience that came from accepting the fact that she was a masochist. At least they lived more intensely than most people, she consoled herself, with their constant rollercoaster of ups and increasingly wicked downs. But sometimes she did almost crack, like that time - with the dogs ...

So there she was, secured naked to the floor of the bondage bedroom. A sinking feeling in her belly as she heard the sound of claws on the polished wooden stairs. The next thing she knew the room was full of slavering dogs and Adrian was smearing warm melted chocolate onto her vagina, her arse and tits. She was yelling at him to stop, to release her. Begging him not to do this to her. Saying she was frightened. Pleading with him to take the dogs out. But he shushed her with a further stroke of her lower parts, to make sure whatever stuff he was smearing onto her was spread well in. He told her she would enjoy it, that she was a bitch on heat, his to do what he wanted with. Didn't the anklet say that was so? When she wore that she had to do as she was told. His bitch who obeyed him, right? He had commanded the dogs to sit and stay. She felt their eyes feasting on her curiously, just as those men had that time at the races. She could feel their hot breath, their contained, quivering excitement.

"Just open your legs and let your body go baby, like the way you know you can. This I gotta see!" said Adrian salaciously.

She was truly frightened then, frightened by the proximity of the dogs' slavering jaws.

"Go with it babe!" laughed Adrian softly slapping her buttocks. Adrian gave his hand for the dogs to lick, which they did insatiably. Then they gazed up at him enquiringly, eyeing Ruth's raised arse and exposed gash. "Go on boys! Go on! Go to it!" commanded Adrian.

The black one was first. She saw it dart towards her from between her legs and the next thing she knew its tongue was greedily licking her cunt, getting deeper and more insistent, whilst the other one shared the treat by licking the parts Adrian directed it towards, like her breasts dangling down smeared gratuitously with melted chocolate, sticky and sweet. The dog was nudging her body over as she tried to shield it away. Adrian flailed a whip making her jerk so that the dog's nose, cold and damp, was thrust up her arse where it discovered more of the chocolate. The other dog had managed to find her tit, nudging her to make the fruits of her nipples and breasts more accessible. The other dog devoured her vagina, licking it again and again until she wanted it to shove its nose right up her and touch the G-spot that set her squirming, squeezing out her own sweet juices.

Adrian was calling out vile things and mercilessly clicking a camera. She knew he would use those photographs as he had done the others. To start with he would make her forget it had ever happened, soothe her, love her, make her happy. Then he would begin working long hours again so she would begin to miss him. Then suddenly the photographs would be brought out, some with her face clearly visible, and he would threaten sending them to her friends, her parents. He always found fresh ways of tormenting her. Money was no object and she dimly guessed he probably made money out of those photographs. That was why he often blind-folded her - though he always took one for himself of her without any disguise, so he could show her afterwards and gloat or pretend that she disgusted him. But mostly only her body, hardly ever her face could be seen.

One day her faint suppositions were confirmed when she had found a letter in his jacket pocket agreeing to give a certain price for a batch of bestial pornography. That was a month after the episode. The irony was now she dare not confront him. There was no knowing what he would do if she tried to oppose him. She had once spent two days without food in the room upstairs for daring to contradict him in front of her friends, on one of those rare occasions they had all met up together. He had whipped her mercilessly as well. Drawing blood so that later he had washed her wounds as she wept, demonstrating such consummate tenderness that she had believed him to be truly sorry. He had soothed her, been so gentle and loving it made the pain and debauchery worthwhile. That was the way they worked. She was becoming addicted to pain, he increasingly expert in delivering it.

He had photographed her latest debasement as the dogs stood over her and licked her to a strange abandoned state of arousal. Adrian erected poles around her, fitting them into specially made casings on the floor. He dipped his hand in the thick chocolate, turned her over, his hand lifting her crotch and covering her labia with the sweet warm liquid once more. She was hoisted by the chain round her belly, attached to a bar on the ceiling, which lifted her arse, exposing her vagina. One side of her was tilted out, so that one nipple dripped with chocolate as if it oozed the substance, in full availability for the dogs.

They swapped positions as if in secret agreement. Her labia exposed to the dog! As it licked and licked, raking its tongue across her clitoris, too soft for it to be painful, too insistent for her not to respond.

The animal part of her began to enjoy the sensations despite the demeaning way she had been forced into the situation. Despite her own debasement she could not help becoming aroused by the long wet tongues of both of the dogs. She even came to feel like the bitch on heat Adrian continuously told her she was.

One dog was methodically licking her nipple, making her gasp. Both dogs were getting charged up, shifting about, trying to grip her with their paws to mount her. Adrian dabbed something onto her from a little bottle. The dogs grew suddenly even more excited. The black one tried to shag her breast, whilst clutching onto her shoulder with its front paws. The other one nosed her back end continuously, actually physically lifting her up and nudging her cunt, till it was even more open and accessible. Doing just what Adrian did, getting her in the position it wanted her in, growling for her to comply.

Adrian had the camera flashing and was egging the dogs on. Until finally the one at her back end leapt up and to her horror she felt its cock thrusting into her, shagging her quickly and virulently, in a frenzy the way dogs did. When it was over it gave her cunt a desultory lick and ambled away to leap onto the bed and flop down upon it in satisfaction.

Adrian urged the black dog to do the same, inserting the pony tail into Ruth's arse to vary the effect. He lifted her arse up by the pony tail to oblige the dog, smearing more of the chocolate and what she later discovered were bitch pheromones, onto her vulva. The black dog was whining and frenzied licking deep into her, clutching her with its fore paws as if she was a bone, growling at her so she froze and exposed her cunt for it to use. Then it was upon her, its thin cock poking in and out of her, whilst Adrian took photographs still.

The peculiar sliding thrust and knowledge of the dog flesh inside her. When it was over the dog got down and nudged her with its nose asserting itself, growling menacingly as if telling her not to move or try anything. She wanted to curl up in shame. But Adrian laughed and patted it giving it a lump of meat from a container he had brought up. He lowered the positions of her bindings so she could lie down comfortably. He threw her a duvet and pillow leaving her there like the animal she was, he told her. She had been a filthy dirty bitch and she was now relegated to the lowest status in the household, beneath the Alsations because they were male and they had roddered her as well, so Adrian told her. He even allowed the dogs to sleep on the bed, as if they were more civilised, more worthy of his company than her.

He kept the dogs interested in her all the next day, smearing her from time to time, and insisting she walk on the leash on all fours, where the two dogs could enjoy her if they wanted. He was merciless. The two dogs perpetually nosed her, licked her, mounted her or growled at her to give them space, assuming they had precedence to Adrian's company above her, he encouraging them in this, enjoying Ruth's fear and manipulating it to serve his own warped ends. He told her to lick milk off the floor which he had spilt on purpose. When she did not move immediately to obey him, he smeared the bitch pheromones over her again and tied her leash to a radiator letting the dogs have their full rein. She had curled up to try and protect herself but the black one had nipped her and they

were so slaveringly insistent she had to let them have their way with her body as they chose.

Adrian even fed her from a bowl on the floor. He let the Alsations eat theirs first then made them sit and watch her whilst she messily ate her meal from the bowl, with her hands duly handcuffed behind her back. The dogs even seemed to despise her, seeing in her a weaker, inferior being, who the master enjoyed getting them to do things to. They energetically obliged, sometimes coming close to fighting over her in their attempts to assert dominance, the one above the other, and each of them always over her. Adrian always prevented such threats from getting out of hand and she could tell he enjoyed the fear those occasions induced in her. She could tell he enjoyed his mastery over the dogs, his ability to control them, as much as he enjoyed her vulnerability and total subservience to his and the dogs' desires.

He even made her sleep with them, ordering the dogs to lie still and guard her so that whenever she shifted they growled menacingly. He left her with them all night like that on the bedroom floor. Just before he went to bed he smeared some mashed banana upon her, so that the dogs slavered over her, licking her insatiably, probing her with their long tongues, grasping her with their paws, as if she was a bone, rich with marrow, in clefts to be insistently exposed for their appetites. Thus was she left to endure their doggy whim, while Adrian masturbated then went to sleep in the bed.

It was the worst night she ever spent. The dogs by that time were used to bullying her into optimum advantageous positions. They would cluster round her back end, barging her, jostling each other for the prime licking spot. She split herself wide not daring to attempt to prevent them, fearing their jaws, the disdain they seemed to direct at her. Finally when they had both got tired she was allowed to lower herself and an uncomfortable night was spent with the dogs lolling over and around her, occasionally giving her arse or side a lick of remembrance or ownership.

In the morning Adrian sent the dogs downstairs and got dressed. As he released her bonds he told her he would be back that evening, that he had arranged to take the dogs round to Dave's early that morning. As if this was being communicated in normal circumstances. He left her crumpled on the floor with a parting shot: "Just remember I've got the photographs OK babe?" A subtle threat and implication left hanging in the air.

When he and the dogs had gone she wept uncontrollably and spent hours in the bath trying to rid herself of the dog smell, rid herself of the disgust she felt, rid herself of the dirty dogginess that had been thrust upon her and into her. She had

lain there wondering what to do, couldn't come up with any solution that did not involve killing him or herself. If she left him, he had the photographs and not just the dog ones either. She couldn't stand ... did not want that exposure. She tried to break into the locked draws of his desk, scabble around his pockets. But Adrian was scrupulously careful and methodical about watching his back, leaving no loose ends stray. She found nothing incriminating and only did so some months later because she guessed he wanted her to. It increased his power over her. She would have got in the car and driven away, just run away free at last to begin again, living for herself instead of around another. But she feared him still. What he might do. Better stand and face the devil she had told herself.

He came back after seven that night to find her drunk and dishevelled, still in her dressing gown. When he walked through the door she flew at him, flailing her fists at him, screaming that she hated him, never wanted him near her again. He held her immobile until she wept her bitterness and frustration before him. He had affected surprise saying, "What? I thought you enjoyed it. I thought it was one of those kinky things you would get a kick out of!"

When she screamed at him again and berated him further, he picked her up and carried her to the settee, lay her down gently, as if she were an injured child, sweeping away the hair from her face and gently erasing the tears with his fingertips. But she pushed him from her, savage again and curled herself away from him. He looked at her in that loving compassionate way he sometimes had, that never failed to startle her. Which made her remember that there was a depth of emotion in him, that he felt for her, that he was as much addicted to her as she was to him. Only he went too far, debasing and belittling her more and more.

That night and for a few days afterwards he had treated her incredibly solicitously, as if she were an invalid to be cosseted and coaxed back to health. But after that episode she had been adamant. She did not let Adrian touch her for days, refused to speak to him, went out busying herself during the day with swimming or aerobics, banal social chatter, trying to forget.

In the end Adrian sweet-talked her round again like he always did. He promised it would never happen again and he always appeared so sincere, so desperately sorry he had hurt her. Indeed he proved true to his word up to a point. He had never repeated the collar episode, making her wear the symbol of her servitude as a constant - no, he had never repeated that, he didn't need to. He had kept his word there. And he had never sodomised her since that one time he had tried it. So once again she kidded herself he did mean what he said. What she was never prepared for were the deviations he came up with; he would rarely stoop to repetition, wanting always the new and devilish untried.

The way he improvised situations, which she realised afterwards had been planned and calculated. It was as if he honed his business acumen and sharp

witted techniques on her. She was his punch ball, his practice kit, his training gym. And he used her how he wanted, she always giving in. Giving in, giving in, so that she felt she was more fluid than flesh, more of the substance of water, that oozed and filled each newly shaped chamber of pleasure and pain, a talon or a waterlily, substance to drown and die in, substance to inspire and ignite.

Always the double-edged blade they walked, the price of such intensity, tipping out of balance one side, resurrecting itself by swinging to the opposite side of the spectrum. Sometimes continuing smoothly connected and aligned until the swing from pleasure or pain began again. Each time staying longer in the region of pain making the pleasure more brutal, more pathetic on her own part.

But he liked her in that state she knew; snivelling, pathetic, hurt. Then he would take her in his arms and tenderly, oh so tenderly and exquisitely caress her, consoling her, worshipping at the shrine of her body - the body he had just abused - telling her how much he loved her, how without her he could never be happy.

Something in her always responded, some keen dart always pierced so she ended up loving him, wanting him, in a fiercer deeper way. It frightened her the way they lived. But she was also irrationally, illogically gratified by it. Because after all, Adrian drew out of her and emphasised certain qualities in herself, made her so dependent upon him, she felt incomplete without him. This kept the arousal between them a constantly flaring spark.

This lent her an air of vulnerability. So that her softness and reticence, her willingness to listen and be easily impressed, made her all the more appealing to men. There was a certain fragile look that shone in her eyes which seemed to beg their acceptance, their approval of her; as if she feared the fact they might not like her or that they might despise her. It was a peculiar and subtle play of qualities which made men look at her like a splendid chocolate box they would have liked to unwrap. The male in them responded instinctively to the exaggerated femininity she presented. She oozed soft, obliging sexuality; her body or figure could not help but do that in the clothes Adrian insisted she wear. But she always wanted them to see her as a person, to like her quite apart from her physical attributes. That's what she always begged from them with her eyes. Most men could never resist that appeal.

Not that she was with men that often. Adrian had engineered her life so that she spent time with her girlfriends, and occasionally their husbands, pursuing her various hobbies and interests - her swimming, her pottery, helping at the crèche on consecutive mornings and then the playgroup. She loved to be with little children. She still wanted a child. But the idea of parenting with Adrian frightened her. She knew it wasn't viable. She couldn't stand to bring a child into

such an environment now. Neither could she break free of Adrian somehow either. Did she want to? More and more these days.

After the dog episode, when she finally came round to enjoying his company again, they had had a long time of settled easy intimacy, so that the idea of children tap-tapped at her mind again and made her body sensitively hormonal. She had put it to Adrian. The discussion. The row. He, in the end refusing to consider it - business, freedom, time together and so forth, pointing out to her that she was only young, barely 23; plenty of time yet to have kids, he told her. She, spoiling for a row, he spanking her, making her forget...

His business interests intruding. More conferences. Evenings spent "working". The old feeling of neglect, abandonment. The old desire to be pathetically grateful to him when he did give her some attention. How she had come to despise herself more and more. But all the same there was a kernel of strength in her, like a nut that would not crack, for she responded to his games by exaggerating her moves, matching him and keeping pace, in a way that even surprised herself. It was the times when he was away that crushed her.

The times when she felt he was enjoying pleasures elsewhere, having other women. He had never told her or even hinted as much, but she knew. She could tell by a certain fulfilment he came in with, a certain dreaminess, as if his mind was elsewhere, as if he did not see her. Then her soul cried out in terror, for she realised beyond Adrian's shadow she no longer existed in her own right. Without him she was featureless and barren, an entity that only knew itself in relation to a larger satellite. And she despised herself even further because of this, and felt sorry for the child she had been, whose head had been filled with dreams of innocent charm. To think she had ended up like this! A doll to be neglected or played with, depending on his mood. And yet she stayed. She could somehow never find the strength to break the bond - to cut and run. So in bursts and starts it kept happening. The sado-masochistic merry-go-round which she was as inexorably drawn to, just as much as he.

And of course it was her own fault - who else could she blame? Some days after a savage ravishment at the hands of Adrian, she would feel unreal. As if reality was an illusion, a test-card on the T.V. held up to fill her time until Adrian returned and real existence began. Then work would take him away and so forth, and onward it would go. And then something else would happen. Something catastrophic. The bomb dropping to obliterate her once again. For the nth time of happening. And she was still too stupid to see it coming...

Adrian, she noticed, had a way with men. As if he had a latent homosexuality, which remained perpetually frozen in a state of suspended animation, only

allowed outlet through observation. He enjoyed observing, playing the vicarious participant, the voyeurism of the dramas he orchestrated. She supposed that's how he could handle it - watching a chosen few fuck her. He enjoyed their derangement, their discomposure, as well as gaining a rapacious pleasure out of Ruth's abandonment. Proving all along that he was the superior one. The blokes he chose he could always be chummy with; they always had a camaraderie she was perpetually outside of. Thus in such situations they communicated to each other in spite of her, forcing her to become the sex-object, her husband had set her up to be.

Then the last episode. Adrian's fascination with body piercings and tattoos ever so casually revealing itself in relaxed and nonchalant manner. Showing her a book a friend had given him - pictures of pierced nipples, cocks, vaginas. Body suit tattoos. And weirder and stranger paraphernalia than these. Ruth's instinctive aversion to it, as if she had sensed where this interest would lead. Adrian not mentioning it for days. As a joke, asking her if she would like her belly button done or his cock given a Prince Albert. She had laughed at the latter, wondered about her navel, fingering the small indentation uncertainly. Adrian's caress. Nothing for a long time. Adrian's work interceding and taking precedence. A certain time of the month. Adrian exquisitely arousing her, keeping her nerves taut, until her flesh ached to be touched.

Just dinner for two that Friday night he had said. Just something quick and easy so they could drink the wine and he could get down to the real feast of the evening, he had joked, smacking his lips at her and kissing her in a lingering fashion. "You're all turned on aren't you babe? Aren't you my Ruthie? Never mind I'll come tonight and sort you out - until then keep yourself on hold!" He had slapped her buttocks in jest and followed this up by saying: "By the way, I want you in some sexy gear when I walk through that door tonight. You've been letting that go recently. I work hard you know to keep you in the lap of luxury. When I come in I want to see a sight to please my eyes, take my mind off work. So wear something sexy. That leather strappy thing I bought you a while back. Nothing else OK? Make me believe I've died and gone to some kind of heaven, eh? Just for me!" And he winked at her with that roguish irresistible charm he had. She had pandered to his words, laughing with him and arching herself provocatively. Fool! Fool! Fool!

She had complied with his instructions, wearing the garb he had bought her a couple of months ago. The garment was little but a series of leather straps accentuating her lovely curves, the softness of her skin. It made her look like a beautiful exotic animal, naked behind a leather cage. She wanted to please him, to keep him sweet. So that night she made chicken breasts in a brandy sauce on a sweet potato crush, and opened the wine ready for his return. When he came in she was already waiting for him, the glass of wine ready poured, held in her

hands, she sitting up straight and pert on the dining room chair. He had smiled at her appreciatively and her heart had flipped over a little - this time it was going to be good, she had thought.

He took the glass without saying anything and savoured it, gazing into her eyes as he did so. Then he had kissed her, told her to give him ten minutes to shower and change, whilst she got the meal ready.

Half an hour later they were sitting at the table finishing the very tasty meal. Adrian finished his second glass of wine and then, to show his appreciation, he knelt down and kissed the soft flesh of her inner thigh. He nibbled it and pressed his lips and tongue upon it, so she opened her thighs exposing the pink petal folds of her vagina, the dark forest of hair around it. Adrian stuck his tongue right up into the gash then sucked at her as if he drank the juice of an exotic fruit. Then he got up and pushed his fingers inside her, at the same time as filling his wine glass.

He watched her movements grow wanton as he pushed his fingers in and out of her, sipping his wine as he did so. He put down the glass and glanced at his watch, noting the time with satisfaction. He bent over her and took her nipple in his teeth, sucking at it, grasping her flesh and kneading her as if she were dough. Which was what she felt she had become - dough to be shaped and poked and prodded, just for his whim. The long days of waiting and slow arousal unfulfilled had paid off, for once again Ruth could not help but respond immediately to his touch. At that moment once again, she was ready to do anything he wanted her to.

Suddenly the doorbell rang, and Ruth stiffened. They weren't expecting anyone - were they? A sinking feeling in her belly, looking at Adrian inquiringly.

"Don't worry I'll deal with it," he said. "You just stay there til I come back", rubbing her clitoris so that then she didn't care what the doorbell meant, just so long as he came back to her. She heard voices in the hall, the door closing, conversation continuing, another man's voice, laughter. A few minutes later the door opened and a tall brawny figure followed Adrian into the room. He had his hair tied back in a ponytail, his nose and ears pierced. He had strong brows and dark eyes, a hooked nose, thin lips, a wide mouth. He was staring at her, the lust naked in his eyes, puckering his lips and whistling when he saw her.

"You got some sweet piece of meat there Ade, I'm sure we can do a deal on that. We'll soon have those treetop baboons taken out for you so that the building work can go ahead, alongside this little extra you promised me, OK? Consider the task already done, so long as you keep your side of the bargain now ..."

Adrian smiled: "No problem - I promised you, didn't I? I am a man of my word you know!"

When they had entered she had been sitting as he had left her, with her legs opened wide, her head to one side, her eyes closed, for she didn't believe he would bring a stranger in cold to see her sitting like that. But too late she realised he wasn't alone - she had sat up and opened her eyes, closing her legs quickly and pressing them tightly together. She felt like a fool. She pleaded with Adrian with her eyes, but his look held a warning not to let him down. She knew he could get nasty, in the past he had proved that on a number of occasions, so her fear held her obedient to his command. While inside she wept, *not again*. Not again. Oh no, not again.

Adrian got a kick out of other men using her, as long as he had engineered it. If she flirted of her own volition, well, now that was a different matter, Adrian had told her in no uncertain terms. He liked to see her prostrate and straddled; he liked to watch the animal in her respond, taken over by sensation; he liked to see the men pound and squeeze her, watch them getting carried away too. Their lust for his wife turned him on and was another feather in his cap. This was the fourth time he had used her in the business bartering process.

She realised he was something to do with Adrian's latest job. There was some controversy over it she knew. Some protesters dwelling in tree-tops to prevent construction. She realised the tall, beefy piratical-looking man was something to do with the ejection of those people. He looked like someone you wouldn't want to argue with.

"Have a glass of wine," Adrian said. "Let's adjourn to the lounge. Ruth, pour my business associate a glass of wine and carry it through in front of us."

She looked at him beseechingly, hesitating, but on seeing his eyes begin to cloud, as they did when he got angry, she silently got up, poured the wine and walked to the door, turning back inquiringly to look at Adrian to see if she had got it right. He gestured her on, smiling at her and pleased with her again. Her flesh was still erotically charged from Adrian's caresses ten minutes before. She was conscious of that moistness now, conscious of the other man ogling her, and she wished her breasts weren't so prominent, didn't bobble in that way when she walked. In contradiction she still ached for the sexual fulfilment that had been denied her, in the build up to this night.

The tall man leered at her buttocks as she walked before them, clearly wanting to warm his hands on them, try her out for size. Adrian enjoyed the spectacle and became correspondingly even more puffed up and superior, but still retaining that laddiness that always made him so popular with other men, so

easy to get along with. How he was now, thoroughly obliging and charming along with it.

"Thought you'd like a bit of a drink first, enhance the anticipation, know what I mean?" Adrian was saying tipping him a broad wink, then: "Just stand there a minute Ruth, will you?" giving her her orders. There she stood conscious of her near-naked provocative garb, holding a glass of wine for Adrian's guest.

"Take a seat," Adrian said to their guest, indicating a place on the settee, whilst he sat in the opposite armchair. The man sat down clearly enjoying the experience of having a woman barely-clad on his behalf and serving him, apparently waiting on his every whim.

"Give the gentleman his wine Ruth and make sure you kneel as you do so," came the directive from Adrian.

Ruth in the unreality of an unfolding drama, did as she was told. She walked over to the man, who was now sitting, and did as she had been commanded, holding out the wine for the man to take, feeling conscious of his proximity, the outward jut of her breasts. The man with the pierced nose smiled lasciviously saying: "Thank you," and looking like he was holding back the urge to fondle her. Adrian, in his turn smiled, pleased at the effect Ruth was having on his business friend and settled down to enjoy the situation.

"You've got her bloody well-trained Ade! How do you do it? If only all of 'em were like this eh?" the man chortled. Adrian responded in likewise jokey manner, offering his wife as an object to be borrowed and played with. But she dared not protest.

"Get her warmed up yourself if you like, then we'll go upstairs and you can get out your box of tricks and return the favour - OK?" Adrian was saying.

"Suits me just fine!" joked the piratish Jason.

"Ruth get up and stand in front of Jason. Do a turn for him. He wants to look at you a bit closer".

She contemplated running out, but she knew she wouldn't escape. Her only protection was to give in. Play her part. The part Adrian had created for her. Again and again, according to his dictates she had played her part, as it seemed she always would. Adrian's willing puppet to do with as he pleased.

So she did as Adrian said and Jason leered up at her grinning, clearly deliberating over how to begin. She could sense in the actions that followed a desire in this man also to test the boundaries, to test how far Adrian would allow him to go. He discovered the boundaries were limitless. His fingers followed the curve of her thigh, brushed against her crotch, eventually holding onto the

leather straps circling her waist. Then he pulled her face downwards over his knee, so her arse swelled up helplessly exposed before him.

"Very nice contours Ade I'd say. Where did you pick up this little bargain then?" Jason joked, acting as if he believed she was not really Adrian's wife but a prostitute paid to act her part.

Adrian laughed appreciatively. She could tell he was happy about the way things were turning out.

"Found her doing agency temping work, took pity on her 'cos her tights had a hole in 'em and she couldn't afford new ones till the agency paid her. Sad, don't you think? I could see her potential so I rescued her. She's come a long way since then. Women are like animals, Jason, don't you think? They need to be trained. All this feminism stuff is a load of rot! All most of 'em want is a good fuck. Somebody putting their foot down and telling 'em what's what. They get turned on when they're ordered around. At least Ruth here does, and so do most of the other women I've met as well. It makes things a lot easier. Ruth knows I earn the money, keep her in luxury, so she takes the orders and does what I say. She'll do the same for you. She's very compliant. It's how I insist she should be".

Jason was rubbing the palm of his hand over and round and round on her buttocks, a motion that was beginning to make her skin tingle, while they discussed her as if she had no voice or feelings of her own. As if all she was, was a novelty doll, made to be especially accommodating, before being put back in the cupboard and locked away until the next time came! The trouble was Adrian was right. It did turn her on. He had continuously modified and modified her behaviour so that she fitted in perfectly with his fantasies, his wishes, his unimpeachable commands.

"I'm impressed," said Jason, now only concerned to take things further. "Seeing as this is on your recommendation, can I try a bite or two, just to see if you're right?"

Ruth realised he was into it too, treating her like some wares, a geisha girl to be offered and shared, to do with whatever they pleased.

"Sure. Go ahead, don't mind me. I'll put some music on and get some more wine. Help yourself to the treats on offer. Ruth will be very obliging, I know," Adrian responded, putting Jason at his ease.

"Ta," said Jason, grinning, she could tell.

Suddenly he sank his teeth into her buttocks, biting quite hard as if he couldn't resist the temptation to do so. Ruth cried out in pain. But then he was lifting her up so that his tongue could explore her crevices, spreading her thighs to

accommodate him, sucking deep on her labia, stimulating her clitoris so she became as compliant as he wanted her. Turning her over, lifting her up by the straps so that his mouth met with her nipples, holding her breasts like ice-cream cones, there for his particular savourment, as Adrian had sanctioned him to do. His big hand working within her, making her gasp in slavish abandonment. His hands, his teeth, his tongue rendering her that melting quantity which only existed to oblige the masculine desire. Jason bending her over the settee and entering her from behind. His large cock opening her wide, as he used her for his own satisfaction.

Adrian's dry voice commenting on the nymphomaniac quality of his wife which served to make her so marvellously malleable!

Afterwards they made her smoke a joint, care of Jason, which she was not accustomed to, so that it enhanced the dream-like quality of what followed. Drinks and a shared joint for the men, as Ruth lay dishevelled and prostrate, awaiting their further pleasure, in a strange dreamy state because of the intensity of a stranger's sexual urges and the unaccustomed nature of the marijuana. The ashtray was balanced on her butt, as they discussed their business interests further and Jason told stories of the kinky clinches he had had when he had worked as a tattoo artist in Brighton.

And there she lay in bed the following morning, Adrian having left using the excuse of work to disappear, so he wouldn't be there to suffer her anguish or recriminations. She gazed down at her body, fingered the belly-button stud that was pierced through the skin, felt the sting of the tattoo on the top of her thigh. Remembered again how, intoxicated and abandoned to erotic sensation, they had strapped her down. How her struggles and cries were in vain when she realised what they intended.

His box of tricks. Jason the practised tattooist and body piercing expert, using his accomplished skill on her at Adrian's request. She learned also, that Jason had been in the SAS and hence ran a group of professional thugs, hired in order to eject the troublesome from the path of all-consuming business interests.

The belly button bit was mild. She had treated it as a joke til then. Even that, stopping there it wouldn't have mattered so much. But no, Adrian had to embellish the point. Her body scarred for life. Just like Adrian was scarring her emotionally. This time he really scared her. He had fingered her labia, while he and Jason considered the advantages and disadvantages of piercing her there, in the soft, juicy, fleshfolds of her vagina or on the soft plum of her nipple. She had screamed and screamed at them.

But Adrian only laughed and encouraged Jason, telling him she went in for histrionics, that really she loved it just as much as him. Whereupon he grabbed her arse and took her flesh into his mouth, his fingers working in her, seducing her once again. The other man at it as well, fondling those parts of her not being probed by Adrian.

Coming up for air to discuss the further possibilities, get another drink, smoke another joint, whilst she lay quivering for their touch, the sexual spark enhanced by the frisson of fear introduced into the proceedings. Despite that her hormones overtaking her, wanting their hands, their mouths upon her. She giving, giving her body unto them, as if it was a rich yielding earth for them to delve into as they pleased. But no they would brand it, intent on leaving their stamp, their mark upon her. Adrian's designs; to brand her like a slave, his undisputed property. Only this time he'd gone too far.

But what frightened her was the response in her to accede to her status; to live up to or down to it, so that finally the fantasy had become more reality than life itself. Bondage. The collar. The chains. They could all be taken off. But a tattoo! And it had hurt. It had burned into her flesh and because she felt abused she had ended up weeping. In the aftermath of that action, they caressed her and stroked her consolingly, like a pet which had required some sort of surgical intervention. Adrian even carried her to the bed and lay her down, whilst he and the man Jason had another drink, smoked another joint. The man Jason, had come over and kissed her goodnight, after putting his clothes on. "OK sweetie, don't worry, it'll look great when its healed. Your man'll just wash it for you in warm water and apply the savlon before you go to sleep and you'll find it's no bother. I'll leave instructions with your man here about how to look after it, OK? Thanks for a fabulous time. I won't forget it in a hurry, eh?"

Her sniffing a disconsolate reply. Retreating into herself as the hurt do, when realisation began to dawn and her sense of shame returned. A plague on her see-saw emotions! A plague on them! Her hand went involuntarily to her thigh. What was he thinking of? How far did he intend to take this... this game that had become the sketchboard of their life.

She got up and went to the mirror almost afraid to see the result. At first she was relieved for it was not large or gaudy; it was discrete, indeed fascinating. When Jason had gone Adrian had tried to soothe her, had washed the soreness away and smeared savlon over it, then held her and coaxed her to sleep. She had woken confused, tormented. Again the downward spiral feeling sinking through her. But when she saw the tattoo, how apparently inoffensive it was, her mood lifted slightly.

Going closer she could see it in all its starkness. An A in black with an S made to look like a red lightning zigzag strike. Underneath this, the words: *His Will Be Done*, in neat black lettering. Ruth didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Adrian Spearman; A.S. It was there for anyone to see: as *His Will Be Done*. She felt strange on seeing those words - as if he had given himself the status of her god, who could be just as cruel as loving, and more so of the former when it suited him. As if now with those words cut into her she couldn't help but do whatever he said. As if she had signed her life, her wishes away and she had no will but his.

She felt as if she hovered on the brink of a precipice. If she continued to go along, to give in, where would it all end? What would become of this puppet's life she led, with him always pulling her strings, making her dance any which way he liked? What was she going to become if she allowed this to carry on? A pleasure toy for her husband and a few choice business colleagues, as if she were a high-class prostitute, part of the deal. Indeed that's what he had made her. He would develop a reputation for it. This was the fourth time this had happened. She felt she had become part of his bargaining design, part of his business plan, a perk to be offered at a whim, a lure and reward to clinch a deal.

What would become of her? The her inside that did think, did engage her mind, did think about the complexities of life? Adrian liked turning her into the she-animal, into the panting female and then exacting a penance of pain - come from pleasure - to pain again. His sadistic enjoyment at her cries; the pleasure, the pain. Did she really want this all her life? The tattoo as an indelible brand made her even more his victim. If she did not kick back now when would she?

She had heard that tattoos could be removed. She turned the idea over in her mind. This time the thought that Adrian might be enraged by such an action filled her with an intense frisson of excitement and pleasure. Now, after all this time, if she stood up to him, what would he do?

Didn't he need her as much as she needed him? What could he do to her? She would show him finally there were limits beyond which she would not go. The thought of rebelling in this way, taking charge of her body again, lifted her spirits and rather than dwelling on the debauchery and pain of the previous evening, she carried the tattoo like a battle wound on her thigh; a scar that would denote her final victory. The tattoo would, by its disappearance, finally vindicate her and break her from his puppet-master's spell.

But she would wait. She knew he planned to go away in a fortnight's time with 'the lads' - his business cronies who always remained vague and indistinct to her. From time to time he went for jaunts in the country, 'to revitalise himself and get a breath of nature' he would claim. Last year he'd gone fishing up to Scotland and orienteering in the Derbyshire Dales. He dabbled in these things, keeping

himself fit in the gym after work and using the bar in the bedroom. Fifteen pull-ups in the morning, fifteen pull-ups in the evening, a hundred press-ups to start the day. "Got to keep fit Ruthie. A man shouldn't be a dough-ball. He's hard, muscle, iron strength. Not like this". Fondling her breast, his fingers sinking into the softness. "Soft and succulent. Never do for a man, eh?" He joked squeezing her buttocks and demonstrating her seeming wealth of rounded flesh, compared to his lean torso, the tight firm buttocks of his behind.

Adrian's vanity. He liked his trips out with 'the lads' as he called it. He told her it was a way of discussing business in a more relaxed environment; he insisted it wasn't all play. Where was he going two weeks from now? Paint-balling in Shropshire? Somebody's birthday treat - Paul, an old school friend, he'd told her. Running around as if they were fighting in a real war, shooting paint at each other or something. Ruth found the idea faintly ridiculous. But for once she welcomed the opportunity of his absence, for she had made up her mind. She had decided it would be then, when Adrian was away, that she would arrange for the tattoo to be removed.

But for now she would surprise him by her lack of protest her unruffled acceptance of it all. She would make her face, her behaviour a mask belying the fact that finally the worm was about to turn, to bite back. Yes, finally to bite back, to assert herself in this way. Yes, this was what she had decided to do.

So she applied savlon to the tattoo, dressed and breakfasted and then looked up the telephone numbers in the yellow pages of clinics which might perform such an erasure. Finally she found one which would book her in, and made an appointment for the 1st of June, the Saturday when Adrian was away. She shivered with nervous excitement and felt deviously powerful, something she was not accustomed to feeling. She enjoyed the new sensation. So when Adrian returned that evening expecting a tirade, he was disconcerted by her normality, by her matter-of-fact ease, by the way she brushed aside any mention of the previous evening.

Adrian was disconcerted by her unexpected breeziness, she could tell. And he wanted to show her he could fit into that mood very well. But deep down inside he was a little unsettled. Her tears, her anger, her guilt, her remorse, these he knew how to deal with. He liked the thought that he could orchestrate her emotions, her impulses. But this. This calm, this warmth, this willingness to wait on him, to keep him happy, this was unexpected after the previous evening. And a part of him was disappointed. He enjoyed more the drama of her unhappiness and confusion to the warm sea of her accepting love. Yet also he was relieved. He couldn't have predicted how she would feel about the tattoo. Now he assumed her lack of anger or tears meant that she liked it, that it turned her on.

He felt proud at the thought of it. His mark. His initials. His words. His command upon her. His in a way no other could be. Even if he did play the dilettante now and then, Ruth he reserved for his most dark, most debauch experiments. He wanted to keep her sweet, to keep her indelibly his so that this genius he thought he possessed, this genius for ever more bizarre and unlikely sex interventions, he could indulge in whenever he liked. Well, you only had one life, he always said to himself, might as well play things for real instead of permanently fantasising and never acting.

He loved Ruth in a way which went to the bone of his being. But it was a possessive love, jealous of any independence or initiative she might have. He insisted on controlling her, on directing all her movements, approving all her actions. He did not like her to do anything without consulting him first. The possessive nature of his attachment made it seem a natural extension of their love to use her, to experiment on her, to bend her over, twist her round, try this implement and that position, watch others partake of her, notice animal involuntary responses, chain her, whip her, teach her the lesson that he knew she had learned well. That she was his to do with as he wanted, that she was his slave who would always do his bidding, no matter what that bidding was.

So his over-inflated masculine ego was kept monster hidden behind his smooth ways, his public school boy charm. He was master in his own household like no other man he knew and he was proud of his wife because of this and yet ever more concerned to keep her in her place. Hence the tattoo - a stroke of genius. It made him feel good to think about it.

So surprisingly the following days which merged into weeks, were a warm, intimate lull of closeness. He, happy and satisfied with her and she, pandering to his tastes, flattering him, playing up to him, holding her secret rebellion inside herself and secretly laughing at him, in the moments when she considered his reaction when the tattoo was no longer there! Come Friday of the following week, he had his bag packed and was all ready to go.

Dressed in a checked shirt and jeans he looked rugged and relaxed; the look enhancing his surface charm so that it was difficult to see the black glint that sometimes pierced forth from those grey-blue eyes, cold as a winter's day; those eyes at times, like an ebony stiletto slicing through flesh, watching the pain well out as symbolic blood on a background of pale skin.

As he kissed her goodbye there was a subtle warning in his eyes. As if he was telling her, 'I know there's something you're keeping to yourself. I don't know what it is yet but you'd better beware you make the right moves kitten, or you might get more than you bargained for. Remember, ultimately you're mine - that's the way we work, you know that as well as I. So be careful and make me happy not crazy when I return'.

There were no words he formed to voice these sentiments but she had come to understand and interpret, perhaps exaggerate in line with his desires, these non-verbal cues. A certain black, brooding intensity in his eyes belying the vicious impulse always so skilfully concealed. Yet at times, those flint-blue eyes could be warm and witty. This was his public face; warm, witty, just the right amount of arrogance combined with modesty, an apparent obliging sincerity which drew many people to him.

His life was a disguise for what lurked beneath, in his hidden private lair where he tip-toed on the brink of blue-beard excess, enjoying the throb of life too much to cut the thread irrevocably. But to bruise and beat, even draw blood, how satisfying that was at times! Seeing her begging and hurt until he magnanimously swept her up and treated her with the tenderness her fragility had earned. He did not always inflict pain, and sometimes the pain was subtly pleasing; sometimes the experience was an indolent, undulating roll of pleasure. But he reserved the right to choose.

He had moulded his wife that way. If he chose to inflict pain, to truss her up like a choice cut of meat to be prodded and poked and slapped and punched as he saw fit, then it was his right to behave like that. She had handed over the reins to him long ago and abided by his rules. That knowledge gave him a dark, sweet pleasure that nothing - none of his other infidelities - could touch.

Ruth knew all this, as they passionately kissed goodbye, her body cleaving to him of its own accord, reassuring him of her devotion. She knew what he was and yet she still could not find it in herself to resist him, to rebel.

Except now that was something she was beginning to consider; to sample the sweetness of rebellion, of shocking this man whose love retained a dictator's absolute authority.

Adrian eventually untangled himself from her, pleased with her show of emotion, clutching her buttocks possessively, then bending to kiss the still-scabbing tattoo on her thigh.

"Treat yourself kitten. Go shopping tomorrow, see one of your gossiping friends, throw a pot! I'll be back on Sunday afternoon so I can have dinner with you and relax before work on Monday. Make sure my shirts are washed and that dark blue suit is ready to wear OK babes? And don't do anything naughty while I'm away all right? 'Cos you know I'll find out and be forced to do something about it...". He left it an open issue but smiled at her and pulled her to him again pretending to sink his jaws into her neck. She screamed and they tussled until she was laughing and begging for mercy on the bed.

Eventually Adrian stopped the antics and looked at his watch. He got up and sleeked back his nutmeg hair from the dark brows.

"Have a good time," she said to him, " don't get lost in the hills or lured away by some enchantress or something!"

"I've told you before - nobody could be what you are to me. Nobody could be what you are to me," his whispered repetition pleased her as he fingered the tattoo on her thigh to symbolise his meaning. "You know that". His arms wrapped around her in confirmation of a bond that was dark and true.

"I've got to go kitten, or I'll be late," said Adrian extricating himself. "Have a good time, enjoy yourself - within reason! I'll be back on Sunday and then you never know, your luck might just be in!"

Her mock scowl, he tousling her hair in fond reproof. Smiling at her from the door, blowing a kiss, a final subtle glint of warning - 'just you dare babes, just you dare'. A look of dangerous appeal which while it scared her, stirred an erotic impulse in her that had always been her downfall, which had always kept her willing victim to suit his predatory whim.

It was the way they worked, the way they had always worked together. Up until that moment when for the first time she was left considering whether or not to assert herself, considering Adrian's reaction if she did so ...

Then Adrian was running down the stairs, going outside to his car, opening the boot, putting his week-end bag and walking boots inside and shutting it, the car door closing, the engine revving. The black BMW reversing out of the tree-lined drive. A wave at her, from the car window, as she stood at the bedroom window until he was on the road and the car disappeared with a final beep of the horn.

Later these moments were etched stark within her mind - moments which were replayed and replayed searching for clues which, no matter how many times she went over that last scenario, were never revealed to her. But then she had not been aware of what would follow. At that moment she was only considering what seemed to be her most immediate dilemma. That was on the Friday morning.

She felt strange when he had gone. Almost ill at ease and uncertain about how to go about her day until gradually the realisation dawned, as it usually did on these occasions, that for two days at least, she did not have to consider someone else before herself. She realised for a brief while she did not have to wait on Adrian's every word, watch his moods, pander to his desires to ensure her own comfort and peace of mind, to avoid the pain he was so expert at inflicting. She did not have to ensure that everything was in its place, as Adrian always insisted. He always noticed if she hadn't done something and punished her days

later if he felt like it. But she had other things to think about now. What if she did have the tattoo taken off? What would he do to her? She shivered to think of it.

She remembered the time last year when he went crazy, when some business deal collapsed. He expressed his disappointment by beating and slapping and twisting and punching and kicking her. But he broke no bones - there was barely a drop of blood. Just the cold fear that he had finally lost it. She lying crumpled on the floor. An hour afterwards he had run a bath for her. Almost weeping, he had bathed her, so gently, slowly massaged her body to life again - to pleasurable sensation, once again. But was it worth it, she asked herself? The more she colluded with it, the worse it became and the more inextricably ensnared she felt she was.

Yet if she had the tattoo taken off, the first time she had deliberately flaunted his wishes, what would he do? Which road would he go down? How had she got herself into this alternately vicious then delicious closed circuit situation? How had this net of circumstance come to be closed so skilfully around her? It was her own doing. If she fought back this time, dare she stand the storm, the inevitable hurricane of abuse? Her insides quaked. Could she afford *not* to do something?

So, all during that day she pottered around the house - starting something then leaving it unfinished - in an uncomfortable state of boredom come anxiety. She decided to drive out somewhere for a walk, just by herself. She ended up driving all the way to Silbury Hill to climb the man-made slopes that formed a supposed ancient burial site. It was immense. It gave her a sense of the unfathomable, the spirit which moved beneath, beyond the surface things, beyond material existence. As she looked out towards the expanse of Salisbury Plain, something in her stirred and urged her to take her life into her own hands - become a full human-being, instead of a putty parcel of flesh to be squeezed and moulded into whatever role Adrian chose to impose upon her. To do something for herself and change the pattern of her life forever.

The day was warm and sunny and she felt a sense of freedom she had almost forgotten. She listened to the sky larks, watched sunlight glancing off the trees at the base of the hill. When she came down she felt inspired; inspired to express herself in some way. An idea formed in her mind: to use her fledgling skill with pottery to reverence that unseen grandeur of Nature, that mysterious majestic potential contained within the human frame, which she had caught a glimpse of on that ancient site. To make the pottery she crafted as an act of worship in itself. A chalice which would appear to be a crucible holding the elixir of life itself. Something profound and beyond the petty miseries of day to day existence. Ancient symbols of the sun, the moon, sea shells, stars, the unfolding petals of a rose, the abstracted shapes of life drifted through her mind, and she

was glad not to have to think of her situation or Adrian's predilection for cruelty and absolute submission from her.

When she got home, she went to the workshop at the back of the house that Adrian had adapted for her as an indulgence on her 22nd birthday. A space that was her own - that is, when Adrian allowed her to use it as such. She spent the evening crafting a huge medieval goblet, scoring strange, abstract images into the sides, like ancient enigmatic runes. Finally she became hungry and made herself an omelette.

She took a glass of wine into the bathroom as steam filled the room and put Tom Waits' *Blue Valentine* on the stereo downstairs, turning the music up loud so she could hear it above the running water. Then she stripped off and sank into the benediction of warm-scented water.

Ruth fingered the belly-button stud, admiring its impact upon her belly - its appearance, the exotic glint of the tiny diamond set within it. She tugged at it gently. It made her feel ... strange ... different ... fantasy becoming reality ... a slave girl of the 1990's for real. She scooped some of her 'body scrub' into her hand, the body scrub that kept her skin smooth for his touch. She gently rubbed the tiny grains over the tattoo. There was no pain, only the usual rub against normally responding skin. The scabs had all but come off a few days ago, the last bits of skin peeling off and flaking insignificantly away. Ruth rubbed at the tattoo half-hoping it would blur of its own accord. When it didn't she rubbed it more fiercely. But it remained impervious - the black, finely drawn "A" merging with the red jag of the "Z" like a lightning bolt underlining it. **His Will Be Done.** When she saw those words on her flesh, her stomach tightened and a trickle of erotic impulse sparked through her thighs and up into her belly. Why did it turn her on? Had he known it would? Somehow, somehow it gave her a role so stark and clearly defined, nothing could defile it. Was it something to do with that? Or was it cowardice? Baseness - an essential baseness of nature, a weakness in herself? But she did love him, despite (or because of?) the way he treated her. She couldn't help loving him and wanting to please him: always, always! Yet, if she kept fitting in, fitting in ... where would it all lead? The perpetual dilemma! And still she remained undecided, peculiarly fascinated by the stark beauty of the tattoo, becoming more and more drawn to the idea of keeping it. Why directly defy him like that when she almost enjoyed ... but was it enough? The unresolvable conflict was there kept in frozen suspense as her body was suspended in the water.

So she drank her wine, listened to the gravelled strains of *Blue Valentine*, looked down at her body, enjoying its soft smooth curves, her pale flesh and gleaming flanks which showed the cut of the tattoo admirably. The red and black initially

catching the eye, then the small neat lettering beneath holding the attention ... mesmerising. At least he admitted his ownership, even if he did go to extremes. At least he was proud of what he provoked in her, not like the straying luke-warm relationships of others. She finished her wine, got out of the bath and dried herself. She smoothed cream into her skin and each time her fingers touched the tattoo she felt an electric thread of liquid fire shudder minutely through her. Why? Why? Why did she feel like this? Turned on. Horny. She couldn't help it, it just was so. Why should she shatter everything, break the spell? Besides which she was coming to enjoy the sight, the knowledge of it.

She went naked to the bedroom, lay on the bed and masturbated. When she had relieved her pens up feelings in this way, she began trying on some of the garments Adrian had bought her. The leather basque and matching panties. The white lace see-through body stocking. Her slave girl straps. The clingy diaphanous tunic. And all the time the tattoo peeped provocatively through these garments of allure and seemed to enhance her attractions even more, gave her a peculiar but special status, a fragility and resilience that seemed to glow from her as the light caught the diamond in her navel and glinted at her in the reflection from the mirror.

By the time she lay back down on the bed to sleep, she had succumbed to the notion of keeping the tattoo, and only awaited Adrian's return with a kind of breathless desire. She would go shopping the next day and she would buy something that would blow him away, make him want her, in the way she best liked to be wanted. He would see, they would rise from the downward spiral yet - he would see!

So pleasure and excitement infected her the next day and she blanked her mind from any qualms or doubts or fears now. For once she would enjoy the simple fact of being, existing, with the cushion of comfort and luxury money could buy. In the morning she went swimming. A habitual activity which she had avoided the past two weeks because of the tattoo. Now she chose to flaunt it in a high-legged black and white leopard spotted swimsuit. She noticed the lifeguard's eyes following her, a few in the pool, their eyes drawn to her thigh. It made her vagina contract.

She swam thirty lengths slowly and luxuriously, smoothly pulling back the water and moving her torso as she kicked her legs. She felt a sudden joie de vivre at the fact that she was young and healthy. Then she noticed a dark-skinned man who kept diving under the water each time she pushed off from the side to turn round at the completion of each length. He seemed to swim under water along side of her for a short way with a regularity that obviously coincided with her turn. She felt irritated by his attention and soon got out when she had swum her lengths. She noticed him, and a few others, with their eyes fastened on

her thigh. Their eyes raking over her body as if they had read those words on her thigh and wondered at them, wondered at what they might signify.

She washed her hair and body in the shower, dried her hair, put a bit of blusher and eye-liner on. She felt the faint quiver of excitement that she got when she knew once again, she was desired, wanted, even by those who did not know her, know of her capacities. Yet the men, when they looked, seemed to see that capacity in her because of the tattoo, because of those stark words. The wolf in them arose and they wanted a part of whatever she represented to them. An absolute feminine submission; flesh pliant to the masculine will. Ruth had played that part and enjoyed it too often not to respond to it now.

She threw her swimming things into the car and drove up to Oxford. She parked in a multi-storey car park and then found a few exclusive haunts Adrian and she had visited together on the odd occasion. Off-beat and high-class little shops where they sold unusual, sexually-enticing gear around particular themes; or the best lingerie departments, the discrete store where a variety of provocative garbs could be procured for the right price. She thought of Adrian as she glanced at this and that, and after a couple of shops and several dressing up sessions, she found a garment which appealed to her and which she thought would appeal to him.

The outfit was a deep claret red and made of cotton woven like a fancy lace net which revealed more than it concealed. The garment emphasised her curvy form, made her breasts appear as if they strained to burst from the material, the blush of the nipple semi-visible. A single strap, woven like a thread - a blood-red bond - held the garment up, going over one shoulder and merging into the back of the tunic, so one shoulder was completely bare. It was very short, just covering her buttocks and crotch. It gave the appearance at front and back of a very short clinging semi see-through tunic, whilst the sides revealed a slit reaching up to the waist so that the whole of her flank and hip on either side of her body could be seen. The lightning bolt red of the jagged S on the tattoo seemed to match and enhance the red of the garment, the latter highlighting the former so Ruth felt that particular outfit had been made for her; for this moment, when she would sport a tattoo on her thigh, carrying the words **His Will Be Done** to their logical conclusion, to the extremes that had come to signify their union. She had the garment wrapped up and handed over the money quickly then, suddenly wanting to be away from people, from their inquisitive questioning glances, their smug suppositions.

She got back to the car and drove home. When she looked in the mirror she was glad she had bought the flimsy blood-red apparel. She was glad she had desisted from having the tattoo removed - glad she had cancelled the appointment to

have it removed. And now she looked forward to the effect of her new risque acquisition, wanting to please. As always so desperately eager to please, reverting to type, unable to break from the chains that were partially self-constructed. She felt she knew it would be good this time when Adrian returned; this time, this way ... she knew ... she hoped ... this time it would be better than ever ... didn't she?

Ruth spent the rest of the afternoon in the workshop, the anticipation of the following day in her mind. How would he be? Would he ... love her like she knew he could this time or ...? No. She was sure. This time it would be much better than alright. This time it would be so good ...

She worked at the wheel well into the evening, moulding another huge chalice out of the clay and then painstakingly etching a frieze around the rim. Cascades of naked forms entwined and unfurling. Her task absorbed her and she was satisfied with her creation by the time the light had gone and night encroached. It seemed like an offering, an act of worship, that chalice she had made. Or rather, it was like a prayer she offered up to the gods, a plea to favour her, to help Fate work for her for a change in line with the best possibilities she nurtured in her sub-conscious.

She had something to eat then, read a book, watched television, enjoyed the peace, the lack of restrictions, the feeling of space around her. Unconcerned about Adrian now she had made her decision; to keep her badge of bondage, in the hope it would keep it all sweet for a long long while. Was she being naïve? Unrealistic? Probably. But she was sure: with the tattoo cut so striking and stark into her flesh - surely he would be satisfied with her now? Surely he would ... wouldn't he?

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Adrian felt the eagerness, the anticipation flood through him as he accelerated the BMW past the car in front of him, the engine smoothly purring its response. His mind was on the evening, the company he would enjoy, the few available females his friend Paul always managed to invite to these affairs, knowing how the little frisson of sexual opportunity never failed to make things go with a swing. He had pressed his friend Paul for details about the women who would be biddable to seduction. There would be the red-haired physio he had met before, full of bubbly laughter, a sexual appetite to match - and a couple of others he hadn't met: a divorcee who had more money than she knew what to do with, and a girl fresh out of college just cutting her teeth on the business world. Then there would be the usual crowd, the old college chums he kept up with for just these occasions. The possibility of sexual encounter along with some challenging outdoor pursuit; the thought of it was vivifying to him.

Finally he was in Shrewsbury where he found the Lion Hotel car park, and confirmed his booking. His bags were taken up to the room where he would be spending the weekend: a gracious, rather sumptuous space with an en-suite shower room. He tipped the porter, unpacked and went downstairs to the lounge nearest the foyer where he could await the arrival of the other members of the party. He ordered a gin and tonic and selected a seat so he could keep his eye on the door. He always liked arriving early to such places in order to soak up the atmosphere, assess his opportunities, gain a possible advantage. The deep red leather armchairs and settees, the old oak coffee tables and stately sideboard pleased him, for they indicated generations of accumulated culture and style. They appealed to his snobbery and sense of superiority, as did the evidence of history and ancestorship on the frieze around the walls, the artefacts which left an ancient imprint. It all permeated through him, provoking a satisfying and reflective mood which caused him to contemplate his life and good fortune.

He considered how biddable his wife was, kept cosily at home for him, awaiting his return in order to fulfil the function of her life - which was his satisfaction. He considered how adept he was at balancing his life in this way, where he retained the freedom of his youth to a large degree whilst suffering none of the uncertainty or angst that such youth is renowned for. He always had the chance to pursue sexual liaisons whilst using his wife as a buffer against the usual female failing; the demands about commitment. He could also explore sexual capacities with his wife in a way he could not do with other women, because of his subtle and absolute mastery of her. He was proud of this fact, proud of the way he had organised his life so that he *could* have his cake and eat it. He had the best of both worlds, but only because he had made it that way.

He thought of his business success, how he always got the deals, always pushed them through: first Folkestone, then outside Bristol, Birmingham, Newbury and now this York deal, Naburn. He was a rising star, trusted to get the job done. He was renowned for driving a hard bargain but also for making such bargains watertight against any failure. He thought scornfully about all the row over the green issue, about what utter rot it was. They didn't consider the necessity of economics, of keeping the country streamlined and efficient, a going concern in the European finance stakes. The majority of the fools didn't realise their lives were so cushy because of such building developments, which provided the financial injections from outside investors the economy needed to keep afloat. Such developments were economic necessity in order that they maintain their position within the free market and compete favourably with the rest of Europe. Adrian saw his business deals and financial acumen as essential assets helping to maintain the country on a par with the rest of the civilised world. The fact that he bulldozed through 'green-belt' land, an act which was apparently unfavourable to a lot of people (to the majority? - he doubted it) did not concern him. Also, the fact that he was being cool-headed amidst all the controversy

gave him a feeling of satisfaction, secure in the knowledge that his clear-thinking, unemotive business intentions would prove to be superior ventures in the future. He knew what he was about - the majority did not. Thus, he felt on a level with the most famous Caesar of all, who had declared: 'I came, I saw, I conquered!'. He, Adrian Spearman, had conquered, just like his ancestors before him! And he raised his glass when it was brought, to himself and to them. He was proof of their success; he surely must make them proud. He smiled to himself and let his eyes wander to the door, anticipating ...

After a short while of waiting and musing, Adrian's eyes were drawn once again to the door. There he saw an interesting looking young woman wearing a long swirling dress sweetly fitting the curves of her form. She had brown gold hair cut short at her chin in 1920s style and a scatter of freckles on her nose and cheeks. There was something fresh and appealing about her as she approached the desk to make enquiries. She did so with a confidence that made Adrian want to break through that exterior of control, made him want to see her humbled and begging. She announced her name at the desk and was told a room had been booked for her. The porter showed her to her room. She looked at Adrian as she walked past, her cheeks colouring ever so slightly, when he twinkled her a smile and raised his glass in a conspiratorial manner.

He could see she liked his gesture and knew he had warmed a way in to her. He hoped she would come downstairs quickly before any of the others came so he would be able to charm her into savouring his company and wanting more of it. Also, he admired punctuality, and if someone was as eager as him to get there early, that could only bode well for the future flirtation. He hadn't seen her before, but he certainly liked the look of her. There was a kind of innocence there he wanted to crush, then savour. He was sure she would be one of their party. The graduate from university, surely?

In wonderful concordance with his inner machinations, the young woman did come down looking lovely in a soft mink brown dress that clung to her contours and swayed and swished provocatively as she walked into the lounge where Adrian was sitting. The soft brown of her dress seemed to emphasise her assets: the green of her eyes, the freckles, the golden-brown soft short-cut hair. Adrian stood up and offered his hand in a calculated risk of logic.

"Adrian Spearman at your service, mademoiselle! Did Paul invite you? Paul Storey? Are you mad enough to be partaking of the paint-balling on the morrow then?" Adrian gleamed his teeth at her and twinkled his eyes roguishly, inviting her to share the well-pitched joke.

"Well, yes as a matter of fact... Adrian Spearman: you're an old school friend of Paul's is that right? Oh sorry, I haven't introduced myself: I'm Jerri Gray - pleased to meet you Adrian".

Adrian liked the unaffected manner of this young woman, Jerri, and demonstrated his pleasure by switching on his charm, the smile which he knew rarely failed; slightly suggestive, appreciative of the woman in her, intelligent yet rakish. Thus were the subtlety of non-verbal cues brought into play.

"And I am enchanted to meet you Jerri. Can I get you a drink? I'm just indulging myself in a G and T - what would you like?" Adrian said, smoothly gallant.

"Oh thank you. I'll have a white wine and soda please" Jerri crinkled her green eyes appreciatively at Adrian.

Adrian ordered the drink then turned back to seize the initiative. "So Jerri, let me see if I can remember what Paul told me - young, beautiful, talented, just beginning to find your feet in the business world, with an unusual fascination with birds of prey and a predilection for rustic outdoor pursuits, is that right?"

Jerri smiled ruefully: "Absolutely spot on. I didn't realise I'd been talked about behind my back!" she teased.

"Surely you expect that! A woman as lovely and talented as yourself is bound to stand out. You must be used to it. I assure you whatever was said 'behind your back' was purely complimentary. You don't object to that do you?"

"Oh I don't suppose I can when you put it like that!" replied Jerri bristling and flushing with pleasure, as she flashed him a look from her emerald eyes.

"Now tell me Jerri, why have you got such a fascination for birds of prey? Isn't that unusual for a woman? I must confess that I have studied the subject myself in some depth - I'm always drawn to something which is politically incorrect!"

"Good for you!" responded Jerri clearly warming to Adrian. "As to why I have such a fascination, it seems obvious to me, for the qualities which birds of prey possess are ones you cannot help admiring. You know, that fierce untameable spirit, the pride and freedom they represent. If you get me on this subject I'll go on for hours and bore you to death - I do warn you about that!"

"Nonsense! Such a fascinating subject - a subject that interests me as well - discussed with a lovely fascinating woman could hardly bore me. The thing that interests me is what this hobby of yours reveals about the inner you. To appreciate falconry so much must reflect something of your own nature. So you are fierce and untameable are you? You're a free spirit who can't be controlled or pinned down - is that right?" Adrian ruffled a hand through his hair and grinned transparently fishing.

Jerri laughed and flushed again. "Well I don't know. I suppose I am like that in some ways..."

"What, fierce and untameable? Oh no, I'd better watch out then - especially tomorrow when you have a gun in your hands!"

His quip went down well and Jerri laughed again feeling impelled to qualify her statement and therefore reveal herself a little further.

"No I didn't mean... I am a bit of a free spirit, but you always admire what has the capacity to surpass you as well, don't you?" she said, candidly.

Adrian was leaning towards her utterly concentrating his attentions upon her, exuding sexual attraction, yet in a way that was subtle and very complimentary.

"Does that mean if I surpass you tomorrow, out on the 'battlefield,' you will admire me, then?" Adrian said with a hint of the wistful.

Jerri cast her eyes upwards at this gambit but smiled all the same. "I don't think I'd better answer that - the proof of the pudding and all that!"

"Ah I see! You're challenging me are you? Throwing down the gauntlet! Well I'd better make sure I don't disappoint you then hadn't I?"

The more they talked, the more the subtle flirtations were exercised, the more Adrian felt Jerri became attracted to him, curious about him, admiring of his business prowess and his obvious physical fitness which he managed to get into the conversation in a calculated, understated way. The more they talked the more open Jerri became and the more intimate and revealing their shared conversation was. Revealing that is, as far as Jerri was concerned. Adrian was adept at drawing out of people what he wanted to know, the information that would be most useful to him in any given circumstance. The time passed and Adrian had just insisted on ordering them another drink whilst they discussed the relative merits of peregrin falcons compared to merlins as expressed in the art of falconry, when their cosy tête-à-tête was interrupted by the arrival of the host and organiser of the weekend, Paul, along with his wife, Emma.

Paul was a tall thickly set square man with dark hair and brown eyes whilst his wife was a willowy woman with ash-blond hair and a crinkling blue-eyed smile. There were hello's and introductions all round which were extended when Cliff and Angela joined them. Cliff, a marketing manager for a large company, was of rangy build with a slight stoop. He wore round metal-framed spectacles and sported a moustache. Angela was diminutive and dark and worked in the personnel department of a well-known bank. There was a volley of greetings and a further round of hand shaking. Jokes from Paul, welcoming them all and making rye remarks about yet another birthday turning up, which provoked him

to burst into an apparently well-known ditty they had all learned in their college days:

*"Another year older and wadda ya get?
Money in the bank an' money galore,
'Cos each birthday passin'
Underlines the score!
The chink of those coffers is heaven's store
The chink of those coffers is heaven's store
Oh yeah, uhuh, oh yeah, some more
'Cos the chink of those coffers is heaven's STORE!"*

Adrian and Paul, and then a big viking of a man with blond hair and a beard who came to join them, all chanted the little ditty together, until they finished it in unison, laughing at the fact they'd remembered it so well.

"Silly old song we made up at college - I'm surprised we can still remember it! We haven't done badly though, have we lads, eh? How are you Stuart? Good to see you!" said Paul, reaching forward to shake the hand of the blond bearded man. "Jerri, this is my very good friend and accountant to boot, Stuart Longsdale. Stuart, this is Jerri Gray, a new business associate, fresh from university and thrown to the lions of the business world, but turning into one I'll be bound before long!"

Jerri flushed and laughed and told him to stop practising hyperbole. Paul raised his eyebrows and retorted in kind.

"Hyperbole? See what I mean, university education's got a lot to answer for, turns 'em out too clever by half. Hyperbole? The only thing I practice on a Friday night can't be mentioned in public, I'm afraid!"

"Stop making ridiculous innuendos Paul! Just because it's your birthday! Honestly, you're incorrigible. Just ignore him Jerri. He's at that age, you know, early male menopause and all that!" cut in Emma, Paul's wife.

"Cheek!" retorted Paul. "I'm only 33. That's a clear case of projection, if ever there was one!"

"Who's projecting what? Sounds very interesting!" Quipped a red-haired woman called Susan, who had arrived to join the group in time to contribute to the banter going on. She was the physiotherapist Adrian had already met before now and someone who he'd had a couple of nights of passion with two years ago. They had parted on friendly terms though and Paul had told him that she had her eye on another chap, Simon, who she'd driven up with, so he knew their previous liaison would be kept under wraps for that weekend. Sure enough, Susan was accompanied by two other men, Simon and Gary.

Simon was an executive of an estate agents. Over the past five years he had doubled his income and had moved into the arena of high finance, of which Paul was an hereditary part; Paul, who played the city financier, played the stock exchange and had built his pot of gold into a loaded coffer. Simon was of average height but compact looking with deep-set eyes. Gary was short and broad with sandy-red hair and a dimple in his pugnacious chin. He was a respected engineer and his and Adrian's paths had crossed from time to time in the sphere of work.

More introductions, the whirl of conversation, chatter and cross-talk banter. Then Gina and Helen joined them. Gina was a leggy brunette with a big nose and broad smile, whilst her friend Helen was a curvy Latin-looking type. They both worked in advertising. They were closely followed by Nigel, a small, neat man who was a dentist, and the divorcee, Tanya with Strawberry blond hair and more money than she knew what to do with. There were drinks all round, further initial social etiquette, clusters of conversation going on between various members of the party.

Adrian and Jerri still sat next to each other, now pleasantly close because of the swell to their numbers. From time to time their arms or thighs brushed one against the other, something that Jerri rather than avoiding seemed happy to court, Adrian noted with satisfaction. But on Adrian's other side sat Paul and Emma, so his time was taken up with them to start with. He could not pay Jerri the attention he would have liked, and also Stuart appeared to be entertaining her. But Adrian wasn't worried. If he had read the body language correctly, which he was quite expert at, she definitely favoured him and was eager for a renewal of the closeness they'd begun to enjoy earlier. As usual Adrian was confident of his success with Jerri, who he had targetted and marked for himself.

"How's Ruth?" Emma asked him.

Adrian glanced round and lowered his voice a little. " She's fine Em. She has no appetite for this sort of thing - thinks it's all a bit childish, you know. Anyway, I'm on a well-deserved holiday and I sort of want to remain in cognito if you

know what I mean. My wife and I have an open relationship - you know that Em. It's no skin off her nose this jaunt, I assure you. But you will indulge me, won't you Em? You know I've had a hard time of late with all this green issue rubbish!" Adrian directed his appealing boyish look at her.

"Oh go on with you, you deserve it! Ripping up the countryside like that! I really don't know why I should indulge you Adrian Spearman. You're a positive rake. As for your wife, I don't believe you've got one. I've never even met her. What do you do? Keep her under lock and key or something?" Emma teased him.

"Very droll," replied Adrian, not even slightly discomposed. "She prefers to stay at home. She's got her cronies and I've got mine. She has jaunts with her pals, like I do with mine and we meet in between times for passionate clinches!" Adrian finished with an over-emphasis on the passionate which made Emma giggle.

"Oh get off with you! You are wicked Adrian, absolutely wicked! Worse than Paul and that's saying something. Can't help but oblige can I? When you look at me like that and talk such rubbish!"

"What, what, what, what, what?" interjected Paul. "Who's talking rubbish? Only I'm allowed to do that don't you know? It's my birthday and I'll do what I want to - oh alright, within reason!" he finished seeing the warning look come into Emma's eyes, which provoked more laughter from those closest to them.

Time rolled on amidst much aimable converse and the beginnings of more flirtations. But presently Paul informed them all it was time to retire to the dining room so they could look at the exceptionally good menu and make their choices before they became too sozzled to bother! Put like that, the company readily complied with his edict and they assembled in the dining room to take their seats at the long table already prepared for them. Adrian manoeuvred himself to sit in between Emma and Jerri. So the social banter and teasing refrains continued over the excellent meal. Paul's booming inanities had them in stitches, whilst Adrian's carefully chosen interjections were placed for maximum effect. Cliff's sharp ascerbic wit made an impact along with the dizzy comments of Tanya, the strawberry blond, while further down the table Gina and Helen the advertising duo were getting on famously with Stuart and Gary. The meal was enjoyed in between the conversational gambits. There were more quips, much laughter, more alcohol consumed despite the fact they had to be up for a reasonable hour in the morning. The moment was what mattered, tomorrow would take care of itself.

Presently they all agreed to adjourn into the lounge for coffee. So gradually everybody filtered off for the stimulus of specially selected party games and the hiatus of coffee and cigars before the fun began. Everybody left the dining room until only Adrian and Jerri remained, getting closer and closer and more intimate as the evening wore on. They stayed conducting their intense conversation after the others had left, getting close to the nub, the raw of the matter, the fulfilment of the physical desire that inflicted them both. Adrian had prised out of Jerri, whose defences were dropped following the several glasses of wine consumed, that she was at the moment single and celibate - something of a joke between them both.

"But don't you ever feel...?" Adrian said looking at her and grinning, his leg accidentally on purpose brushing against hers. He had her then, his gambit had worked and it was obvious that she wanted his company in more than a social sense. When the others drifted off, he was left playing games with her fingers watching the green fire of her desire beginning in the emerald of her eyes.

"This isn't fair," moaned Jerri, pulling her fingers from his mouth rather reluctantly. "Look, I hardly know you. I choose to remain celibate because ... because I want to. Because I want it to be right... with someone who might become special to me - if you know what I mean," she finished, trying to appeal to his better nature.

Adrian, however, was not equipped with such a quality and manipulated her words to his own advantage. "But how do you know I am not that special person? How do you know I am not the one? Do you think I behave like this all the time? It's you that has made me act like this. I wouldn't normally at all. It's just you're so ravishing ... there's such loveliness in you I can't help being turned on by that. It makes me want ... to know you now. Why be careful, restrained? Sometimes if you fail to seize the moment it's gone and you've lost the chance for anything at all. You must have gathered that in the business world by now. Do you not think it applies to the personal, on occasions as well? No don't answer me, don't speak," Adrian whispered with a passionate inflection in his voice laying a finger upon her bud-like lips. "Just think about what I've said and we'll discuss it again later. For now, I think we ought to go back and join the others or we'll be accused of party-pooing and I'll never hear the last of it from Paul!"

So the transition from intensity to social jocularly was smoothly executed. In the lounge, which Paul had booked exclusively for this occasion, the company entertained themselves with a variety of well-chosen party games, at which of course Adrian excelled. He could see he had impressed Jerri, the little bird trapped in his net, the fresh innocent cast in his path. At the end of the evening they were the last to make their way upstairs after the others had variously dissipated. She faltered on the brink of entering her own room and asked him if

he wanted a night-cap, after refusing an invitation for one in his room downstairs. His suggestion had been light, friendly. He had purposefully been the opposite of pushy for he sensed she would come round, if not that night, the next. He could tell he aroused her: the subtle innuendos, the carefully chosen gallantries, the brooding glance that Ruth, in a moment of frustration and exposure, accused him of using on other women.

Then he was in her room, with the young woman, Jerri, self-consciously pouring him a brandy. He enjoyed that nervousness he recognised in her. He had already gauged that she had not had many lovers from the things she had told him. He deduced that those she had known, had treated her too well, too reverentially and that she had become bored by this. He had got this much out of her. Adrian knew he could make her soar. He knew his greater experience and knowledge was making her insides twitch, even as they sat making a play of conversing. He guessed she was ready for him, but did not have the courage to make the first move. So Adrian talked, kept the conversation going, enjoying the tension in her body, the deliberate restraint of the wantonness he could see she felt. Adrian had been here before and he knew he would have the conquest he desired. He knew he would not fail, like he knew that his skill, his adept manipulations would deliver him the flesh banquet he held in his mind's eye for that night and the one to follow. And he was a man who made sure he always got his way.

So when he asked her if he could see the pendant around her neck more closely, she virtually fell into his arms as he reached up for her. He spent a long time over her body, making her ripe for his purpose, the mild punishments he would subtly deliver, a certain roughness he employed in his arousals, the sharp cut of teeth, a whence, a sudden understanding that he could if he wanted ... He could see the wariness, the shocked erotic impulse beating green fire in her eyes. This was how he tested them. If there was only fear, hurt, he knew they weren't for him or that he could not take things too far. But if there was the want along with the tremor of apprehension, then he knew he could push things more towards the limits that he found acutely satisfying. He recognised in Jerri a capacity for that sort of thing which he could exploit in the brief space of time, spanning the weekend that they had together.

So he made their coupling a storm of pleasure. He didn't want to frighten her off prematurely before he had had his full enjoyment of her. He wanted her begging; just for this weekend anyway. So he gave her wings to soar on and she became willingly entangled in his web, whose darkness was concealed beneath the brightness of utter sensuality, the novelty of such expertise as Adrian demonstrated to her. Jerri became giggly and shy and tender and doting prompted by the heady mixture of sexual excess and flattery which Adrian glibly used to get what he wanted. She was filled with the fires of lust that she imagined had transformed into love. In the morning, shy and almost humble, she

could hardly bear him to touch her, in case she sank into his arms and gave herself up to him unreservedly, as he sensed she wanted to. He always got them this way and he thought a little aloofness would make her spiky and hurt enough for a little fun later on in the day. He gave her a lingering kiss to confirm his hold over her and left her then, to go to his own room for a change of clothes and a shower.

They met down in the dining room at breakfast. Most of the others were already gathered. Adrian gave Jerri a surreptitious wink, but sat next to Stuart, the hulk of an accountant, and got embroiled in some matey chatter. He noted Jerri's chagrin and inwardly smiled.

Paul had told them the previous evening what he had planned. They were to have a paint-balling session that day, whilst on the Sunday he'd planned something "a bit different". A surprise. He wouldn't let on what it was, but he had told them to wear casual clothes - something they could move easily in. He had, however, informed them it might involve a spot of horse-riding.

It was a lovely warm day, the promise of summer in the air, shimmering on the horizon. Everybody was dressed in tee-shirts and jeans, or sleeveless vests and snug-fitting leggings, such as Jerri wore, showing off her slim shapely legs and taut behind. Her shoulders were exposed and her small budding breasts pressed deliciously against the cream cotton of the top she had on. Summer brought out the ladies' skins, thought Adrian, glancing round at the women with masculine satisfaction and approval. He looked over at Paul, who flashed him a grin full of unspoken understandings.

"Right then, let's get going," said Paul clapping his hands together and rubbing them briskly.

"Where exactly are we going?" asked the tall thin Cliff, whose wife Angela stood next to him, looking athletic in black tee shirt and black leggings. They both looked inquiringly at Paul.

"Ah now, we've got a bit of a drive - 40 minutes or so. Then we'll meet with the experts by a certain wood that I've arranged access to. I know the family who own the estate, pulled a few strings, whispered in a few ears, and presto! There we have it. A nice little old wood to roam around in all to ourselves. It's called Big Linley Wood. That's where the paint-balling company are meeting us, at 12".

They were all trailing towards the van Paul had hired, most of the others listening eagerly to Paul's explanations. "Couldn't you have made it a more seasonable hour, Paul, you rogue - like 2pm," complained Stuart yawning, only

half in jest. "Day doesn't start for me at the weekend until well into the afternoon!"

Everyone laughed, including Paul, who answered: "You lazy sod. How you manage to operate during office hours defeats me! No, I say to you! We've got to be there at 12 as planned, otherwise it'll all be up the khyber. Anyway, it's my party so I'll do what I want to - you'd better fit in or else!"

Emma, Paul's wife, patted his behind and reached up to kiss him on the cheek commenting in a fond rye way: "You always do what you want anyway, don't you darling? Whether or not it's your birthday!"

"That's true," grinned Paul. "Now come on, hop aboard and we'll get moving".

He opened the back door of the van and unlocked the driver and passenger door. Emma sat in the front along with Paul. The rest of them sat in the back, Adrian making sure that a place next to Jerri was unavoidably usurped by the good-humoured Stuart. Adrian smiled at Jerri in an easy, social fashion, as if nothing had gone on between them; as if the previous evening had been a dream, nothing but a fantasy. He noted Jerri biting her lip, over-concerned to show she was in the same buoyant mood as the others, and not quite managing it somehow.

They chatted and joked all the way there, so the journey didn't seem to take long at all. Paul turned down a narrow, winding little road where hills abounded on either side, the rising green chequered with woodland. Then they drew up beside Big Linley Wood. There was another van turned into a gateway, already waiting. Paul got out and shook hands with the two men from the paint-balling company, who were there to provide them with the equipment.

Everybody gathered round to listen to the lengthy instructions and demonstration with the paintball gun. The man showed how a bubble attached to the top contained balls of paint-filled bullets, which dropped down when the gun was fired, reloading it. They were warned not to fire at close range, and guidelines for the skirmish were laid down to avoid any disagreements. Then boiler-suits were found for each member of the group to fit the varying heights and contours of each individual. After an apparent surge of chaos, everybody was kitted out in the appropriate clothes, and equipped with a paintball gun. Then they were given helmets and the teams were chosen. Adrian was in the red team, along with Cliff, Angela, Gary, Tanya, Emma and Nigel. The white team comprised of Paul, Simon, Stuart, Jerri, Gina, Helen and Susan. Because the red team ended up with more men, there was some good-natured dissent and accusations of unfairness from all quarters. But Paul squashed all argument by pointing out that was just the way the cookie had crumbled, and complained about what a nightmare it was playing host to a bunch of ingrates.

Adrian's team, the red team were shown their homebase - a wooden shack - which they had to defend. The whites were driven to the other side of the extensive wood and shown where their defence point was. Before they left Jerri had been flirting in an animated fashion with Stuart, apparently engrossed, ignoring Adrian. But Adrian only smiled to himself, secure in the knowledge she wanted him still, that the flirting was a ruse to salvage her pride. Even better thought Adrian: better and better. He licked his lips unconsciously and turned his attention to the more immediate demands of the situation.

The leader was chosen by lot, which turned out to be Cliff, the journalist, who Adrian had been at Harrow with. This suited Adrian who volunteered to be a scout and fore-runner, going on ahead to gather their bearings, collect useful information on the white team's whereabouts, and to try and establish what the "enemy's" battle tactics were. Cliff and Angela opted to move forwards as part of the attack in a westerly direction. Emma and Gary agreed to move forwards towards the east, whilst Tanya and Nigel offered to stay and defend the homebase. So then Adrian took his leave of the rest of them, shooting off straight ahead and beginning to establish an easy rhythm.

Adrian was a fit man and ran for a while through the trees, exhilarated by the process. On and on he jogged until caution bid him slow his pace. He walked now carefully forwards, straining his ears and trying to remain concealed between the trees. He heard a bird's alarm call some way ahead and crept forward stealthily, in anticipation of possibly sighting the enemy. He heard the crunching of leaves to his left and instinctively ducked and froze. He looked around quickly and saw a dense cluster of trees a little further on. He ran lightly to it and crouched beneath the bases, feeling a sense of superiority, as he fixed his eyes to the woodland expanse before him. In a short space of time Adrian's foresight was rewarded for Paul and Simon came into view.

They were walking quickly and with apparent purpose, going Northeast as if to circumnavigate the reds' homebase, which Adrian was meant to be defending. He flattened himself down and strained his ears to catch their speech. "Do you think she'll be effective on her own?" Simon was saying.

"Who, Jerri? 'course! It was her choice and the reds won't expect a woman to attempt anything like that on her own, so we'll have the advantage. It makes sense 'cos if we fail at least we'll distract them enough for her to surprise them, and claim their territory. It's simple. They'll be too occupied with us to think of her. Anyway, why the qualms? Would you rather have gone with her? Don't blame you, my old son, don't blame you at all, she's really rather..." Paul's voice burred on but Adrian couldn't catch the rest of what was said.

Eventually their noise faded away until once again all Adrian could hear was silence. The faint ruffle and flutter of the leaves on the trees stirred by the light breeze, the hum of insects, the flutes and trills of bird song.

He waited for a while but he heard no other evidence of human activity. Then to his left he heard a fracas. Paul's voice crying: "Shit!Shit!Shit!Shit!" echoing through the forest uproariously.

Adrian could not believe his good luck and arose smiling to himself. He walked quickly, straight across the wood, passing through the danger zone, and ignoring Paul's defeat. He crept along ducking and diving at the slightest noise. Once more he heard signs of human activity and hid in the undergrowth, belly down, waiting until the rustle and glimpse of a distant member of the whites was no longer a threat. He dodged and weaved his way on. Presently the wood started to thin so he traced his steps back up towards his own home base, running forwards and looking alert and expectant, making sure to keep shadow side of the trees.

Not long, not long and he seemed to hear something. Yes! And there she was ahead of him attempting to skirt stealthily between the trees, looking as if her heart wasn't quite in it, as if she was rather enjoying the place and the privacy rather than the activity. Adrian felt his pulse quicken and his blood race with a pleasant rush of adrenaline. She was his quarry and he would have her.

He moved noiselessly behind her, where the shadows still helped to conceal him. Presently she slowed down and walked, gazing into the sky a moment and looking at the height of the trees, the remnants of the bluebells, feeling the sun's warmth; supposing she was entirely on her own.

Then suddenly she was hit from behind and found herself falling, caught in another's arms. They fell amongst the faded bluebells. She cursed and struggled, angry when she realised it was Adrian who accosted her. But he laughed a little and held her pinned, looking at her in the brooding way he had, giving her a signal she could not refuse. He wanted her. He was hot with desire for her. She! She made him hot with desire!

He took off his helmet whilst he still crushed her incapacitated beneath him. She struggled, accusing him of ignoring her while he smiled and told her he was being discrete - and besides, it was more of a turn on this way. Look, wasn't this better, he told her, the way he'd planned it? Look at the bluebells, feel the sun. Have you ever been made love to in a bed of bluebells? he breathed to her putting his mouth close to her neck and trailing a finger down her breast, where he could feel her shudder slightly in unavoidable response - even through the boiler suit and vest she wore.

"You want this don't you?" said Adrian softly. "You want this babe. I know. You need it."

He was zipping open the boiler suit. He was exposing her breast releasing it from the confines of her bra and clothing. His lips were upon her, sucking her nipple, consuming her with his mouth. And then she could only moan, as his hands tore off the boiler suit, her vest, and stripped off her leggings so she lay prone and near naked in his arms. He divested her of her helmet. He knelt above her gazing down along her body: the small, pert breasts, the budding nipples, the firm, sweet buttocks and length of smooth, pale thigh. He looked at her face and saw the green eyes filled now with reluctant desire, and also, a vulnerability, that was emotional rather than physical.

He smiled down, as if to himself, at the sight of her and nodded his head very slowly. Then he savaged her, grabbing her breast and roughly pulling her legs apart, tasting her buttocks with his teeth. He did this with carnivorous conviction, with the expertise of irrefutable dominance. The way he pulled her legs apart and plundered her, scared her, he could sense. He tasted the erotic charge of the aftermath in her juices though, when he worked her pleasure zones, so she lay desperate and panting for him. He considered whether he should stop there. Just to spice things up for later on. To make her even more of a challenge. But no, she looked too tasty at that moment to ignore, with the sun lighting her hair to trails of gold and her nipples like the buds of a rose. He drew it out though, and brought back a startled look to her eyes.

Teeth that cut a little too deep, holding her in a way that was a bit too harsh, a bit too authoritarian, turning her around and upside down in his arms as if studying her every angle, knowing her as she did not know herself. In the most undignified position, bringing forth her lust until she did not care what he did to her, as long as he continued to do it.

Adrian almost opted to take the experience even further, but he decided he would leave the risks for later on - for that evening, when the curtains were beginning to close on this transitory dalliance. He could feel a little more free then, because he planned to use her like she had never been used before. Perhaps he might persuade her to stay an extra night, after the others had left, rearrange his schedule for the novelty of corrupting her. If she didn't want to see him again after that, that would suit him very nicely thank you. He enjoyed the anticipation of these things as he gloated over her body and sucked at her juices. But tonight baby, wait til then. Then we shall see, Adrian thought. He made love to her, cradling her breasts and feeding from them as he drove into her again and again, building his pace on ... and on ... and on, to both their further satisfaction; his climax, her slow buzz and tremor.

They lay still for a while, feeling the sun warm their skin. She nestled into him and ran a finger wonderingly down his nose and across his cheek, as if she could

not understand herself or this man who had induced such a fevered response from her. Adrian smiled, caught her hand and kissed it. "Very sweet; very, very sweet," he whispered looking deep inside her. She smiled and flushed a response.

Adrian glanced at his watch. "Oh dear, I wonder if anybody's won the war yet. I know what I'd rather have been doing," he grinned at her wickedly, "but you know we should make a move, or the others will be missing us, or calling us spoilsports or something".

He got to his feet and helped her up, his eyes raking her body. He handed her her bra and top. "Thank you," she said demurely, shy now in front of him. "Don't ignore me though, Adrian. It makes me feel used, cheap. I don't want to be made to feel like that. You needn't be quite so distant need you?"

"Listen angel, I just want to keep it low-key. This is Paul's birthday, we've been mates for a long time. I don't want it to seem as if I'm just using this as an opportunity for my own ends. Not that there was any intention of such a thing in my mind before I met you. It's your fault, you know, all this - you shouldn't be so damned tantalising! This weekend is a social occasion, and I feel guilty enough as it is that I'm thinking of you all the time: your beautiful body ... I thought discretion would be the best policy in this case, do you see? It's hard, 'cos you're so irresistible - which is why I came to hunt you down. I couldn't help myself. You see what an effect you have on me?" Again, the brooding look and infectious grin.

Jerri couldn't help smiling spontaneously in pleasure at his words and flattery. "The feeling's mutual," she murmured, picking up the paint guns and handing Adrian's to him, entirely pacified at the moment by his explanation, and kicking herself for revealing her feelings so soon into their liaison. The last thing she wanted to do was pressure him or scare him off. "Well what do you suggest we do now?" she asked, resolving to be more laid back about things, or at least to give the appearance of being so.

"Let's continue operations," said Adrian decisively. " You go up as you were meant to, and I'll go down to try and raid your camp. See you at the end of the war babe, when I'll win some more of those secret kisses from those lovely lush lips of yours!" Adrian pulled her to him and his hand went down to finger her lower lip suggestively. Jerri giggled and pressed herself against him in accommodating fashion. "Flattery will get you anywhere!" she quipped. They kissed again lingeringly. Then he patted her behind and pointed her forwards whilst he began to jog in the opposite direction. "Goodbye my lush, see you later!" Adrian called. Then he set up a steady jog and soon left her behind.

It was not long before he could see the edge of the woodland so he took a track inwards, slowed his pace and walked expectantly on. He came to a place where the wood dipped down. From where he stood at the top of a bank, he could see a small wooden shack where a battle was in progress. His team, the reds, had encircled the white camp who now numbered four. Likewise he could see four of his reds at various positions from his vantage point. The ground behind the shack rose gently so that from behind and above the whites home-base, he had a discrete view of the whole area. Two whites, Susan and Stuart, looking menacingly large, were crouched either side their homebase. The woman Helen was squatted behind a piece of fencing, looking more like she was cringing from the action rather than defending her territory. Her friend, Gina, on the other hand looked sharp and poised to explode behind a tree, occasionally chancing bursting pot-shots at the reds.

He could see Cliff, his tall, thin frame shielded by a bush and in a good position to get a hit. He saw Cliff's wife, Angela, effect a policewoman's shooting stance, almost finding her mark as Gina nearly copped it in the groin, the paint just missing her thigh as she turned. Cliff was shouting instructions and drawing their attention, whilst two of his team on the other side, where Helen was crouched, were making a move forwards. Stuart was shouting to Helen to shoot at them. She froze and then leapt up like a startled rabbit, but still managed to shoot. She was taken out by one of the reds' guns, but unfortunately Helen managed to hit one of the reds as well. Adrian recognised Emma beneath her helmet and saw that she was out of it now as well as Helen. But Gary, the other red, was gaining ground, using the fence for protection.

Adrian made his way stealthily down until he was at the back of the little hut. He looked around and saw Susan making a move forwards. He shot her and at the same time pelted forwards, shooting at Stuart and throwing himself to the ground in a dramatic roll as he did so. Stuart was splodged; Adrian was victorious, sprawled on the ground where he had rolled. As they all watched Adrian's flurry of activity, Angela moved in on Gina and got a hit so the reds had it all tied up. Adrian was the hero of the moment.

The end signal was given and soon after they were all gathered together again, hot and sweating from their endeavours. The others that were "dead" had come forwards grinning; Paul and Simon, scowling in mock consternation. "It was Cliff and Angela, they were just too damn quick for us. Caught us by surprise from the side. Look at this - yuk!" Paul said exposing his paint-splodged side.

"Where did you get to?" asked Simon, as Jerri walked towards them along with Nigel and Tanya, the two defenders of the red-homebase.

"She tried to jump us," called Nigel. "Nearly succeeded as well. She got Tanya in the arm but by that time I'd done for her - gave us a bit of a run for our money though, didn't you Jerri?". Jerri smiled and shook her head at him admonishingly.

"Where did you spring from Adrian, anyway? You seemed to come from nowhere, you sly git!" Stuart quizzed, while everyone laughed.

"Yes, you swine, I wasn't expecting it from behind!" Susan pouted. There was laughter all round at the innocently meant remark.

"Ah well - just a little trick I saw on T.V., you know," Adrian joked, basking in the admiration and semi-grudging praise.

They all walked back to the van in a group, laughing and ribbing each other, Jerri walking beside Adrian who surreptitiously squeezed her flank and tipped her a wink while no one was looking - which made Jerri dazzle him an appreciative smile. Back at the van, everybody divested themselves of the cumbersome garb and paint guns, which were accepted by the two men from the paint-balling company who had waited for the conclusion. There was a little mock up ceremony where the reds were awarded tacky plastic victor's medals amidst much cat-calling and sarcastic rejoinders by the whites. Then, they were all clambering into the van where they were whisked off to an exclusive health-club for fruit juice and springwater, followed by a sauna; massages for those who wanted to pay for it, and a relaxing jacuzzi and swim after all that. The men and women separated for these activities for the most part, so Adrian and Jerri did not see much of each other until they were clambering back in the van, ready to change and dress for dinner. Everyone agreed that they were rather flaked out by the rigours of the day, famished and anxious to recline.

Back at the hotel the company separated again, agreeing to meet for dinner an hour later. This was duly done, the camaraderie continuing into the evening, Adrian occasionally titillating Jerri by brief brushes kept out of sight and effected beneath the table. The group did not quite have the vivacity of the previous evening and everyone was content to siphon off to bed at a relatively early hour in preparation for the following day which Paul, still being mysterious, told them they would need all their energies for. First one person then another trickled off to bed until Adrian, pretending to yawn, said goodnight to everyone and went up himself. He noted a brief flash of concern appear on Jerri's features which she quickly concealed. But not long after Adrian had gone up, she followed him, as he had anticipated she would.

He waited till it was comparatively quiet and waited because he wanted to play upon Jerri's anxieties. When he finally went to her she was so eager for him she

had already undressed and greeted him in her underwear. He tumbled her onto the bed to dispense with the necessity for words. He did his wicked sensual work upon her, until she was wet and aching for him to enter her. Just how he liked them; just at the point where he knew he could exercise power over them. In keeping with expectations, Jerri obliged him.

He roughly pulled her back from him, one hand entwined in her bra, whilst he whispered demands into her ear and shafted her with his fingers as he did so. Ready for anything she was, glazed and wanton enough to accede to his desires.

With trembling fingers she undressed him. Took off his tie, his shirt whilst he now lay back and enjoyed all the ministrations she could offer. When she took him in her mouth, he held her there and controlled her movements with a hand grasping a handful of hair. He told her she would make good money as a high-class prostitute, and after a while of enjoying his own satisfactions, he pulled her up, an irresistible strength and direction in him, thrilling her. He bent her back to expose her throat which he nibbled and bit into so she cried out, half in desire and half in pain. What else was he capable of? But she had never been accosted in so sensual and so utterly dominant a manner before. She was used to being adored, to boyfriends doing their utmost to please her. Adrian's roughness, that hint of cruelty combined with an objective consideration of her flesh, acted more like an aphrodisiac than anything else she had known before. She was ashamed and amazed at herself and the situation. The wickedly erotic fulfilments continued until Jerri was all but weeping and shuddering from the intensity of it. By the time it was over she felt she had undergone a baptism of fiery bliss. She felt she would never be the same again.

For a long while they lay together in the afterglow until Adrian whispered he thought this time he should go back to his own bed. She was too stunned still by extremity to protest much, whilst he mildly joked that he was sucked dry and needed a good night's rest in order to recuperate. His lips brushed her neck and her brow. Then he left her with a softly whispered good night, whilst she lay awake still buzzing, trying to assimilate the night's events into her view of herself and her understanding of sex.

Adrian back in his own room fell into bed and went quickly to sleep, utterly confirmed in his own excellence, in his ineluctable abilities to get just what he wanted - exactly when he wanted it, whatever it might be. Filled with a deep sense of satisfaction, suffused with an unshakeable confidence in his unique prowess in every arena, he drifted off to sleep.

In the morning when he awoke, he showered and dressed casually for breakfast and the day's jaunt out riding that Paul had hinted at. When he came out of his

room to go down to breakfast, Jerri synchronised the same intent with his own. He came up behind her and ran a single finger down her back as she turned and melted beneath his look, as her body quivered eagerly at his touch.

"Now then, now then, keep your hands to yourself Spearman," came Paul's booming voice down the corridor. "I should watch out if I were you Jerri - you don't know where he's been!"

Unphased Adrian turned round and quipped: "Go on with you Storey, you're just jealous 'cos our team beat yours yesterday. Winner takes all - you should know that by now!"

"Gads you're an arrogant git - isn't he Jerri? You'll suffer for it one day, mark my words young man!" teased Paul, with a tiny undercurrent of needle in his voice. The banter made Jerri laugh; and the three of them went downstairs in good humour with Paul claiming he was hungry enough to eat an elephant with a horse thrown in, and Adrian telling him he'd have to watch his weight now he was getting a bit long in the tooth to combat the middle-aged spread. Evidently it was customary to insult each other in this way, and it caused much merriment when it continued over the breakfast table.

Soon breakfast was over and the group were clammering to know what Paul had in store for them that day. Under popular pressure and from practical necessity, Paul relented whilst Emma, his wife, looked somewhat apprehensive awaiting the group's response. It transpired that they were going on a hunt. But it was not the usual hunt; it was going to be a human hunt. When everyone exclaimed, demanding clarification about what he meant, Paul told them it was going to be one of the group that would provide the quarry. In other words, those who wanted to partake could draw straws. The loser would be the one who had to play the "fox". There were protests and cries of *sadist! Warp-head!* and so on. Paul parried all these in a good humoured way, explaining it was an experiment and nobody was obliged to have a go at quarry if they didn't want to, but that he was relying on the gentlemen's sporting spirit to rise to the occasion.

By the time he had finished, everyone was persuaded into enthusiasm and most of the group (apart from Tanya who was choosing to opt out and wait for them at the stables) were at least looking forward to going for a ride on such a clear sunny morning. By the time discussions were over, all the women had opted out of playing the quarry, along with Stuart, who claimed to be far too lazy for such a pursuit and Simon, who was a smoker and who maintained his lungs weren't up to it. This left five of the men. Paul produced the straws and asked Emma to shuffle them and then hold them out. There was a sense of anticipation and a twist of tension amongst the group as each of the five men took one of the straws.

It became immediately apparent that Adrian had drawn the short straw, which served to delight Paul tremendously. "Well boyo, it's not the usual thing for you, but this time you've definitely drawn the short straw ... see ... do you believe me?" crowed Paul, holding out the other straws. Jerri was enjoying herself, laughing along with the others. But Adrian affected unconcern, keeping his cool and smiling along with them, as he commented: "You old rascal Paul - did you rig this or what? Getting your own back on me, eh? For winning the war!"

"No, no, trust my good lady wife here. It was all done fair and square, wasn't it Em.?"

"You bet!" agreed Emma tickled pink that Adrian was getting a little come-uppance.

Adrian smiled again. "That's OK I embrace the challenge. In fact, seeing as I'm feeling lucky I'll throw down the gauntlet and say: be prepared to be out-witted and out-manoeuvred yet again. I bet you a tenner you won't run me to ground".

"A tenner! You cheap-skate!" joked Paul, who then informed him that he had to provide them with an item of clothing that had his scent on so the dogs could recognise and fix onto his trail. This caused a few ribald remarks and jocular insults care of Stuart and Cliff. But Adrian parried all their jibes, cool as usual and as confident of his abilities to outwit the hunters, as he was of his ability to succeed in any conquest or business deal he set his sights on.

The day's initial events now decided, everyone tramped out to the van, where they were driven to the stables of a friend of Paul's, near where they had been the previous day. In the van, Adrian sat next to Jerri, their thighs touching as the van swayed. Adrian had an arm thrown across the back of the seat and was relaxed and confident in the face of his coming ordeal. He turned round from time to time to join in the banter of Paul and Stuart, and enjoyed Jerri's presence merely as an accolade to his own charm and sexual prowess. He sensed many of the men were envious of him and of the way Jerri's eyes gazed meltingly up at him when he spoke.

He had been the hero of the day, yesterday, and despite the disadvantage of being the hunted rather than the hunter, he determined to prove just as much of a hero, when his back was against the wall. He basked in the grudging admiration of the men and the undisguised appreciation of the women. He was in his element and was resolved to maintain his reputation of being one of Life's lucky winners, no matter how the odds were stacked against him. In fact, Adrian thrived on such circumstances and knew himself to be one of those golden individuals who fortune always favoured and for who the tide always turned sympathetically to gain him a ready and superior advantage.

In the front, Paul was explaining how he'd decided to organise something like this, which he told them was a relatively new thing from the States. "I've been out on a jaunt like this once before. It's good fun and something which is taking off in the army, as a simulated escape situation. There are three bloodhounds, named Jess, Nudge and Smoo - don't ask me why - that my mate Rupert has trained for this purpose. I've lined up 12 decent nags for us care of Rupert. We go back a long way, him and me, our parents were friends. We went to the same prep school together. He's the guy who owns the stables of course. I'd have invited him but he's on a busy schedule at the minute, time of year and all that."

"What happens if we corner Ade here in just half an hour?" asked Stuart, purposefully trying to rile Adrian. Adrian flashed him the V's and a sarcastic smile as if to say - in your dreams mate - as Paul responded. "He's got a lot of faith in you hasn't he Ade?" he twinkled.

"Masses and masses," commented Adrian dryly.

"But to answer your question Stuart, if that should happen we simply choose another quarry from our company and have another go. Quite straight forward really. It's only a bit of a lark. It was just something I wanted to have a go at," explained Paul.

They turned off a main road to travel down a lane fringed by high hedgerows, still decked in blossom here and there. Finally, they were turning down a long drive to pull into a clean-looking brick stable-yard. This had a long array of stable doors containing the large court-yard and a variety of horses being saddled and tacked in preparation. The place was a hive of activity with an aura of well-organised, wholesome rustic charm. Paul stopped the van. "O.K. folks we've arrived. Is everyone ready to enjoy the hunt then?" he asked, turning round to beam at all of them - particularly Adrian.

A burly, ruddy looking chap came to the driver's window where Paul sat. "Hello there Thomas," Paul said, reaching his arm through the window to shake the man's hand. "We're all here as you see, ready to be found suitable mounts and to be equipped with riding hats."

"Aye, that's all being taken care of Mr Storey. Now who's the unfortunate one who's been chosen to act as fox then?" Thomas enquired, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Me, I'm afraid!" cut in Adrian, whose tone was not at all gloomy.

"Well Sir, I don't know if Mr Storey has explained, but while the others are being kitted out, to give you a head start I'll drive you across the way to Linley

Wood. That'll give you a bit of time to lose yourself before the dogs can get on your trail. How's that sound?"

"Fine," replied Adrian, "though I don't think you'd better give me too much of a start otherwise they'll never find me!"

"Oh you're so full of bravado, Adrian," teased Emma.

"It's well-founded," commented Adrian in the same spirit of banter.

"Now then, have we got time for a tippie before you drive him off Thomas?" said Paul producing a hipflask.

"Whatever you like Sir!" said Thomas smiling at the good spirits of all concerned.

"Here you are then Ade, a bit of Dutch courage before you get off?" Paul proffered the hip flask.

"No thanks," said Adrian, "don't need it. I'd rather get off if that's OK, now I'm here and ready for the challenge."

"Gods, you're a bit keen aren't you? It's unnatural!" commented Stuart.

"Well if you don't want to wet your whistle, we all might as well pile out and let Thomas drive you over there. Come on then everyone off your butts and ready for horseback on the instant!" ordered Paul.

They all got out, except Adrian who climbed into the front seat as Thomas got up into the driver's seat. The others flocked round to where Adrian sat.

"Well, best of British old man, though I'm sure you don't need it!" said Paul raising the hip flask and toasting Adrian.

"Yeah, bye, good luck, don't fall down a rabbit hole, cheerio," came the various acknowledgements of the company, together with: "Bye, break a leg Ade!" as a last cheeky comment from Jerri. She grinned delightedly at him. He narrowed his eyes slightly in not altogether mock threat, hinting that he'd get her back later - and so did he intend.

But then he was waving goodbye to the lot of them as Thomas reversed the van and drove out of the yard. Fifteen minutes later he was dropped off at Linley wood, as arranged. Apart from a map of the area in his top pocket and a small knife which the vestiges of his boy scout training had compelled him to bring, he only had his wits to rely on.

Adrian did truly relish this challenge. He enjoyed pitting his wits against others whatever the scenario, and he prided himself on his fitness. He felt that according to the dictates of Nature, he was of the strongest and fittest, and the strongest and the fittest survive; the strongest and fittest prove the winners in Nature's world of tooth and claw. Adrian was confident that he would demonstrate the inexorable logic of that philosophy over the next few hours. He was on a roll. First, the Naburn deal. The tattoo, placed so pleasingly upon his slavish wife, who pandered to his every whim, who proved he was lord and master and who he held like a dark sweet secret at his heart. Then the comparative ease with which he had seduced the girl Jerri, for his own enjoyment. Even the way he had surprised the whites and claimed their base. He couldn't fail. He felt as if everything he touched turned to gold, metamorphosised to accommodate his will.

He patted his shirt pocket reassuringly and walked into Linley Wood. He took the map out and looked at it noting a stream to one edge of the wood. He thought the trees would slow them down, proving difficult for the progress of the horses. He ran, weaving in and out of the trees, in and out, in and out, as if he were training for football dodges, pushing himself to the limits. Finally, he slowed down and mounted the mound where he had surveyed the scene of "the battle" the previous day. He paused and ran down the other side, spying the stream near to a tiny road. He jogged towards it. The stream was shallow and for a short way he could walk in the midst of it without getting too wet. But when it started to get deeper he crossed over and back, and over and back until it grew too difficult to continue the movement. A hill loomed to one side of him, just across the road. Adrian crossed the road, climbed a gate into a field, and further on another one. He made his way up another inclining stretch of pasture land, before coming to a stile and a path beside another wood which encroached adjacent to the territory of the bracken-covered hillside.

He began walking upwards through the scattered woodland, which was outstripped, higher up, by the bracken, that in turn was superseded by bald rocky outcrops at the summit. Adrian noted the distinctive character of the hill with interest. It was at that point, he heard in the distance the baying of the hounds. Coolly, as if time was of no importance Adrian took out the map again and worked out that he must be on Black Rhadley Hill. He studied the map and felt a dart of adrenaline prick him into decisive action, when he noted a feature which might prove to his definitive vantage. As he looked down then, way over to his right, he saw the hounds come into view, running towards the stream, followed by a straggle of people on horseback. They looked of matchbox proportions from his elevated position.

Adrian sprang into action, continuing his upward climb, skirting through and beside silver birches and the occasional beech, and keeping his eyes scanned to the right. Finally his efforts of intense observation were rewarded. He could discern, at a short distance from where he stood, a little dimple or grove carved into the hillside obscured by stones and long grasses. A glint of darkness caught his eye and he knew this was the nook he had been searching for. Adrian looked about him, considering and scheming. He looked at the trees closest to him, assessing their strength and height. The hounds had begun baying again and they sounded marginally closer.

In the spontaneity of innovation, Adrian quickly began cutting large fronds of bracken with the little knife he had had the foresight to bring with him. After a while of doing this, he twisted them round and beneath his boots and secured them by tucking the ends of the leaves into his socks. By doing this he sought to obscure his smell and confuse the hounds so that they lost his scent. But this would only work if the second stage of his plan was successful.

He looked at the trees scattered around him and then in a single motion, he bunched himself up and leapt towards the low branch of a nearby beech tree. His hands managed to grasp the branch and he kept himself swinging to gain momentum until he projected himself into the air to land close to a small silver birch. He landed securely, wobbled a moment and steadied himself so that all he rested on was his bracken-covered boots. He strained his eyes towards the glimpse and depth of shadow which he had targeted as his destination and which he thought would provide him with his winning move.

He reached towards the branch of the silver birch and pulled himself up again onto the outstretched limb. He was pleased that all the hours in the gym were now paying off, and he mentally patted himself on the back. Again he swung himself as far as he could so he sailed into the air and landed in the little hollow beside the overgrown grasses and stones. Extremely satisfied with his progress, he crawled forwards to inspect what lay behind the thistles and grasses where the darkness showed.

There he discovered, as the map had indicated, the mouth of a small cave. The cave wasn't very big, as far as he could discern from the natural light that filtered in. He also noticed what appeared to be a tunnel, or an indent, going off to the left of the little concealed grotto. He shook his head and smiled at his continuing run of fortune, aided by his own dexterity and skill. Then Adrian crawled into the cave and almost tumbled headfirst as he did so, for the floor of the cave dipped deceptively a short distance from the mouth of it. Adrian righted himself and turned, crouching on his feet, to inspect the space he had invaded.

The cave wasn't very big, being longer than it was tall, and revealing part rock and part packed-earth walls. The hole or indent off to the left gaped in the darkness of shadow intriguingly. Adrian had been caving a few times and enjoyed the sensation of exploring those hidden veins of the Earth that remained largely untouched by human activity. It made him feel like an explorer who dared where most would not. He also found it peculiarly erotic; as if he plundered the mightiest female of them all. As if when he had spent a whole day crawling along Her innards, he was conquering the ultimate female. Adrian noted that further interior with interest, but he could hear the hounds baying closer, so crouched down pulling the grasses and thistles to conceal the entrance even more and then waited to see what they would do.

He did not have to wait long. The baying came closer and closer until it felt to Adrian as if despite all his efforts they were making a direct bee-line for where he had hidden himself. But still out of sight, the baying stopped and he heard the snuffling of the hounds as they slowed down to check his trail. Adrian held his breath. The hounds continued snuffling, not now giving voice, but using their energies to try and track his scent. The sound of horses hooves. Exasperated voices - he could make out Paul and Cliff: "Drat it - where's he gone? The dogs seem to have lost his scent. Here Smoo! Smoo! Have another smell of that, atta boy, go to it, find now Smoo! Find!"

More horses thundering up the hillside. "What's happening? Haven't you seen him?" Jerri's voice. A strain of disappointment.

Adrian grinned to himself and continued holding still.

They urged the dogs on, and tramped around on their horses discussing what to do, what tactic to try now the dogs seemed to have lost the scent.

"Well, he can't be far," Cliff's voice. "Perhaps we should split up and go in different directions?"

Another voice - Emma's he thought. "I don't know. He can't just have disappeared. I mean the dogs tracked him to here, only now they seem confused. Hold on, what's Jess interested in over there around that tree ...?"

Adrian reacted on the spur of the moment, determined to outwit the lot of them and to maintain the secrecy of his hiding place. When he inferred that the dogs had picked up his scent near one of the trees he had used as a launching pad, he thought it would only be a matter of time before they sussed him out. Unless he did some kind of disappearing act again. In spontaneous reaction he scrambled towards the interior which he had not yet fully explored. He banged his head on the roof and stumbled forwards in an abortive attempt at speed. Then instead of landing on a solid floor of earth, the ground crumbled and gave way beneath him.

In the distortion of mesmerised unreality, he seemed to fall for a long time, though in truth it could only have been a matter of seconds. When he landed on a bed of earth, more of the same showered and continued to shower on top of him, until for a brief nightmarish moment he thought he would be buried alive. But the soil finally stopped falling and all was still in the darkness. He listened and caught the sound of horses hooves a long way above him it seemed - and was that the hounds? Briefly, briefly human activity could be discerned, but then it all receded away into the distance until all he was left with was the cloying silence of the earthen sarcophagus he had unwittingly gained entrance to.

Up above, in the sunlit blue that bathed the giantish hill, Jess, the youngest of the three dogs, had grown bored of snuffling unsuccessfully for their original quarry. When the smell of a vixen caught her attention, she opened her throat and gave chase, causing the other two hounds to follow suit. Past a small hollow on their right, beyond the trees and up through the bracken, onto the higher rocky realms of the hill, the dogs chased their new scent. All the company on horseback followed, thinking they had finally caught the trail of their quarry and would soon run him to ground - little knowing their prey had already gone to earth ...

When the soil and fragments of stone had stopped falling, Adrian refused to be alarmed by his predicament: at that stage, within the honeycomb interior of the hill, he felt as Alice must have felt when she found herself down that rabbit hole. But Adrian was confident that he would dig himself out.

However, the fall had disorientated him - he did not realise quite how far he had fallen. He tried to scabble up towards where he thought the entrance was, but could only get so far before he slipped down again. He gouged footholds in the earth and tried to dig at a higher level to gain access to the outside world. But the soil seemed endless and impervious to his actions. He tried digging in a different area with the same result. The longer he dug unsuccessfully, the more frustrated and confused he became. He began to sweat and a thin lance of fear cut him briefly - but he dismissed it and continued his labours with more energy.

After what seemed an age when he felt he was getting nowhere, he sensed something opening before him. He scabbled the earth away, wriggling into another opening, expecting to see some light, but instead being greeted by yet more darkness. He cursed and felt around him. Another hollow. Like a womb. Contained, complete in itself, but no opening to the outside world. Just a rough, curved indentation, bare and purposeless. He couldn't work out if this was the first space he had fallen into or not. Surely the whole hill couldn't be a myriad of such apparently isolated pockets?

Adrian began to feel a faint unpleasant rill of horror whispering inside of him. He sought to banish it, and scrambled his way out of this new blind alley back into the space he had left. He sat against the side of the cell and held his head in his hands as he struggled to contain his rising sense of panic. Then, after calming himself, he began to dig again in another direction, where the soil seemed to be loosest. But as long as he dug, all he seemed to find was earth and more earth and a solid bank of earth and another solid bank of earth, and yet more soil and yet more earth, but no welcoming daylight, no lifesaving rush of fresh air, no glimpse or relief of greenery.

After what seemed like hours of fruitless scraping at the soil with his bare hands, and still not getting anywhere, Adrian gave up and sat glumly staring into space, pushing down the panic he felt. But the more he sat doing nothing, the more stifled and claustrophobic he felt, the more his imagination succumbed to the horror of never being found ... but he would not accept such a thought.

So he began digging again in another area. He tried to approach the problem systematically, but he seemed to be in some sort of shaft, the entrance to which was blocked by the avalanche of soil and stone that had fallen when the ground had crumbled beneath him. All his efforts proved to be in vain. It seemed to him as if hours had already passed. He felt the air was beginning to suffocate him. He sat entombed within his vault of sealed soil, held his head in his hands and sobbed in frustration and fear. As he wept the feeling of impotence, something he was entirely unaccustomed to, swept through him and seemed to highlight and exacerbate his predicament.

After giving vent to his feelings in this way, he drew on his hazy religious recollections and began to pray to the Unseen Power he had previously barely given a philosophical thought or any avowal of faith to. This quietened him and he sat and waited. A tiny shred of hope worked within him. Perhaps they would find him. Realise what had happened and rescue him. Surely the cave would be an obvious place to look? If there was freshly loosened soil then it would provide them with all the clues they needed to find him ... wouldn't it? But what seemed obvious to Adrian proved elusive and mysterious to those who searched for him.

Still feeling certain he would be found Adrian settled down to wait for the search party to release him. The waiting was so nullifying he found himself drifting into semi-torpor. He knew by now he must have been down there for hours; the length of time for him had become incalculable. He could have been down there for minutes, for hours, for weeks ... he felt he had all but lost the ability to judge. After a while the dense silence played on his nerves, made him feel already dead and forgotten, buried alive. So he set to working the soil again, digging and digging with more and more futility. Never seeming to get any further or uncover anything that would lead him back to life and light. Then he

did truly panic, growing hysterical and screaming and flailing his arms uselessly into the soft, suffocating soil.

But he could not maintain such a wild trauma of emotion, and eventually he calmed down. Dumb with a deathly misery, he curled up in on himself, sobbing quietly. In his heart he longed for Ruth, for his mother, for life and the comfort of another human presence. Surely, he thought, it can't end like this? This pointless, stupid ... He dared not say the word death even in his own mind - but it was there around him, in his nerves and his muscles, in his lungs and his heart, behind his cranium, even if he did not dare acknowledge it.

If only they would come...

He realised the horrible irony of his situation. He had been far too clever for them, far too clever. If the hounds had lost his scent and led them away from the vicinity of the cave, how would they ever trace him back to where he was?

But only the cloying silence yawned back at him and clambered across his nerve endings, stirring sickness and fear in his belly. Once more now, out of desperation and drunk with fatigue, he tried to dig. But he moved as if pushing within and against a dense pressure of water; the energy he possessed seemed to be draining out of him, siphoned from him by the deadening clay. Finally, he fell onto the soil. The walls seemed to wobble and close in upon him. The air became thinner and thinner bereft of the sustenance he needed. It constricted him even, soaking up the moisture of his breath and body and giving only bitter solid back. The foetid, dampening smell of earth consumed him until, in the hollow pit of his consciousness he knew he was buried alive and the smell that choked him was the stench of his earthly grave. The grave that would contain and compress his flesh, conceal his bones forever more. He never imagined it would be like this. *Not like this!*

On and on then, he continued his anguished beseechments; on and on, in delirious sobs, until his body was thrown into convulsions and he shovelled soil into his mouth, choking on it, his breath bubbling and frothing. Then he lay stilled, only quivering now and again, mumbling, staring sightlessly into the pitiless soil, in the pitiless belly of the Earth.

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Ruth woke up on the Sunday morning with a sensation of vague unease - she could not have said why, except that she had had a strange lurid dream; a somewhat unusual event for her as she was not accustomed to dreaming. In the weird landscape of her dream she had been walking towards a seashore, climbing over sand dunes; suddenly falling, falling, sand cascading over her, sand showering down on her, burying her alive ... But the sea had come and washed it all away, carrying her with it until she was tossed and floundering on

the huge expanse of the oceans. Then some huge bird, like a mythical griffin, had picked her up in its talons and carried her for an indeterminate length of time so that she swung in its grip in a state of mesmerised limbo. Eventually, the creature had dropped her on a daisied hillside where the sun warmed her and a gentleman dressed all in black was fixing his eyes upon her ...

Ruth did not have the least idea what the dream could mean, if indeed it could be ascribed such potency and was not merely some freak convulsion of her subconscious imaginary. She dismissed it from her mind when she recalled that Adrian would be returning later that day. The house was pristine awaiting its master; the slave, however, had her ablutions and toilette to effect in preparation for the master's return. Ruth fingered her pierced navel and stretched luxuriously between the crisp cotton sheets, imagining Adrian's reaction to her new outfit, designed to be irresistible. She felt a flicker of excitement and got up to have a shower to make herself as smooth and sweet-smelling as possible for that afternoon.

And so she idled the hours by and was chagrined when by 5pm he had still not appeared. Her excitement began to fade and in its place a bitter constriction of jealousy began to grow. Where was he now? Who was he with now; kissing and handling no doubt, giving another what for, neglecting her as usual - the dumb bitch he left at home while he went out and played the field. As night began to encroach, this feeling had become the taste of bile on her tongue and moodily she began to watch the T.V., a soporific for her anger.

She was just getting up for a drink, an hour or so later, when the door bell rang. She went through into the hall and her stomach turned over at the sight of the dark blue uniforms. She opened the door to the police; a man and a woman.

"What is it? What's happened?" Ruth blurted.

"May we come in, Mrs. Spearman?" the policeman said in a kind quiet way.

She took them through into the lounge where they all sat down, she wordless as if awaiting some awful verdict. They asked her if her husband had contacted her that day; Ruth told them how she had been waiting since that afternoon for his return. They then explained that her husband had been reported missing but told her that there was probably no cause for any great concern, as yet. They then revealed the circumstances which had led up to his disappearance: how he and his friends had been involved in simulating a hunt with blood hounds, where Adrian, her husband had been the quarry...

"Hunt? They were hunting him?" her brain could not connect. Slowly and clearly they described the events of that morning.

"The blood hounds unfortunately got side-tracked after losing his scent, and led your husband's friends off on a wild goose chase. When your husband never turned up they searched the whole area, which unfortunately may have obscured his original tracks, but they could not find him anywhere. They notified us this evening. They thought he might turn up somewhere during the afternoon, but I am afraid Mrs Spearman, he hasn't.

Although there is certainly no cause for alarm, we do have to ask some uncomfortable questions, and follow up any possible leads which could give us an indication of your husband's whereabouts. Your husband has not been very popular with certain factions in society of late. Is there anyone you can think of who might hold a grudge against your husband? No? Are you sure? You must understand that at this stage, we have to explore every possibility and not rule anything out..."

The policewoman's soft, insistent voice carried on explaining, questioning, attempting reassurance. Ruth blinked blankly. She could not think. She answered everything in monotones. Her mind seemed to have frozen. Despite their reassurances, a sense of dark foreboding inflicted her.

"Perhaps you should have somebody with you," the policewoman was saying, "is there anybody you can call so you're not on your own? Your mother?"

Ruth nodded silently staring arridly into space.

"What's the number Mrs Spearman? What's your mother's telephone number?"

Ruth heard the question but could not connect to it. She continued staring at the policewoman wonderingly.

"Mrs Spearman, what's your mother's phone number? Do you know it? Can you tell me what it is?"

Ruth continued her dry eyed, vacant stare but then her face creased temporarily into consciousness again and she whispered the number with a sob contracted in her throat. The policewoman phoned up her mother and explained the circumstances in discrete, serious tones. When the policewoman had finished speaking on the phone, she told Ruth that her mother would be there in an hour. Would she be alright til then, or did she want them to stay?

Ruth put her head in her hands. " I can't...I can't understand...how could...what does it all mean?"

"We can't say at this stage Mrs Spearman but we are conducting enquiries and searching the area with police dogs so we hope something will turn up to give us a clue. Most likely your husband will be on his way home right now, or making his way to a contact point. We'll get in touch as soon as we have any further

information." The policewoman's tones gave her some small margin for hope. She clung to that and tried to smile her thanks, coming to life and demonstrating that she was not in such a state of shock that she could not function. Though in truth, she had a horrible cold feeling in the pit of her belly and felt a deadening numbness that both protected her and petrified her. A presentience arose within her so that intuitively she knew Adrian would never return to her.

The policewoman and her male colleague left promising to inform her as soon as they heard anything, or turned up any other helpful leads. When they had gone Ruth drifted aimlessly about the house, unable to prevent herself from tidying little details which might have irritated her husband. When her mother arrived it was strange having to adjust to her company, even though a large part of her was glad that her mother was there. She always felt she had to don a suitable mask for her mother; conceal the reality of her married life which her mother could not possibly understand. So part of herself was always kept hidden away, the part her mother had no notion of - that dark, secret part which she was both ashamed and perversely proud of. What could she tell her mother about that? She knew her mother would not quite understand the overwhelming panic and bottomless dread that gripped her if Adrian should be... She dare not say the word; she dare not think it. And so with her mother she was falsely bright, so brittle she might easily crack, her self-control in danger of shattering at a single ill-chosen word.

On the Monday evening, after a day of tremulous anxiety, the agony of waiting, Ruth sensed that her life would never be the same again. Somehow, deep down inside she felt he was never coming back to her. Her mother could not understand her resignation, her gloom. Her mother thought she had abandoned hope far too early. But deep in her bones and with growing certainty Ruth developed the conviction that Adrian was gone forever. Despite her mother's protestations, her attempts at optimism, Ruth gave herself up to grief and lay on the bed, the tears running down onto the pillow case, causing a damp patch to grow and spread where Adrian's head had rested just three days ago. No amount of comforting or brisk encouragement to be positive could console her. She held herself and rocked backwards and forwards, sobbing and crying as if she would never stop.

After the storm, some kind of calm. In the days that followed Ruth remained dazed, inured to anything around her, uncertain of what to do, how to behave, as if enacting a mime she could not quite believe in. She was like an amputee who still feels the limb that has been removed even though it is no longer there. She could not believe he would go, just like that. She did not understand how this could have happened. People did not just disappear into thin air. There was always something, some evidence or clue. But the police had found nothing.

Paul, his friend, had written a letter to her saying how sorry he was that something so light-hearted had ended so disastrously. Trying to give her hope. There were others too, names she had heard of, some she had not, offering their support and sympathy. She hoarded all of these letters as if their bulk might somehow bring Adrian back. His family descended. His cool elegant mother and abrupt sergeant major of a father. But their presence was more of an irritation than a comfort. She had always felt Adrian's mother half-despised her, whilst his father seemed to see her as part of the furniture that padded out his son's life. Now, neither of them knew what to say or how to treat her. His mother was pallid and monosyllabic. The father was brusque and off-hand in abortive attempts to be normal, to make her feel better, make them all feel better. But what could be done? His parents could not understand what had happened anymore than Ruth could. They had had a rich, smart, successful son one minute, their pride and joy to boast of to their well-connected friends. The next minute he was gone, as if in a proverbial puff of smoke. No longer in evidence. Simply disappeared. It was weird, they all agreed.

Thankfully, after a few days, his parents, who were obviously as traumatised and numbed as she was, left her to herself once more. She was relieved that the pressure of their presence was no longer there, and determined to see no more of them unless she was positively forced to. Politely they said goodbye, offering her a cold peck on the cheek and insincere sympathies. Ruth felt they both blamed her for Adrian's disappearance, though they did not intimate any such accusations verbally. When they left her - at last! - to her own devices, Ruth lapsed into the inertia of an automaton. She sat for hours, dry-eyed, staring into space, lacking the energy or motivation to do anything at all. Her *raison d'être* had been scotched, erased without a trace, and now she had become like a vacuum. She was sterile, an empty vessel; her whole existence an age of interminable desert become, where once a vibrant ravening Eden had bloomed.

The days and weeks that followed were a numberless blur; a weird collage of practical necessities such as preparing food and washing, combined with an unbroken suspense of waiting where her will was frozen, and she did not know what to do or how to behave. Soon those weeks turned into months and there was the growing realisation that her initial intuitions had been correct - that Adrian was gone (where and how was still a complete mystery) and would never return.

After six months had passed, the issue of finances raised its head. Her parents had been urging her to find out just what her position was. Finally she went with her father to Adrian's family solicitor. She came out of that lengthy interview stunned. She discovered she was a rich woman - a lot richer than she had imagined with the various investments and stock exchange tip offs Adrian had exploited to the full. She was worth an awful lot of money. Not that that seemed

to matter much at that moment. It didn't register. All it was, was another nail in Adrian's coffin, another clod of earth thrown upon his nameless grave. She felt disloyal. A cheat.

Life has to go on, her parents kept telling her, trying to draw her out, light some spark of animation in her. The arid stare and continuing torpor disturbed and worried them. A couple of girl friends came round often, being supportive, urging her to go out with them. But no amount of kindness could change the way she felt. Nothing seemed to matter to her; she did not want the painful process of living again or the vivification of blood, adrenaline. That kind of zest seemed part of the past. But deep down inside she knew, she could not go on like this indefinitely. So when a friend from the nursery came round urging her to resume swimming, she finally forced herself out of her frozen state and consented to go.

Inevitably, she could not conceal the tattoo, and the attention it drew forced upon her once again the knowledge that those words were no longer true. Who was he anyway, the invisible AS? Where was he? - *His Will Be Done* - Why had he deserted her in this way? How could he have left her in this crucifying state of limbo? She sobbed in the shower whilst her friend soothed her. She felt better afterwards; as if the public catharsis had done her good. It was the beginning of her re-entry into life again, the beginning of her proper engagement with it, but on her own terms, without 'the master' always ordering her actions and responses. Slowly, falteringly, she took the first unsteady steps towards independence.

Nine months, ten months. Ruth began to take more notice of the world, begin vague plans and consider her direction. What was she to do with her life? She did not know.

Ten months, eleven months later. On a cold blustery April day, she was having tea in a little cafe in the city. She was reading a cheap romance, engrossed by it, wiping her mouth free of crumbs from the biscuit she nibbled. Somehow something penetrated her concentration. A man of distinctive demeanour was staring at her, consuming her with his eyes. He wore a black leather trench coat and a trilby to match. His eyes were dark and intense while the sharp jut of his nose suggested some quality of granite. She stared unconsciously back for a moment and then her spirit came to life as she saw a desire, a mastery in his eyes that stirred an echo of familiarity in her. She became flustered, confused under his scrutiny, perhaps playing up to his fantasy.

Eventually he moved in on her, in a quiet voice asking 'if he could take a seat and join her'. She, dumb-founded, had nodded. His steady delicate conversation, his finger startling her, making her flesh burn as he brushed a strand of hair from her cheek, as if it was something he was accustomed to doing. He suggested a

drink. Without knowing why she complied, the scent of adventure in her veins. The cosy snug of a pub. A few drinks. The flattery. A sudden kiss. Getting a taxi to his flat. The long awaited onslaught on her flesh and the tell-tale signs were there: through her lust, another dark road beckoned her onwards ... She stayed the night with him, wrapped in his arms. But in the morning she extricated herself and left quickly before he awoke. μ

She needed to think. Was that what she wanted again? The way it had been with Adrian? Was she going to fall so quickly into the same trap - again? She collected her car, paid the fine charge and drove home. She still did not know what to do nor did she have any clear sense of direction for the future. But she did recognise herself beginning to live, to think again, a certain forward-looking energy stirring within her which, for the first time since Adrian had gone, gave her some justification for optimism.

Did she really want to travel that same path she had travelled with Adrian? If not, what was it that she did want? She still had physical needs: how was she to fulfil those without becoming in thrall to them, at their mercy - at the mercy of her body's demands? She didn't want that intensity again. Not after Adrian - for there could be nobody to replace him. She wasn't willing to risk that much pain again.

But she could not continually maintain her life on hold, waiting for Adrian to come and set things in motion once more. His absence had become as fixed and irreversible as death, despite the lack of certainty or tangible proofs. So for the first time in years, she began to analyse what it was she really wanted. If she was not ready for the risk and torment of love, what was she ready for? The active impulse within her, for so long squashed and denied, now sparked and stirred. She knew she wanted something different, something new and untried. Some challenge or adventure to take her out of herself. Then, like a strand of sunlight lancing through curtains of grey cloud, it came to her. She felt a twinge of excitement thrill through her and a vague idea, nebulous and indistinct at first, began to form itself in her mind.

She found Adrian's business address-book and the letters of sympathy his friends had sent. Blanking her mind to their content, dashing away the tears that welled and focusing on her intent, she began making a list of telephone numbers. She considered the practical implications of the startling scheme that had come to her. And as she considered the real potential of her plans, all thoughts of Adrian were pushed into the background - for once, for the first time since she had been on her own the trauma and pain finally became submerged and she experienced a sudden new lease of life.

The days went by and this new project continued to be a source of excitement, a tangible possibility in the process of becoming. She even began to smile at herself in the mirror, wondering at her own audacity! My oh my, how this worm has so suddenly turned now, she thought to herself, utterly amazed but nevertheless extremely gratified by the turn of her mind, the turn of events she could envisage in the future. In a snap of the fingers, transformed, just like that. They would see! And in her mind's eye she witnessed Adrian's scandalised expression, as he viewed her machinations. She saw his shock and amazement, a new glint of admiration and grudging respect come into those storm-cloud eyes that had held her so in their thrall. And this image of her former master incited her to pursue the idea with an enthusiasm she had thought she would never recapture.

It was the story of Cynthia Payne that had sparked the whole thing off. A large house in the country. Discrete, high-class. Providing a service much in demand. An innovative approach. Sex-games and role-play seductions arranged by appointment, advertised in exclusive circles by word of mouth and recommendation. Romanesque orgies to satisfy every lewd desire ... She imagined herself playing a part she had never dreamed she could play. The Madame, the Mistress of sex, calling the shots - the masters pleased to oblige. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to sample such a new reality. Greedy for the adventure of it, the assertion of herself in an entirely new persona.

It was Adrian's friend Paul she decided to contact first. She remembered him from their wedding; that booming voice, the upper class assumption of superiority, brought subtly home somehow when she had opened her mouth to speak, to thank him for the very generous wedding gift. After that she had kept her mouth shut as much as possible and let Adrian do most of the talking, only hoping that her pretty face would please them. Well, that was then, she told herself firmly. Now she intended to prove an entirely different proposition altogether. They would see! Those patronising privileged business magnets Adrian had known; those imperious, arrogant nouveau riche Adrian had cultivated to use for his own ends.

She made initial telephone contact with Paul, requesting a meeting, to give her some guidance with "a financial project" she had in mind. He had readily agreed, anxious to help Adrian's grieving young wife as much as he could, a vague inflection of guilt making him more than ready to accommodate her whim. She sensed his surprise at her request - beneath the smooth ready tones of condolence, the affectation of expedite gallantry - and smiled to herself as she put the telephone receiver down.

Three days later, dressed in a short, figure-hugging, but nevertheless tasteful, black dress, she was waiting in the reception area of one of Paul's plush offices. Her make-up was discrete, her manner self-contained, as she sat with her shapely legs crossed casually to reveal just the right amount of thigh. And she had to admit at that point, she was really rather enjoying herself. She did not have to wait long. After five minutes Paul came out to greet her, taking her hand in an unctuous bid to show his sympathy, his eyes taking her in at a glance - taking in the very tasteful and attractive woman, taking in the luscious limbs, the surprisingly self-possessed manner. Not at all as he had remembered her.

He courteously bid her enter his office, apologising for the fact that he had not written or phoned, excusing himself on the candid lines of uncertainty, given the peculiar circumstances of Adrian's inexplicable eclipse. Paul urged her to make herself comfortable, motioning towards the white leather armchairs. He asked her if she would like a drink: tea? Coffee? Something stronger perhaps? A pre-lunch G and T? She agreed to the latter, secretly thinking that the alcohol would make for a more cosy, relaxed atmosphere.

Very quickly then, Paul had supplied them both with a drink from the discrete, amply filled drinks cabinet in the corner of his office. He sat down beside her, giving his undivided attention; and indeed it was clear that it was no chore for him to do this! He asked about her and her affairs in a most solicitous way, giving her as much time as she needed to come to the point of her visit. After half an hour or so she laid her verbal bait.

"... because you see, I know Adrian would want me to get on with my own life. It's been nearly a year now since ... it happened. For my sanity's sake I have to believe that he is dead. I hope you can understand that and not judge me too harshly. I was absolutely devoted to Adrian, my whole life revolved around him, which is why his ... disappearance has been so desperately hard for me to come to terms with. Especially as in some ways, our relationship was rather - how can I put it? - unusual, I think is the best way to describe it. But I can't remain in this state of frozen animation forever, waiting for Adrian's return, when there's been absolutely nothing, nothing at all to give any indication of what might have happened to him. I'm still young; I have to get on with things as best I can." And then, a brisk change of tone, a flash of her lashes in his direction.

"Now I'm sure you are aware, Paul - you, probably more than anybody - that Adrian was a very successful business man. I discovered the extent of that success a few months ago when I visited the solicitor Adrian had appointed to take care of our affairs. I'm sure it'll come as no surprise to you, that I am very comfortably off indeed. The thing is, I would like to use some of that money to occupy myself in a meaningful way and in a way, that I hope will prove lucrative in the long run. However, what I have in mind, requires great discretion and sensitive consideration, which is why I thought I would come to

you first ..." the subtle flattery and careful understated appeal to his vanity paid off.

"Now look Ruth, I hope I've made it clear, if there's anything I can do to help you, if it's within my capabilities and sphere of influence to aid any venture you have in mind, I will do it. After all it's the least I can do after what has happened. I am here at your disposal, so fire away: what is it that you have in mind?" Then, seeing her hesitate and look down as if foreseeing some difficulty or awkwardness - "please, Ruth, I will give you whatever guidance and support I can, Whatever it is you are thinking of, don't feel embarrassed or inhibited about saying what's on your mind." The brown eyes, which from time to time, flickered to rest on the swell of her breasts beneath the black silk, confirmed the warmth and acceptance of his manner.

Ruth gave a small, musing smile, uncrossed and recrossed her legs, leaning slightly forwards as she did so. She took a breath and began: "Well Paul, you're a man of the world I know, and I'm sure you understand all there is to understand about sexual desires and ... unusual sexual inclinations." She was gratified to witness his kindled response, the quiver of electricity that trembled in the air between them as she broached this clearly unexpected topic. Clearly, directly, as if she was putting forward a scheme for a charity event or had ideas for launching a new fashion design outlet, she stated her plans. She spelled out just what kind of pleasure palace operation she had in mind.

By the end of the lunchtime meeting, she felt a surge of affirmation and she knew she had the talents and capabilities to see this thing through to its practical culmination. Indeed, Paul proved to be more than helpful, in every respect, once he knew just what her ideas entailed. She discovered she was able to use her charms in such a way that made Paul willing to make her his priority, promising to phone this colleague and that old school friend, in order to gather the information and contacts that would stand her in indispensable stead in the future. Just a brush of her breasts as she reached forwards to kiss him on his cheek for his most welcome aid, just a hint of what might be available for him if he played his cards right. For they both knew how stale a conventional married sex life could become. They both recognised how necessary that discrete extra outlet was, for those with sexual drives which exceeded the needs of their lawful spouse. In fact, she discovered they were quite in agreement over most things to do with the subject that consumed their discussion over the course of lunch.

He insisted on seeing her to her car, becoming more chivalrous and more familiar, more anxious to assure her of his unqualified support, the more time they spent together. She was aware of his appreciative glances at her legs, at the curve of her buttocks beneath the clinging black silk, as she bent to unlock her car door, and when she sat down in the driver's seat and her dress rode up towards her crotch. She had wound the window down and smiled a response to

the assurances her willing benefactor had given her. A compliment, a gentleman's kiss of her hand as they said goodbye, with Paul promising to ring her in the very near future. She drove away from the meeting thoroughly delighted with herself, and with her appetite wetted for more of the same.

Over the following weeks she arranged to have lunch with a variety of Adrian's business associates and friends. She laid her suggestions before them, silkily purring out her plans of erotica, of undiscovered pleasures; asking their advice in a knowing way, helping them confide. She needed girls, you see. Advertisements placed in the 'proper' places. Lots of beautiful consenting women and discrete publicity. Would they help her? Most agreed to her softly suggested suasions, as she quoted a likely fee and asked them to spread the word. She knew the news would spread rapidly on the old boy's public school network, and interest would be speedily engaged.

She always dressed alluringly on these occasions, in clothes that were soft and tasteful, clothes which carried her curves like a banner of beauty when she walked. Many of the men, not having met her before, were stunned by her, were impressed by her calm acceptance of their old friend Adrian's apparent death. They admired the guiltless way she spoke of him, and were drawn to her loveliness, so that by the end of the meeting they were intrigued into becoming willing informal advocates for her "business". Paul had assured her that this would probably be the case at their first meeting, after which he had obliged her by giving her a number of useful names and organisations, making some suggestions with regard to security which proved of invaluable assistance later on. She thanked him in a way that secured his continuing support and favour ...

The next thing she did was have her tattoo not taken off, but altered. She went through the pain and expense of erasing the A and the word *His*. When that had healed she went back and had the letter R put before the zag of red that served as an S and instead of *His Will Be Done* now it read ***Her Will Be Done***. She was amazed at herself. It was almost as if she had separated into two parts. The passive part which had acquiesced to Adrian's every whim, was now pushed into the role of observer, whilst the dynamic part of herself struggled to give birth to a new, more assertive, self confident Ruth. She hoped that the changed tattoo would exert as powerful effect as the original one had done. Only this time she intended that the tattoo would serve to confirm her own strength, her own will and determinations, not that of her absent master. And truly it seemed to have the desired affect. In addition to this measure she put herself through a fitness regime and took up Aikido, to give herself more physical confidence, in keeping with the nature of her new role. Then she set about organising the first "party".

Gradually news filtered through. There were discrete phone calls, meetings with potential dancing girls - with beautiful women who wanted to explore "the dark side" and the quick ready money it brought. Or there were women like her former self who took a masochistic delight in their own debasement. A whole array of women, from female contortionists to rubber clad dominatrix, from belly dancing masseurs to naughty nannies; women who thought they could use their talents or indulge their whims, and make money as well.

She got in touch with the pony club and asked them to send some of their gear, for which she paid handsomely. She had the lounge re-decorated in a deep dreamy blue with rich colourful hangings on the walls and an array of nooks to sit or lie in. She intended the atmosphere to be opulent, extravagant, royal. She found a large brass effigy of an eagle in an antique shop and there it stood in the big room, lending an imperial theme to the scene. Another room, another reality: light, Grecian, clean and spacious with cream drapes at the windows and thick rugs on a floor scattered with a multitude of plush woven cushions, enhancing the white marble effect walls. Another door opened into a warm pink room, reminiscent of the womb space; richly dressed in dark colours shot with gold where one could lie and relax, perhaps as a sultan may in the rooms of his harem. Each door opened into a different dream, held an alternative presence. The French windows led onto the lengthy lawn and the river at the bottom. The surrounds of trees and high manicured hedgerow which at one time she had hated and felt isolated behind, now seemed a benediction of possibility which Ruth brought fully to bloom.

Upstairs, the torture chambers. Downstairs, a doctor's waiting room. The cellar extended to provide a space for any anomalous desire, not catered for elsewhere. The fitting room where the dining room had once been; a plethora of garments hung ready to inspire, to be tried, to be trussed or discarded as was required, as pleased the multifarious appetites that came to indulge their untoward fantasies in fabulous style. The bathroom refitted, scented candles in wall brackets, filling the sensuous air with exotic perfumes, provoking the gratification of aphrodisiac response. More garments, more devices, more imaginatively constructed sex scenarios, graced by nymphs of pleasure, ready and willing to play the games of the client's dictates - for the right amount of money, for the correct, richly arranged fee. A boudoir, a palace of abandon, a hall of excess that could invent the paradise or the penance kept hidden in each visitor's waking world of fantasy. A mansion where the wildest of dreams came true. For a night ... For a calculated cash advance. Here, Her Will Was Done in the skilful succour of the senses, satisfaction guaranteed.

Nearly two years after Adrian's disappearance, Ruth stood on the brink of a new life in a different role entirely. There was an array of lovely women: blondes, red-heads, brunettes, gypsies and slaves, serving wenches and princesses,

dancing girls and primitive natives strolling around scantily clad, offering drinks, taking coats, whilst Ruth issued greetings, arranged the meetings that had been requested. She was dressed in her leather basque and matching briefs. She had fishnet stockings on and high leather boots, a swirling black cloak. Her tattoo was clearly visible and shocking to see. She had played up to the image well. On her arms she wore silver amulets like shields of armour and she twitched the leather scourge in her hands convincingly, as she asserted they must enjoy themselves, or else they would have her to answer to! The men laughed nervously, aroused at the thought.

She had managed to get in touch with Jason, the tattooist, and had enlisted his support as well, whilst at the same time astonishing him with her transformation. She made the boundaries clear. He was there to provide an extra service, an extra possibility for the clients who fancied risking a tattoo or a body part pierced, and to help out in case of any trouble - to be the minder she might sometimes need.

And so Ruth grew into her role of Madame, Mistress of sex and planner of erotic parties, where everyone could let their fantasies come free. She got a kick out of marching around, tapping her whip on her boot, leaving traces of unfulfilled desire where ever she walked. She was an entirely different woman now as if to make up for her weakness and submissiveness of before. Now she was Amazonian. Her public face. Her armour.

On occasions she would allow herself to be taken, switch roles, become a willing slave. But she did not allow any of them too close, and continued to enjoy her independence, her growing reputation for unusual and excellent pleasure parties; the money that was steadily accruing in the bank. The public school connections were very useful at times. You only had to say the word, make the carefully timed request, be advised to opt for these shares and you'll see, the money will grow. And it did. With the help of her "trade" and further investments.

Very soon she became a by-word for those rich circles. A place to go to, to let off steam, indulge the fantasies. Pretend for a while. In a very enticing, erotic way. So her position was strengthened and she continued to build her empire, using the garden as a paddock for female 'ponies', for subversive, sexual inclinations which she was fully versed in and which she thoroughly understood the itch for. She became renowned for her weekend pleasure trips - anything you desire, we cater for. Simple, deviously discrete, richly entertaining and handsomely rewarding. So Ruth built her own empire and surveyed it from the lofty height of an ever filling money pot.

Then as the months followed on and the years took pace Ruth would only occasionally now think of Adrian. When she did, he still posed a puzzle for her. She would remember how when she had been with him she had felt submerged, featureless and deadened, yet also hopelessly alive. Tormented and yet electrified. Dead and alive. Dead and alive. Like the mystery of his disappearance. Like he had become. Like she was herself. For she felt strangely empty at times; and then it was that, despite her transformation and success, she would crave the special dark flavour of his love.

Finally though, as the years rolled by, Adrian became a distant memory to her and Jason became her lover. She would even risk switching roles and play his willing slave at times, but only when she chose to; she made her boundaries clear this time, thanks to that confidence money and independence had given her. The echoes that remained of her previous life were seemingly submerged by the newly desirable, the rich society life she had become a part of, where she played her role with elegance and seductive aloofness.

She only freed herself, from time to time through Jason, a union which allowed her wild imaginings, her itch for debasement, a temporary release. Then the flavour of Adrian would return to haunt her in fleeting subliminal impressions - like a hidden fruit - gorged and gone to seed ...

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In Shropshire, opposite Big Linley Wood, rose the imposing bulk of Black Rhadley Hill. Now the evening light seemed to lend it an aura of hidden vitality. Forested banks glanced with the luminous gold of secrets in a glimmer of rays from the setting sun. The russet bracken, the somniferous pines and virescent broad leafs that shrouded its sides, spoke of some magickal or lush possibility in the gloaming evening haze. Crowned at the top with nude grey rock were craggy peaks lined with quartz crystal. Bald stone. As if the hill, in the birth throes of creation, had strained to attain the stature of mountain, cracking itself open and disgorging rock from its bowels in cataclysmic effort.

Yet some quixotic whim of Nature had frozen its purpose, as that mountain bud awoke, leaving its inclining mass merely a steeped hillside. But in the lofty region of its tip an echo of grandeur and strangeness remained. A place to touch the stars on. A cleft to carve the sacrificial altar upon. Something dark and unyielding and implacable resonant in the soil, and in the quartzite stone that made up the mass of it.

The bald height of the hill sank serene amidst the dusk, the shadows forming a broad sweeping smile across it; as if the hill itself was satisfied with its own richness, its own sombre charm and cryptic veins of dread. It now stood glossed

with a gossamer robe of purple and gold in the gilding twilight. The bite hidden. The jaws concealed. Just the poetry now in evidence.

Only the beauty of a rocky topped hill overlooking a little river and a wood., the violence of the original volcanic eruption less than a memory in the stillness of encroaching night. Only the perfection and wonder of Nature to behold, as the trees unfurl and blossom their Spring, twirl the black leaves of their Autumn fall.

Black Rhadley Hill in the evening light. A faint opulent hymn that gathers in, that gathers in, and holds what it may in the depths of its bosom.

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Raven-Made

I knew I had miscalculated when the fog began to thicken. I had set myself a three day walk from Welshpool to Hay-on-Wye, travelling along Offa's Dyke, the now little used route originally built to protect Mercia and the rest of the country from Welsh marauders. I had a friend living in Hay-on-Wye who I would be staying with for a few days. She'd given me the idea of walking Offa's Dyke, after mentioning that the route emerged travelling south just down the road from where she lived, it seemed rather elegant and succinct to appear just with a rucksack on her doorstep - as I used to travel before enjoying the dubious benefits of a car. This time I left my car in the city where it belonged, and got the train to Welshpool, throwing all responsibilities and decisions up in the air; forgetting about it all by undertaking this walk and hopefully discovering myself again in the process.

I had set out from Welshpool early, finding the path and enjoying the wonderful scenery presented to me along the way. Shropshire and the Welsh Marches - scenery often overlooked - are rich and stunning in places: vales of Eden with fresh flowing rivers, rolling hills and statuesque trees rising up at myriad points like sentinel genii fixed into wood and autumn leaf-fall. What warmed me was the little pockets of oak tree woodland I came across. The Oak tree represented to me the wholesome strength of the past; a past now diminished, almost eroded by modern inane cacophony. So little woodland left now! Seeing the oak woods acted like a tonic on me. I threw aside the cares that I'd come to escape from, and embraced the beauty of the English-Welsh countryside on a crisp bright autumn day.

The walking vivified me, and I felt the clouds from the city melting out of my mind. I had found the going easy to start with and the uphill straits only served to be pleasantly challenging, for I'd made sure my rucksack was lightly packed. I stopped by a river to eat the sandwiches I had bought and to drink some juice. I was fascinated by the sight of a fish in the river and watched it until some movement of my shadow caused it to dart away. Then I had become engrossed in the wavering riverbed, where the stones were so arranged there appeared to be a gradation of steps descending to the bottom, decorated with the green tendrils of weeds. If it had been summer I might have taken my clothes off and tried those rough steps out; perhaps they might have taken me to another watery world, or introduced me to a hidden cave beneath the river - so did my imagination work. I was rejuvenated by this activity. All of a sudden I felt all the months - years even

- of pressures and harassed city living slough away from me and I was returned momentarily to childhood instincts, where the immediate and present circumstances encompass the whole world, the whole of being. Some sense of uplifting freedom infected me. Time seemed irrelevant and I looked about me in pure appreciation once more, not now concerned about destinations.

I was lured to explore a little coppice not far away where I found three strange standing stones. One of them was so hunched and creviced at the side that it looked like an old woman transmogrified into stone. The impression was compelling and gave life to the whole arrangement, so it seemed that the stones had become three giant granite females caught in conference, permanently in the act of quiescent commune like guardians of the Earth. So it struck me. As I dwelt upon this I extracted a notebook from my rucksack. Being innately fascinated by such structures, though I'd never had the time to explore the instinct further, I spent some time scribing my thoughts into a poem - poetry being something I dabbled at now and again. The time passed and I was loath to leave, but deemed it prudent then to do so. Not before time, I discovered.

I was stiff when I got up, though I soon got into the rhythm of walking again. But, I had miscalculated the distance it would take to get me to Knighton, and after some time I realised I was way behind schedule; my legs had begun to ache, and a blister was beginning to rub on my right foot. After an age of walking, the sun was starting to set behind the swelling hills and forested peaks, softening them with the fading light, and adding to their aura of sombre power. I was not immune to such beauty, but now I began to feel an edge of panic, as I was still a long way from where I needed to be. I did not relish the thought of walking in the dark along a route I did not know save that it was traced upon the map: I began to curse myself as a fool and tried to increase my pace, which only served to exacerbate the soreness of my blister and churn my insides up more.

The light had turned to gloom quite quickly and fog had risen, making it tortuous and tense, stumbling along in the dimness of twilight. I felt a sick ball of fear in my stomach as I imagined staggering around in the dark endlessly, finding no houses or welcoming lights - exposed to all that the thick night might draw...

The words of Lady Macbeth sprang to my mind and seemed peculiarly appropriate: "Come thick night and pall thee in the dunkest smoke of Hell...". That's how the night had become, as if the smoke of Hell had usurped the

healthful light in one fell swoop and left me full of trepidation and anxiety. My imagination began to play tricks on me - I thought I saw a black shape crouched on the path ahead of me, but then it disappeared as I approached. A tree startled me as it rose up in the darkness, its branches like long crooked claws, raking the smoky air above me. Nebulous shapes haunted the hedgerows. I speeded my pace once more, in irritation with myself, longing to see a light, the presence of a cottage or a farm. On and on I walked, chilled to the marrow and depressed by my predicament.

The path took me down a steep hill, which was hard going, especially with the fog so thick and night encroaching. I bumped into a tree and swore, scrabbling through a bush of gorse, close to tears. But as I got further down I perceived a twinkle of light, and a ruddier glow beside it. Heartened, I picked up my pace heading for the source. My track came steadily downwards until it levelled out to a plateau. In front of me was a gate leading a way out of the field, and beside it, facing the track, was a stone cottage with a cosy flood of light coming from the windows. I was shaking with relief and also feeling rather stupid.

The cottage nestled in a dell; behind it, hills loomed. Before it, undulating land hid it from view. By the cottage was an orchard and at the edge of this, a fire leapt in challenge to the night. I could make out a figure standing beside the fire, holding a stick, apparently absorbed in contemplation of the flames. I felt awkward, intrusive; perhaps because of the stranger's demeanour which expressed an intimate communion with solitude - and somehow, forces unknown. I felt my presence would create an unwelcome disturbance for the silhouette reflecting upon the flames. Something about its stillness struck me...

I opened the gate and made my way up a path which led to the crackling fire and the figure transfixed by it, appearing surreal in curtains of smoke and fog. As I got closer, I perceived the person to be female by virtue of the fact that her hair was pulled into a bun smoothly wrapped about the back of her head. She was turned away from me towards the fire, though I could see her profile. I noticed the hair was grey. I could see the curve of a cheek, and a scar running down it, made lurid by the fiery light.

"Excuse me," I said, as courteously as I could. The woman, seemingly unperturbed, turned in my direction and her eyes assessed me, as if gleaning an understanding of my nature. She looked me up and then studied my face. She did this with an unhurried, composed manner.

"Are you in need of assistance?" She asked, her voice clear and low. Her eyes were penetrating, showing neither dislike nor pleasure towards me. I thought she studied me casually, even coolly. Yet, there was an openness, a courtesy towards me conveyed by the tone of her voice. She was old by virtue of her grey and dark streaked hair, the lines around her mouth and eyes. Yet her features were strong and her skin looked sleek and smooth in the firelight. The scrutiny of her gaze fascinated me. She seemed to be seeing through me, into me, behind the image I projected, and this impression stirred and disturbed me.

There was a moment of silence before I responded to her. "Well, yes I am actually," I replied sheepishly, although relieved by the question. "I seem to have lost my way. I'm supposed to be walking to Knighton; I've come from Welshpool. How far am I from there? Do you have a phone? If I could just phone a taxi... I'll pay of course...". My voice trailed off and my face puckered into an appeal.

"I doubt you'll get taxis to come this far afield on a night like this. It's fifteen miles or more to Knighton," the woman replied with a finality that froze my spirit. "However," she continued, "you're welcome to come in and try - but if you don't have any luck, I have a spare room at your disposal if you so wish. This area is hazardous in these conditions and at this time of night – for one who is not familiar with the landscape. Come, we shall leave the fire to burn and go indoors."

Thus saying she gave the fire a final poke of acknowledgement with her long stick, laid it to one side and gestured me to follow her down the path to her cottage. I must admit to feeling a flood of relief when she had said I could stay - at least some help was at hand.

But now a faint trepidation and sense of intrigue filled me. Who was this woman so ready to give a room to a passing stranger, so certain in herself and her actions?

As I followed her into the wooden porch entrancing the front door, I noticed a carving above me, revealed by the porch light. It was the face of a man, a wild swirl of hair and beard billowing his head and chin, a grimace cut into the features. A Wild Man - Green Man of the Forest - *Pan*; the associations rang

through me. I was struck by it, intangibly awed by it. I followed her through the door which was of heavy dark oak wood. It was divided into squares and within each square was some kind of motif. It seemed such an ancient door: it looked as if it would have been better suited to a castle.

A door to a spiral staircase, to a secret chamber: in a way, this is exactly what it turned out to be...

The door opened straight into the kitchen which immediately evoked a wholesomeness and abundance. There was a large oak table in one corner upon which was placed a bowl containing brown bread rolls. The aroma of stew made with meat and vegetables filled the room. I noticed a place set in to eat. There was an 'Aga' sunk into the wall which made the room invitingly warm. There was a sink and work bench, a multitude of wooden cupboards, a jug of wild flowers and ears of corn on a stone flagged floor made cosy by a large rug. There was a kettle on the hob, a variety of pans hanging from a rack, bunches of dried flowers tied upon the beams. There were several simple solid wooden chairs around the table. By the Aga was an armchair, again made of wood, with a patchwork cushion to lend a homely softness to the scene. It all blended together to demonstrate a rustic charm that appeared genuine rather than contrived. There was a door to my left and another at the back of the room.

"Come in - don't dally in the doorway," she said as she went directly to the pan on the stove. I looked at my wet, muddy boots doubtfully. A voice from the stove told me to take them off and leave them by the door. I gaped briefly, for the woman had had her back to me and could not have read my expression. I was impressed and a little unnerved. "One moment and I'll be with you," her eyes smiled at me briefly, almost a tease in their light, but too subtle for any certainty of that.

She stirred the pan and lifted the spoon to her lips. She sipped, pausing whilst she ruminated upon the flavour, then reached for some salt. Stirring it once more, satisfied, she replaced the lid. She'd observed the grimace I had made on taking off my boots - particularly the right one - and there was a tone of solicitous concern in her voice when she asked: "How are the feet? You can bathe them if you like. I'll bring you a bowl of hot water with a particularly good herbal

preparation I've concocted myself. Guaranteed to help the condition. I am rather accustomed to walking myself you see, hence it has been tried and tested, and proven extremely effective, I promise you.

I did not know how to respond: I did not want to put her out, or intrude upon her goodwill. Neither did I want to expose my blisters or get settled in there as if I'd accepted the bed for the night. I still reckoned on getting a taxi. So, I politely and as graciously as possible declined her kind offer.

She shrugged her shoulders, a little motion that conveyed vague irritation and equally, utter nonchalance. "Right," she said, becoming pragmatic, and regarding me closely with eyes of storm-cloud grey pierced with emerald. Strangely affecting eyes somehow ... "I'll show you where the phone is. You can try and phone for a taxi but as I said, I'm not optimistic about your success on a night like this. My offer stands. You are quite welcome to stay and be on your way in the morning; as you wish, it is up to you.

"Thank you very much," I stammered, "it's really very kind of you. It's so stupid of me really... I should've ..." But I was interrupted by my new acquaintance holding up her hand to silence me, in a manner I could not ignore.

"Nonsense - it is little enough. On the contrary it would be shabby of me to behave otherwise, do you not think? I do not mind helping strangers on such a night - depending upon the stranger of course, and the circumstances. In your case, I am happy to be of assistance. Perhaps you have been lucky ..." Her eyes glimmered with subtle irony and humour, and gave me the impression of meanings beyond words. She communicated an unspoken trust in my presence and seemingly acute perception of my nature. Again, I felt a kind of thrill - the touch of an unknown power. "Come this way," she said and opened the door I stood next to.

The room I was led into was sparsely but tastefully furnished. There was a fireplace at the further end of the room, which gave an ambience of comfort; a richness set off by the uncluttered space around it. The carpet reminded me of a forest floor - it was a pattern made of cream, fawn and green, threaded with browns and gold. A wooden rocking chair, an armchair and a sofa surrounded the fire. Green velvet curtains shut out the night. I noticed a large wooden cabinet to

one side. There was a strange wall hanging next to it. It was of a simple oatmeal weaving, but in the middle of it, in black, was a sign, a symbol I did not understand. It was like a diamond shape with a horizontal line intersecting it, whilst inside it was an oval - something else inside of that. The hanging gave an aura of enigmatic power to the scene, that I found strangely affecting, but couldn't quite put my finger on why or how. In another corner of the room, a weird contortion of tree roots, smoothed and polished, stood as a natural form of sculpture. I made out a black rounded shape hanging from one of the static roots. I could not see what it was. Next to this was a large picture which conveyed a sense of brooding wilderness: trees crouched over a river threading into a black interior. The depicted shadows and moonlight and snow suggested mystery - the primal pulse captured in essence upon canvas. These perceptions took a moment to register in my mind, before I followed her to the back of the room, where a telephone rested on a small table. Beside it, surprisingly to my mind, given the basic charm of my surrounds, was a music system and a shelf stacked with CDs and tapes. The whole of the back wall was covered with shelves, filled with books. I was intrigued as to their nature but did not feel able to browse upon them in my host's presence.

"Well, here's the phone. There are some directories under there if you need them," she indicated.

"Thanks, that's great. Is it OK if I phone a friend as well? It's just I promised I would," I rambled tentatively, still too embarrassed by my predicament and too much in her debt to behave otherwise. I fumbled with my purse trying to find the number scrawled on a bit of paper, buried amongst other cards and folded notes. Something fell from my purse and onto the carpet.

"Help yourself," she said, indicating the phone and bending to pick up what had dropped. I heard her give a sharp, almost hissing sound which chilled me a little.

"You'd better have this back," she said grimly, holding a small silver crucifix a friend had given me. My friend's gesture had touched me, though I had never worn the crucifix, not feeling committed to the Christian cause. I was of wavering faith where such things were concerned.

"I don't hold with such things. In fact, I find their presence a defilement and an irritation - Nazarene sickness that it is." Her voice was low, yet delivering the lines with a smooth intensity that rendered me uncertain and speechless. "You believe in such nonsense do you?" she asked with quiet precision.

"Not especially ... A friend gave it to me. I've never worn it. I believe in something; not all the dogma, but what's behind it, I suppose." I felt embarrassed by my immediate disassociation with the church; God, Jesus. I probably seemed weak, shallow. Yet the male dominated ethos of Christianity had distanced me from it a long while since. It seemed to divest me of power so I could not love it or believe it as fully as others seemed to.

There was a slight relaxation of tension, which made me respond. "Do you think it is all nonsense?" I asked. The woman looked at me for a while, as if gauging the intention behind the question, which was innocent and curious enough. Her scrutiny disturbed me.

"We will talk further on the matter in more conducive circumstances. For now, here's the phone at your disposal. I shall make some tea," she said decisively. Then she left me to complete my task.

I got through to Margaret, the friend I was supposed to be visiting the following evening, who lived in Hay-on-Wye. I briefly put her in the picture, telling her I'd probably arrive later than I'd anticipated, because of all the disruption caused by my foolhardy miscalculation. It was good to hear her voice but I didn't want to talk for long, as I was conscious of prevailing upon the goodwill of another. I put the phone down with a "goodbye" and "see you soon". I found two local taxi firms in the directory. I dialled one number, but on hearing my request, the man said they were fully booked for the evening and couldn't come so far afield. I tried the second number. It rang for a long time before someone picked it up. Again a man's voice. I informed him of my predicament. "Sorry love, it's such a long way, twenty mile or more - and in this weather: we couldn't spare someone for that length of time. Not worth the risk I'm afraid ..." his voice tailed off. I was at a loss, tried to persuade him further with no luck, and rather abruptly put the phone down. I tried two other numbers to no avail.

It seemed I would have no option but to take up my recent host's kind offer and stay the night. I was loath to do this, but there seemed little alternative. I cursed quietly under my breath. Then my curiosity got the better of me, and I scanned the room once more, my eyes falling on the picture of the shadowy wilderness; the strange symbol on the plain wall hanging; the sculptured ravel of tree roots in the corner; the copper bucket by the fire reflecting the dancing flames. The whole combining an effect of simplicity mingled with an elegance that seemed full of potency. I was enticed to know more of my hospitable acquaintance. I perused the books quickly. I noticed some of classic distinction: Camus - *The Outsider*; *Wuthering Heights*; Mishima - *The Sea of Fertility*; Mirebeau - *The Torture Garden*; *The Trial* by Kafka. Thomas Hardy. George Eliot. Then ones that aroused my curiosity: *The Tree of Wyrd*; *The Alchemical Writings of Robert Fludd*; *Codex Saerus*; *Grirnoire of the Dark Gods*. My interest was thoroughly aroused by those titles, and I wondered at their import.

But I feared the silence would betray me, so I moved quickly to the door and walked in to see the woman sitting on the chair by the Aga, supping a mug of tea. A tortoiseshell cat, resplendant in orange and white and fawn, dappled with black, purred upon her knee as she stroked it sensuously. She'd taken off her boots, and her coat now hung beside the door along with a variety of other coats and footwear. She wore a plain red woollen jumper with a long Arran cardigan, cream with brown buttons, and soft-coloured cinnamon-brown trousers, that revealed a certain sleek robustness about her figure, despite the banner of her hair proclaiming her lack of youth. Her face was a touch imperious. This effect was accentuated by the steely-grey hair twinned and captured neatly in a bun at the back of her head. A few wisps escaped and framed her smooth inscrutable face, notably the high cheekbones and small vertical scar running down her right cheek. That scar could have been a tribal initiation mark or a score bequeathing some high rank of honour from the way it was starkly, symmetrically cut into her skin. It certainly suggested there was much more to her than met the eye. I noticed the steady grey-green eyes, dark straight brows, strong nose and firm chin. Her skin was browned and rosied as if by a life lived as much outdoors as inside. It was only her hair, the lines around the mouth and forehead, about the eyes that told her age.

"Well? And what was the verdict?" She asked as soon as I walked in and came towards her. I bit my lip in apprehension and felt rather awkward.

"I'm sorry but I couldn't get anybody to come out here. I really don't like to prevail upon you but I'm at a loss as to what else to do. I could kick myself for being so stupid," I finished in exasperation.

"Don't worry about it. You're welcome to stay. It's not putting me out as I have a spare room. Besides, your company is an interesting novelty to me rather than a burden," said my companion, in such a way that it soothed me and put me more at ease. I still felt a fool though, which I could not help expostulating further on.

"I got side-tracked you know" I sighed, "soaking up the wonderful countryside. I tarried by some standing stones and a river at midday. It's so kind of you to take me in - really, I thought I'd be stumbling around out there forever".

"Well," said the woman somewhat wryly, "fate has intervened and fortune has cast you upon my doorstep. Accept my hospitality now without feeling you have to apologise. I am always happy to meet wearied travellers. Perhaps this meeting will prove fortuitous. Do you believe in fate ...?" The lady asked, drawing me in with a smile and spark of interest, following the question with a pause and raised eyebrows as if in expectation at my name.

"Joanna, "I told her. "Joanna Fox; though it's Jo to my friends". "Well, Joanna," continued my host. "Do you believe in Fate?"

I frowned and puzzled over it. "I'm really not sure," I replied. "Part of me does, but part of me rebels against any fixed pattern for the future. To me, it must of necessity, be a fluid proposition,"

"But of course," agreed the woman. "How perceptive of you to view it so. My name's Brenna, by the way," she said, proffering her hand which I accepted, receiving a warm, firm pressure around my own. In fact everything about her suggested strength, certainty, deep understanding. The handshake merely confirmed my intuitions.

"I'm sure you'd like a cup of tea," she said, getting up and pouring some tea from a teapot into a solid brown mug. "Do sit down, pull up a chair. I'm afraid the only comfy one has been usurped by Asoth, as you see. The tortoiseshell cat had sat up and yawned as it was referred to, so that we both laughed and the atmosphere was softened further.

"You mentioned some standing stones. Where did you see them? Could you locate them for me?"

I told her the area as near as I could, mentioning a village near by.

"Ah, the 'three crones'," she said softly. "There's a legend about them. It is to do with the triple Goddess and the ancient pagan tradition of sacrificing the king - he designated Lord of the season - in order to appease the Goddess and ensure a fruitful harvest.

The story tells of a young girl, her mother and grandmother, travelling the roads in search of their True Lord, their earthly Master who one day had simply vanished from their lives having, unbeknownst to them, been sacrificed to fructify the land. Now, when a stranger - a young shepherd - encountered on their journey, brought this to their awareness in all innocence, all three women - the daughter, the wife, the mother - were consumed with grief, which turned to hatred. They had come to an obscure place on their travels, in a coppice beside a river, and there they began to plot their vengeance: to use their will and Woman's power to destroy, to wreak havoc, as their own lives had been shattered. All three women were together in this, the girl no less than the old woman or the raging widow.

They stood upon a an area known most commonly as a 'ley-line': a vein of Earth that amplified their energies. As they settled on a plan and directed its purpose, the hapless young shepherd was taken unawares. They sprang on him and tied him up with the intent of sacrificing him to the Gods of vengeance and war. But they did not realise that the youth was the key to their future. He was the herald of the Lord returned, who would have grown to wed the girl who now chose to execute him. She and he would have held the seed of future fruition: the women were ignorant of this, yet still powerful, still potent enough to destroy the Path and obliterate Chance.

The Goddess rose against their desires as they whirled in savage climax towards the orgy of bloodshed. And as the three women stood in a circle around their victim, breathing hard and wild-eyed, the Earth cracked its joints and lightning shot down, electrifying all three: fixing them into stone before the sacrifice was made. Thereby the seed of the future, the new Lord's life, was saved in order that it should fructify generations to come - the new Lord of course being the male complimentary aspect of spring and summer.

It is a warning to respect the seasons of life and to accept the purpose behind death when it comes - not to rail against it. That little legend, as the saying goes, is as old as the hills. It is in such pockets of the country as this, that you will discover the true ancient world. Its spirit has persevered despite the biblical onslaught, as you will find if you dig deep enough".

"How fascinating," I responded, genuinely enthralled by the tale and the one telling it. "Have you studied local history and ancient custom then?"

"Oh, it is something I choose to dabble in when I have the time," Brenna answered evasively.

I sipped my tea and stretched my legs, basking in the warmth, only grateful I had a roof over my head and a place to stay for the night. What the evening would bring I could not tell.

Brenna began to question me about my background and where I had originated from.

"Staffordshire," I told her, without my usual inclination to dress that up by claiming to come from the heart of England, as was my usual theatrical wont. I felt she would neither have appreciated nor tolerated such a flowery riposte.

"Not too great a distance from here," she observed casually. "And your job, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a psychologist," I answered. "I work with psychiatric patients".

"Ah, I see," Brenna replied and softly laughed. "So you know well the workings of the human mind?" There was something of the sceptic in her voice.

"Well, I wouldn't say that," I said, somewhat piqued, yet all too aware of my inadequacy in some areas, with some cases. In fact I was disillusioned with the profession as a whole. Too much talk and theory, meetings and conferences - too few practical results. Also, the system was too rigid to accommodate the experimental or dynamic. Often I felt I had achieved little in any real terms. But I did not elaborate on my statement, not wanting to reveal my lack of conviction in my own profession. "No? Well that at least is good - only the callow would claim as much. Obviously you do not fall into that category. Do you find your work interesting?" "Some of it - though there are parts of it I find irksome and pointless." Really, I did not want to talk about it; I felt too disenchanted. Brenna seemed to sense my mood.

"It's the case with most jobs I should think. There are always the positives and the negatives - it is whether they balance favourably that counts." Then she turned towards the stove. "I must confess I am feeling hungry. Will you join me? I won't take kindly to you watching me eat alone," she said.

"Of course, that would be lovely. You're really very kind," I responded, repeating myself, at which Brenna laughed, a slight derision in the sound. "I hardly think so my dear. It is little enough, and your presence here offers me favourable relief from my own company - though do not misunderstand me, I am inclined to solitude. In general. I prefer it. But I am not so rigid yet as to make that state an unbroken rule. There is always something to be learned from strangers, do you not think?"

"Certainly," I replied, feeling again almost intimidated by Brenna's manner. She was so different, so self-possessed and fluid, like no one I'd ever met before. I felt my answer had pleased her in some way. She smiled slightly and regarded me for a moment in a calm detached manner. Again, I had the sense of indiscernible power, as of something hidden yet soon to be revealed - as if she were assessing the likely manner of my reaction to something specific. As if she were manipulating me in some way for her own ends. "Well then, let's eat," she demanded. She took another bowl from those stacked on the table beside the

bread and set a place for me. Then she brought the saucepan over to the table and ladled a generous amount of the stew into each of the bowls. In truth, I was very hungry as I'd anticipated a pub meal in Knighton by now. But of course, events had now been dramatically altered. There was nothing I could do but take advantage of them.

I applied myself enthusiastically to the meal, complimenting Brenna on the taste and wholesome nature her fare. She nodded an acknowledgement and offered me the bread, pushing also the butter dish towards me. During the meal she questioned me further about the route I had taken and my plans. I indicated I intended to have an early start; she nodded an agreement. We talked about the locality, the economy of the area and various related topics, in between mouthfuls. Brenna seemed to have a detailed knowledge of such things, which impressed me further. I tried to relax into the warmth and comfort of my surroundings, letting the evening unroll, allowing Brenna to dictate the pace of things.

Soon I sat back feeling thoroughly replete. "Thank you - that was wonderful," I said. Brenna, who had not quite finished, looked up and smiled slightly, then went back to her meal. I waited for her to finish, bending down and caressing the tortoiseshell cat, talking to it crooningly.

"Had her seven years now," commented Brenna, mopping up her bowl with a piece of bread. "Found her on the roadside when I was out walking one day. She'd been knocked down by a car. Some fool driving too fast. Luckily it was only a superficial blow and she recovered quickly. But she's stayed with me, though I suspect her motives are the food and warmth supplied. Still, I like to have her about. She has a brand of eloquence I can relate to. Beautiful creatures cats, don't you think? Beautiful and cruel but not as heartless as their stereotype supposes - what do you think?" She said, addressing the cat rather than myself, whilst fondly rubbing its neck.

"Yeah, they're great aren't they? I love 'em," I agreed warmly, then asked: "What did you say you called her?"

"Ah yes, her name ..." said Brenna, her voice a little distant. "People's tendency to name their animals often amounts to a pathetic attempt to humanise

them. Degrading and deceiving for both the animal and the person. The name I have for her does not bestow upon her pet status, rather it makes me appreciate her nature - her catness if you like - more. Asoth is her name, *Asoth*," she mused gazing at the cat, as if identifying some quality or other she held in her mind.

"That's a strange name," I retorted, "does it have a meaning ? Where does it come from ?"

Again Brenna bestowed upon me a sustained look before replying. "Asoth is the name of a Goddess worshipped from an ancient past. She was meant to represent enchantment, passion and death. A Goddess of great power". I was intrigued by her explanation and wanted to hear more, but Brenna had already arisen to clear the table.

"How interesting, I've not heard of that name before," I said hopefully.

Brenna stood before me with the used bowls in her hands. "No no, you will not have done," she almost smiled, moving away towards the sink. Her categorical assumption of my ignorance irritated me slightly - after all I was not an illiterate fool. But I let the matter rest and brushed the feeling from me. "Can I help ?" I asked.

"No - there is little to do. We shall retire to the front room and sit in more comfortable surroundings," said Brenna, placing the crockery on a draining board and drying her hands. She positioned the saucepan with the rest of the stew on the Aga, removed the bread and wiped the table.

"Are you partial to mead?" she asked brushing a strand of grey hair from her eye. "Mead? Oh yes I certainly am - but I don't want..." "Enough of that," responded Brenna. "Come then, let's go next door". I rose up and followed her into the front room. The fire crackled invitingly as we entered.

"Do take a seat," said Brenna motioning towards the sofa, and going to the copper bucket to replenish the fire with another log. She moved soundlessly to the large wooden cabinet.

"That's a lovely picture," I commented, studying more closely the image of the dark shadowed trees overhanging the disappearing river, a crescent moon reflected in the water. "Rather wild."

"Yes - I'm glad you like it. A friend of mine painted it. It was a present," Brenna remarked absently. I found the picture strangely haunting, and gazed at it further before turning to sit down. Brenna was standing by the cabinet, the front of which she had opened where shelves revealed glasses and a sparse array of bottles. She put two cut glass tumblers on the top.

Then she stopped what she was doing and began watching me with interest. I was disconcerted by her observation. I was uncertain how to respond. I smiled a little nervously and sat down. She gave a slight smile in return and then bent to open the lower half of the cabinet from which she extracted some objects: an incense burner, a gold candle and a small cloth bag. She unwrapped a charcoal block and held it over a flame til it spat sparks, and blew on it till it glowed. The smell of burning charcoal drifted into the air. She placed it in the brass burner, and then reaching for the small muslin bag, she drew forth some crystallised resin which she sprinkled on the charcoal. A strange, subtle aroma began to fill the room, earthy and fragrant. She put the candle in a carved wooden candle-holder and lit it. The corner of the room was illuminated, and shadows flickered upon the cabinet, and the wall-hanging at its side. I reflected upon the strangeness of life as Brenna did this, enjoying the novelty of the situation; yet I could not help feeling I had stumbled upon a witch's haunt - the stuff fairytales are made of, become reality before me. I did not know whether to be afraid and on my guard, or whether to embrace the opportunity the circumstances provided. The latter course seemed most prudent and was closer to my instinct.

I gazed into the fire, reflecting on Brenna. I had never met a woman like her. I judged her to be in her early sixties / late fifties. But the way she moved and held herself belied such an age. She seemed strong and vigorous still. And her face though grooved by several lines, made faintly savage by the scar traced down her cheek, from cheekbone to level with her mouth, was attractive and held a certain strength, a certain resolution amplified by her obvious intelligence. I wondered what had brought her here to this unpopulated region, when the abundance of books, her interest in music, her sparse but elegant furnishings betrayed a certain culture or sophistication, a worldliness which seemed at odds with her rustic surroundings, her solitude. She held a mystery for me I was both fascinated and disturbed by. Brenna's voice broke my reveries. "Music?" she

posited inquiringly. "I'm partial to classical music myself. Do you like piano music?" She moved to the back of the room as she spoke, selecting a CD as I responded.

"Yes, I love piano music, " I said in honest enthusiasm. "I love some classical music - though I don't listen to it as much as I'd like to - lots of other music too. Do you play an instrument?"

Brenna nodded. "I play the western pipe - it is based on the Japanese bamboo flute, the 'shakuhachi'; but mine is made of yew wood and is longer and narrower than the Japanese version." Brenna said this conversationally as she pressed buttons so that some mellifluous piano music filled the room – the quality of sound was superb, crystal clear. I was something of a musician myself. Over the past year I had become involved in a New Age rock/folk group. We were all women and the group formed a part time diversion from work, family, and professional duties for all of us. It was my main source of pleasure in life, and had begun to supersede and eclipse the other unsatisfactory areas. Music freed me. Playing the guitar, singing with the group, writing songs with a message, hoping to change the world! These things absorbed me like nothing else did. I was delighted, therefore, at Brenna's professed musical skill.

"How lovely. I'd love to hear it - or even see it. I play the guitar myself. I've been playing in an all female rock group for a year now - it's great fun."

"Really," responded Brenna, her eyes glinting some im humour. "Do you aim to take the world by storm then?"

I laughed self-consciously. "No, it's only a hobby, but it's great nevertheless - absorbs you like nothing else, do you not think?"

"Undoubtedly," smiled Brenna, softening towards me. "Would you like to see my Western pipe then? I must confess it is rather a lovely instrument."

"I'd love to," I said sincerely.

She opened a cupboard at the back of the room, and extracted a long object encased in leather. She brought it over, at the same time handing me the drink of honey-coloured liquid warming in the glass. She sat down in the armchair, whilst I sat on the sofa facing the fire. She slid the pipe from its holder and handed it to me. It was about two and a quarter foot in length, of very hard strong wood; a marvellous cauliflower grained pattern curling round the centre of it, in a warm sheen of deep golden brown, tapering to darker brown and almost black at the end. It was very simple. There were six holes evenly placed down it and one hole at the back. There was a reed at the smoothed edge of the mouth-piece.

"It's beautiful," I said truly in awe. "Would you play it a little - I've never seen one like that before".

"Well - it's my own design actually," said Brenna. "I wanted it to be unique - that's why I made it."

"You made it?" I gasped.

Brenna nodded. "It's not so difficult once you've mastered the basic principles - it was finding the right wood that was the hardest part. This is how it sounds". She lifted the long wooden pipe to her lips and immediately a piercing, lilting tone over-powered the piano music, which Brenna had turned down low. It swelled and waned in the air, a wave of sound that transfixed and moved, more raw and pure than anything I'd ever heard. Brenna's lips covered the mouth-piece and resonated with the sound, as her fingers flickered up and down, her body bending as if she were a part of the instrument herself. I knew that feeling too, but Brenna's motions contained a completeness that I felt I lacked. "Fantastic!" I responded when Brenna finally stopped. "That's really beautiful."

"Thank you," she said modestly, smiling a little.

"How long have you been playing it for?"

"I've been playing this particular instrument for nine years," replied Brenna. "Previous to that it was the Japanese version. I find the process meditational and the sound is, I hope, pleasing as well as unique."

"It is - I wish I could have it on tape to listen to some more," I said, conscious of my flattery but sincere with it.

"Thank you again," Brenna said, sipping her drink, "but I myself would not tape that sound. Its essence would be negated by such an act. What about you? Tell me about your musical tastes ... have you experienced any concerts of classical music?"

I was conscious of my ignorance in this area; there were some pieces I knew and loved, but also a vast amount I knew nothing about. "I saw, or heard rather, *The Eroica*, Beethoven's third in the Royal Festival Hall and Handel's *Messiah* at the Royal Albert Hall. That was a while ago now".

"Lovely music," commented Brenna, "though it's a pity about the subject matter of the latter - that spoils it a bit really". I looked at her, puzzled.

"Handel's 'Messiah'," she said. "I find such fairytales invidious and degrading. What a shame such lovely music was inspired by such a shallow ideology".

I remembered her reaction to the crucifix and her words- 'we will talk on this matter later...' This emboldened me to spring a question. "Can I ask, and I hope you don't mind me doing so: why do you despise Christianity, the Church, so much?"

Brenna gave a short laugh, casting her eyes to the ceiling. "Why? There are a thousand and one reasons, Joanna Fox, to despise the Church as I do, a thousand and one reasons."

I waited for more, but nothing seemed forthcoming. "But what are your main reasons?" I pushed at her.

She scrutinised me, again appearing to ponder upon my inner self in that subtle, intuitive way of hers.

"Well Joanna, you strike me as an intelligent woman. Perhaps you could tell me one reason why I might dislike the Church so much - come, use your perceptions," said Brenna, regarding me with interest and swirling the liquor round in her glass.

"Oh - is it because it has a rather masculine bias?" I fished.

"*Rather?*" took up Brenna, "that's something of an understatement don't you think? Christianity is no lover of 'Women's Rights' - quite the converse, I should say. There are many references in the so-called Bible to the unclean and corrupt nature of women; to the inferior status of women in relation to the man."

She threw her head back and appraised me, her eyes glittering with a vein of humour. Her words were spiked, deliberately and provocatively I felt, to expose my own allegiances; to stir me or to educate me. "The Bible is littered with such references from St Paul to St Thomas Aquinas, starting of course with 'Eve', the 'Original Sinner'. Then we have 'Mother Mary', the highest expression of femininity: a virgin - the only fitting vessel for God's Son! Thus was the paragon and pinnacle of female virtue held up to all women; always unattainable, stressing purity, virginity - a quintessence of what is most valued in a woman. At least by the obtuse devils who contrived such rubbish. I could talk about this ad infinitum. It scarcely needs underlining. Look at the concept of God. *Our Father which art ...etc... etc.* Utter rot! Strange that God should be male, when it is the female of the species who brings new life into the world ... contradictory don't you think? In addition to that, it is now accepted that the Christian myth, even down to its ceremonies, is based on older, pagan practices and legends - even so far as the eating of the host, and the cross itself. The reality is, an older, more attuned Way was supplanted by an alien creed. Hence I have little time for any of it - the church, christianity, the Bible. It's all blah blah blah as far as I am concerned," said Brenna, moving her hand in a circle and drawing out the last three words to emphasise her point. "Do you understand?"

"Oh yes, completely," I said, warmed now that she appeared to have opened up a little. Brenna has elaborated upon the main reason why I myself divorced from the church and could not relate to its teachings. The recent debate over women's ordination and the massive controversy it had caused underlined that point. It angered me that the Church, with its tone of morality, supposed upholder of equality and Justice, should be so deeply prejudiced against women. I could understand Brenna's point of view and went on to tell her so, detailing my own feelings on the matter.

"Ah, so you are with me in this then!" said Brenna, a little gleefully, rubbing a finger around the rim of her glass.

"Oh certainly," I replied. "I reject all the dogma - though I do believe that a man called 'Jesus' lived - that he was very special and changed things substantially".

Brenna groaned and shook her head. "You haven't listened to what I've said Joanna. Whatever changes have occurred through Christianity have been to the detriment; and what continues to enhance our civilisation does so in spite of the Nazarene. And there is no historical evidence whatsoever to substantiate the common view of the Deceiver's life. The myth was contrived by forces much older than Christianity, whose servants used it to inculcate societies for their own ends, to gain power, rather than a wholly religious influence..."

"But something which has influenced so many people and countries must have some basis in truth, surely?" I objected, unable to accept Brenna's words.

"You think so? It is not the case as far as I am concerned. This book - that most people swear by the precious Bible - was written over a period of hundreds of years by many different people. Scholars with an interest in furthering the aims of the Church, and the forces beyond that. Some time ago, ancient writings were unearthed, known as the 'Dead Sea Scrolls', which gave a completely different picture of the Nazarene, or Yesua, as he was called. According to suppressed sources such as these, he was a militant leader who provoked an uprising against the Romans and was accordingly stoned to death. His body was removed from its tomb by friends in order to implement a new religion. These documents have far more authenticity than any 'Bible', but most people aren't prepared to accept their

validity. The Church has done its job well. The majority are brainwashed according to the legend and act out the sheep metaphor used so frequently in Nazarene texts. The Lord's my shepherd! Tsssk! The Lord's my ball and chain more like. The Lord's my bloody blindfold! Ha ha!" She completed her speech with a short derisive laugh that resonated out, and then lifted her glass to her lips, gazing at me over the brim as she did so; her grey-green eyes smouldering, alight, seemingly aroused by the discussion.

There was a war inside of me. I was confused by her words, by her apparent knowledge and analysis of the issue. I have already said I was of wavering faith, but I admired the figure of Christ and could not easily reject what Brenna had called a life-time of 'brainwashing'. I could not accept her words, despite the apparent research and rationale which she used to support her argument.

"But I still don't see how the Church could achieve such dominance if its roots weren't based in fact - at least to some degree. Look at the early Christians - no one throws away their life for an empty ideal. They felt so strongly that they were prepared to die for their beliefs and many did. There must be some basis in fact for that to occur. I can't believe the story of Jesus is just a fairytale. Why do so many people believe in it then ? There must be some truth in it!" I said earnestly, passion evident in my voice and manner.

Brenna did not respond immediately but smiled ever so slightly before commenting. "Life-long illusions are hard to let go of, aren't they?" Her eyes almost pitied me. "The majority vote is rarely the most discerning, you should know that Jo." I barely registered the abbreviation of my name in the midst of this private controversy, but somewhere deep inside a bell had been struck and was resonating, a note that seemed to signify some development of intimacy between myself and the older woman before me, shattering my ideals. What such a feeling could mean I could not tell for I was too involved in the situation to analyse or objectify it. Brenna continued on.

"Do you not see how useful such a story was for the Church? It gave it impetus - a cudgel to beat a people. It was easy to inspire fervour and unquestioning devotion in a population already under the so-called tyranny of the Romans. It gave their lives new meaning: a spiritual strength, for they believed that after death, if they were true to the teachings of Christ, they would earn a

place in 'heaven' - poor ignorant chattle. In truth it was a dream with no place in reality, manipulated by a learned hierarchy who either used, or created, the reputation of a man called Yeshua, this 'revolutionary' whose corpse was mysteriously abducted ... Thus, there was a 'mythos' to spread further the unique ethos of a people. The story of Jesus Christ has no basis in fact, I assure you my dear. But, what of it ! People believe what they want to believe, don't they? Persist with your misguided notions if you choose - it is not my concern".

I was stung by her arrogance, her final provocative comments, But I was also filled with doubt. She sounded so sure of herself it made me feel foolish. I had always doubted but now those doubts threatened to overwhelm and submerge me. I was at sea clinging to the sinking wreckage of my slender beliefs. Yes - and still I clung to them.

Brenna leant forwards. "You are a little naive as regards the history of the Christian Church aren't you?" She said, and once again her patronage exasperated me.

"Once the Church's ideas had achieved momentum, it was able to press its advantage with a ruthlessness appropriate to any genuine tyranny - and much greater than that attributed to the Roman Empire. It is historical fact that more people were killed in the Coliseum in ever more violent and debauched ways under the christianised emperors, than when the Heathens held sway. Christianity didn't make 'base' urges any gentler; in fact the repressive nature of its doctrines only served to enhance them. It was the power of the sword, the threat of torture and damnation which usually made people convert and take on board the dogma. Look at the Inquisition, for example; look what they did in the name of your Christ! Once those ideas took root over here, in this country, by converting noblemen and the Royalty, the ordinary folk didn't stand a chance. It was a case of convert or die! The old traditions were seen as heretical and anyone known to practice them was dealt with accordingly - by death, by torture. Such pagan worshippers came to be seen as 'witches', and I'm sure you have some idea of how they were dealt with. Interesting that witches were usually or nearly always women - a very useful catharsis for the Church's prevalent misogyny, don't you think'?

It is interesting that Pagan Traditions contain both Gods and Goddesses - powerful female archetypes, as well as male ones. Not the case, as you've pointed

out, with christianity. In that sense the Pagan Tradition was a far more balanced and wholesome system of worship than the autocratic masculine church, don't you think?" Brenna had relaxed back into her seat and seemed to be enjoying herself.

I was not. I was disturbed, knocked off balance by what I was hearing. Understand, it was not because I had any deeply held convictions. Years ago I brushed most religious dogma to one side but decided I believed in something. I believed in a great creative spirit or force which I tried to imagine was beyond any distinction of gender. Yet invariably when I prayed, which was albeit infrequently during moments of extreme depression or delight, I would imbue the imagined omnipotent listening presence with maleness. I was conscious of it yet I couldn't quite rid myself of the habit. I had believed Jesus was a highly evolved man, way ahead of his time, who had given people belief in something greater than themselves, who had offered a humanitarian ideal. Now I no longer knew where I stood with regard to any of it. I lapsed into an uneasy silence. I'd forgotten about the time and the unfamiliarity of my surroundings. I cogitated on the metaphysical matter at hand and stared into the fire.

Brenna rose and went to turn the tape over. "Would you like a drop more?" She said graciously, reaching towards my nearly empty glass. I did not refuse and was soon handed a replenished tumbler. Brenna leant forwards, her scar a trace of venom on her cheek. "It's very convenient, don't you think Jo, to an idol who preaches the virtues of meekness, turning the other cheek, coveting not thy neighbour's ox, *Thou shalt not kill*, and so forth. Would you say that all those who have killed and fought to defend their country and their own kith and kin are now burning in Hell? The meek shall inherit the Earth - and be manipulated, moulded, oppressed. All that this dogma really amounts to is a suppression of Nature - the burden of guilt is the result. It is a *sickness*. Thou shalt not covet, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt obey thy father and thy mother. And how would it be Joanna Fox, if everyone acted thus? The end of evolution, perhaps? You might as well say don't desire, don't aspire, don't harbour hopes or ambitions, don't seek to change the world. Or if you do, make sure it is forcing the foul christian doctrine onto the 'unbelievers'. Silly. It is a sickness, a grovelling form of sickness.

But things will change. For like any power throughout history, the Nazarene influence is waning. Something else shall replace it, perhaps several hundred years from now, but it will come and it will be, I think, a force more vital, more creative and numinous than anything christianity produced. Ha! Perhaps it's impossible to say what the future will hold, and perhaps not ..." Her

eyes glimmered with a humorous yet haunting light. "But one thing is easy to tell, and even though I live in this nest of the countryside, I am still in touch with what goes on in the world. I know the church is crumbling: Thank Satan himself!" Her laugh as laconic yet spiked with a wicked glint of humour, as she saw the slight tension of shock trace across my features.

Thank Satan himself! Yet why was the idea so shocking? It was only an idea, like 'God', like the life of a Christ who had never lived as such. What was there to believe in but oneself? And anyway, I never had believed in the christian 'Devil' or any absolute power of 'Evil'. Yet I believed in something - I believed in a spiritual world beyond the material existence. I believed this now more than ever, for Brenna's presence further instilled in me a feeling of unknown forces at play. She was imbued with power, with implied depth that transpired in subtle ways: glances caught in a moment's search, her words shattering my illusions, her captivating conviction and certainty of tone, her ease and confidence, her bluntness. She was a woman in charge of herself. Queen of her own domain. What that domain was I could only guess at ... I felt myself drawn to some impending climax or revelation tinged with danger and forbidden fruits. I told my inexorably imagination to stop working over-time, but the spell was there; the spell of Brenna's presence. I did not pursue her remark about Satan, but remembered what she had said regarding the future and addressed a question to her, fishing once more, "Can you predict the future?" I asked, feeling bold but inspired to bluntness, after having my arguments demolished by her own systematic appraisals.

She regarded me a moment, the firelight glowing on her cheek, accentuating the scar and making her appear almost unearthly.

"The future has many paths, many roads of possibility; it is a matter of circumstantial degree as to its outcome." Inscrutable, she brought her hands together to form a bridge in front of her. "Do you desire to know what the future might hold for you, Joanna Fox?" She said, pointing her joined index fingers at me deliberately.

"I ... well ... Can you tell the future'?" I asked again, stumbling some over my words, yet rather seduced by the circumstances I found myself in. Brenna laughed easily.

"You've heard of 'tarot cards' have you Jo? I'll read your cards if you like - would you like me to do so?" She leaned towards me inquiringly, a smile and a challenge in her gaze. I felt a thrill of nervous energy.

"Why not?" I said readily enough, "I've never had my cards read before".

"Very well, Joanna Fox, we shall see what the cards reveal." Her use of my full name, her change of mood, heightened the suspense in the room and made me feel young and ignorant. I was sure this was deliberate, but I was too in awe and polite to object. I registered these reactions, but they were transient and superfluous compared to my building curiosity about Brenna; about how the evening would further unfold. It was too late to hold back now.

Brenna got up and went to the back of the room. She put some more incense onto the burner, found a new CD and switched it to play. Immediately the sound of the wind, waves upon the shore, the keening cry of seagulls filled the room; simple, poignantly plucked guitar chords strumming alongside the sounds of nature. It was beautiful, mellow and timeless. Brenna opened a draw and took from it a box of cards. She brought a small table that had nestled by the cabinet, and placed it between where I sat on the sofa and where she sat in the armchair beside me. She smiled faintly as I nervously wetted my throat with the mead.

"What do you hope the cards will reveal, Joanna Fox? Where do you want the future to take you?" Said Brenna in low, soft tones.

I did not know how to answer, for I did not know what I wanted anymore. I just knew a growing dissatisfaction inside myself, an itch to spread my wings and fly - to where I knew not. I knew I had to change things, my circumstances; my relationship with Mark, the man I lived with. I knew I had to change my situation, but I lacked direction. So for the moment I dithered with the idea without any real attempt to change things on a practical level. Yet what did I want? I couldn't tell. A space of freedom. A space free of the staleness in the atmosphere between two people who have ceased to be excited by each other, whose responses are routine, based on friendship rather than passion, and whose arguments and interests remained fixed. I had begun to withdraw from Mark - it was all too cosy, too safe, too predictable and I was coming to the conclusion that this was not what I wanted. It had begun to make me antagonistic, caustic. This consumed me with

guilt. Mark was a good man - warm, intelligent, loving. Yet in the past year I had become conscious of that growing dissatisfaction inside myself. It was becoming clear to me I needed room, a space for myself alone, to express things I'd never had chance to express. This holiday had been intended as a watershed, a time to think things through, consider possibilities, and reach a clear decision. Now fate had thrown me on the doorstep of Brenna's cottage and into her electric presence - that spark coupled with a depth of stillness, which gave her the qualities of a muse.

What did I want from the future? I answered honestly. "I don't really know - freedom from present constraints. Something more challenging, more fulfilling than my present circumstances. I've given myself away a bit haven't I?" I said, a little abashed by my own honesty.

"You did that some time ago Joanna," quipped Brenna with the glimmer of a smile. "I believe you have the courage to be honest. Well and good: let us see what the cards will portend. Would you spend some time shuffling them for me please?" She finished, tending her hand towards me holding the strange cards.

I received them and contemplated their red and black surfaces punctuated with coloured spheres. It was not that I was not interested in such things. I'd never had time to develop such an interest. Perhaps under normal circumstances, I would have been sceptical of their accuracy or their validity. But Brenna's presence inspired me and in a way, I was quite awed by the situation. I was used to being in control, to conducting myself in boardrooms, at meetings, with individual clients. There I was contained, unemotional - rational. Yet this situation was entirely strange to me, and Brenna an unknown quantity that I sensed to be special, in a way that suggested the spiritual. It was the invisible world she consulted an invisible world altogether foreign to me. That strength, that stillness in her, the sparse elegance of her home, and of herself compelled me. I felt drawn to her, as if I would have liked to spend a long time talking to her and to know that the conversation would be a journey of discovery, a time of true education.

The music swelled into the silence as the fire crackled, and I awkwardly shuffled the cards. They were quite large and not easy to handle. The sound of waves upon the sea shore, the wind, the resonant rising tone of the Celtic pipes all brought an ache to my heart. Such beautiful poignant music. It filled me with longing: for something better, more passionate, more fulfilling. My ideas had

grown stale. I was disillusioned with my profession, which scraped the surfaces of issues and had little real influence or credibility in the recognised establishment. It had become mundane and tedious to me. I knew this too well.

The smell of the incense rising in the air, the gold candle flickering in the darkened corner, and plaintive music infected me; I felt a spurt of something akin to fear, a nervous excitement, and my palms moistened as I handled the cards. Finally I felt I had shuffled the cards sufficiently, so I moved to give them back to Brenna.

"No," she said quietly. "now divide the pack into three".

So I placed three piles of cards on the table before her.

"Now pick up the last pile." she directed. "And taking from the bottom place one card here," she said, pointing to a place nearest to myself.

"No, don't turn it over - just leave it there. Now the next one here," she said pointing to a place above and on the left hand side of the card already on the table "... and here," she continued, pointing to the right hand side of the original card, aligned above it and opposite the second card I had laid down.

"One here," motioned Brenna, pointing to a spot directly above the first card and ahead of the second two.

"Here," she said, pointing again at a place on the left hand side of the centre card; then one on the right hand side, and completing the configuration with a final card at the top,

"Right," said Brenna, leaning forward slightly. "Let me explain a little about what this represents. This card," she said pointing to the first, the one nearest me, "represents your essence, your true inner nature; that which drives you and motivates you. These two," she pointed at the two half way above it on

either side, "represent the recent past; an expression of what has happened to that essence, that motivating force inside you - the situations that have resulted from your attempts to seek fulfilment, expressing your inner nature in the material world. Is that clear, do you follow ?" asked Brenna, rather pointlessly I thought. I followed it well enough, given its psychological flavour.

"Yes, yes, I understand," I murmured, wondering what lay behind the cards. Their back covers were enigmatic but rather vibrant, I thought. I studied them as Brenna continued to instruct me as to their meaning.

"This card," she said, "represents the 'here and now', your present situation. This one," – pointing to the left, again half way above the centre card - "represents a likely future outcome. Both of these cards," - pointing to the adjacent card on the right side - "represent two possible future expressions which are material developments of the original inner essence, as represented by this card at the beginning. The last card represents a future culmination of the developments and changes ensuing from the first card; the essence and motivations of yourself. Is that clear ?"

"Yes, ahuh," I nodded, quietly, now intrigued by the cards and what portents they might betray.

"Just a minute," Brenna said, and rose moving to the cabinet. She put more incense on the burner and the enigmatic, subtle aroma filled the room again, earthy and fragrant. Then without asking, she replenished my glass.

I looked at the cards and contemplated my fate. The back of the cards were striking in themselves: a design of seven circles describing a hexagon; the background being a rich red, with black lines connecting each of the circles in definitive symmetry. Each sphere was of a different hue. The middle sphere I was initially struck with, as it was flames of orange and gold intertwined. Sphere number one was blue wreathed silver. Sphere number two - yellow interspersed with black, number three was green and white, shadowy. Above the middle most sphere, on the left, was one of strident red and blue; on the right, a circle of rich violet and crimson, and the topmost circle was indigo and purple. Interconnections of black bridges cutting across the scarlet background interspersed in regular expression with the seven vibrant spheres. I noticed these details. I felt drawn to notice them.

I suddenly had a sense of destiny. A sense that this - my meeting with Brenna - would reveal much to me, help me reach a decision, effect me in a way I had never anticipated.

Here, was the subtle, sharp tang of incense, the poignant, yearning appeal of the pipes, the sigh of the sea, the call of sea gulls, the crackling of the fire; the warmth of honey-mead in my blood which had brought a flush to my cheeks. And the cards before me, mysterious – sinister...

The abstract symbol upon the wall-hanging weaved its charm of mystery: briefly, I wondered what it might mean, but my attentions were concentrated on what was about to unfold for me beneath the striking covers of the cards. Red and black - anarchy, 'sin', Satan: my mind made the connections fleetingly, objectively. Such associations did not concern me at that moment. I somehow knew the cards held a power. I tried to retreat to the arena of logic telling myself not to be ridiculous. It wouldn't necessarily be a proper picture of the future. No one could know what lay in the future. But the logic of that argument had no power against what I sensed on an intuitive, only fleetingly conscious level.

No - that my destiny would be revealed to me, was too corny to be true. Yet I felt on the verge of something - a peculiar rising sense of excitement cast its spell upon me.

"Now Joanna Fox, turn each card over starting here, then this, then here; here: here; here," she said, describing a path across the cards, "and so on until the last," she finished, watching me intently now. I felt slightly uncomfortable, yet eager. Her scrutiny infected me.

I turned the first card and an image sprang out at me. At the centre of a swirl of turquoise and darkness, the white curvaceous naked form of a woman accosted my senses. She held a dark sphere in one hand, a chain and strange pendant clasped to her breast with the other. From her female sex, blood dripped to form an abstract pattern in the waterfall rush flowing from the apex of her thighs. There were catherine wheels of energy; a crystal tetrahedron in one corner; a scorpion, its sting aloft in another corner, and two red-pink gorgeous birds at the topmost corner. All were interwoven through the pattern of swirling lines, to

suggest a wildness, a passion. Something strong. The eyes of the image haunted me: mystical, almost ruthless.

I stared and stared at the card, too engrossed with the details in the picture and what it might suggest to move on. *High Priestess* were the words at the bottom of the card.

"And the next," said Brenna softly.

I turned the card on the left side and above the first one. It was the figure of an old woman, whose face had no features; just a blank spread of skin above her black shadowed outline. She sat by a waterwheel. In front of the garden where she sat the ground was parched and withered; dying. But behind her, the garden began to grow more and more verdant as it receded into the distance. I looked at the bottom of the card. *Satiety*, it said. Aye, well enough I thought: I had sated many desires, and in doing so had revealed a growing awareness that my lifestyle had become a cage to me. *Satiety*, I pondered, moving to the next card on the right.

I looked at Brenna but her eyes, her posture betrayed nothing, except a further impression of contained intentness. I turned over the card. It was the picture of a naked man sitting on a chair in a bare room, apparently sobbing, one hand clutching his forehead, the other trailing a rose to the floor, its petals littering the floor ruinously. In the background, open doorways through which arms stretched, failing to connect with anything - a continual perpetuation of empty gestures clutching at nothing. *Futility*, was the title of the card; futility. Its eerie accuracy of my growing understanding of my circumstances stirred me, giving me Goosepimples: how accurate a betrayal of my relationship with Mark, and my feelings towards work.

There was something else to life I was sure. It glared me in the face. Those hands outstretched, always missing the accomplishment of true contact - always embracing emptiness. Now I recognised with a jolt how far apart we had grown, he and I; how the charge between us had faded so that the friendly ease between us had become too comfortable, too much of a soporific. I felt confined, suffocated by it. The difficulties had started when I joined the group. I'd always had a good voice and a musical inclination, and I could play the guitar with a certain amount of skill. So, the group served as a lively, inspiring diversion from

the growing discontent symptomatic of the rest of my life. I had even begun to write my own songs - two of which the band had used and sung to audiences with much success. My music, my singing began to matter more to me than anything else. At least, I derived the most pleasure from it: all else paled beside it. On stage, I felt truly alive.

Since my musical catharsis I had moved progressively further away from Mark. The points of contact became fewer; we misunderstood one another, and we ceased to discuss things. Good man though he was, he had ceased to move me. The whole thing had grown stale. Futility, *Futility*. I felt a wrench of sadness, but also a resolution stirring inside me; plans, ideas beginning to form, vague and flitting.

I turned over the middle card. It was a dark cell, opened at the back to reveal the swirl of the cosmos in purple and blue and sparks of silver light. The image of a sphinx sat before the opening of the cosmos. The female face was held hauntingly to one side, with a space, a chasm behind the eyes - a chasm to a beyond. In the foreground, a chalice of liquid lay overturned. *Death*, I read the word at the bottom. *Death*, I saw with a jolt, and my nerves thrilled unpleasantly. I had an image of Mark crashing his car; myself in a fatal accident, my family, my mother claimed by the grim reaper. I pushed such thoughts away, telling myself not to be so irrational. *Death*. I felt a heaviness in the atmosphere, a sombre inflection; a further intentness. A foreboding mixed with hunger for revelation. I looked at the wall-hanging trying to cultivate objectivity - it intrigued me, that symbol.

Death, I thought and looked at Brenna, trying to clear any concern or fear from my eyes. *Death*. Brenna returned my gaze, again betraying little, as though wearing a mask of calm, the watchful alertness of her eyes remaining amidst the steadiness and stillness of her pose.

I turned over the card on the left side of the *Death* card and above it, to a degree. It was a dark card. Stormy clouds and sky with a break at one point to reveal a gap of blackness in the sky. In the foreground a German soldier stood resting on a cane, a face dark and intense. Behind him rose a hill. Before this was a stone circle lending an ancient presence to the card. It had a strange brooding feel to it ... I looked at the bottom and *Wyrd* was the word I saw. The picture disturbed me - an unknown quantity that yet attracted me. I was drawn to continue studying it

to try to place a meaning upon it, but meanings eluded me. I glanced up at Brenna: again, the still, composure, the inner intensity, veiled and honed.

I turned over the right side card equivalent to the last. The image leapt out at me. A sinister, darkly beautiful woman dressed in a black robe, clutching a dying soldier bandaged from a head wound. His forehead and mouth were bleeding. The woman held a dagger in her hand and the other described a grip of talons. Behind them geometric shapes burned to livid destruction; a holocaust unleashed. There was something ruthless yet compassionate about the woman's gaze. I looked at the foot of the card, again shocked, unsettled by the images revealed. *Aeon* the card read. *Aeon*, enigmatically. Goosepimples raced across my flesh, yet I suddenly felt hot too. I took off my cardigan and went to turn over the final, the ultimate card.

I glanced at Brenna and her eyes met my gaze. I looked away, my eyes drawn to the wall - hanging once more. At the time I didn't know why, although I sensed it was a talisman that held a particularly personal significance for me...

Brenna narrowed her eyes slightly, their keen light penetrating my own. I turned the last card over. It was a lush vibrant, violent card. A lithe beautiful naked woman sat in the middle. Her hair was an ebony cascade of wild curls down her back, and about her face. Her eyes held a dark power in their glance, and one hand betrayed claws capable of bloody violence. The image was weird, lurid, lush: a swan piercing its own breast so the blood ran, whilst three cygnets formed about it; a raven behind a tree in a night of purple and grey; a crystal shape; the suggestion of a womb-like entrance. The woman sat upon a heap of skulls, holding some stick or wand in her hand. With a start I saw in the middle of her chest, a tattoo: a sigil that matched the one on the wall-hanging. I gazed and gazed at the card, and then looked up, not at Brenna, but to reaffirm the replication of the wall-hanging's image with the one in the picture: a diamond shape with a line through the middle of it, something else inside the diamond. A shadowy suggestion of interiors within interiors. What was that symbol and what kind of meaning did it hold for me, I wondered? *Mistress of Earth* was the label on the card. *Mistress of Earth* - what could it mean?

Brenna maintained her exterior stillness, but was nodding her head ever so slightly, as if something, for her at least, was being affirmed. That symbol - what was its import?

With the tantalising, almost spooky sense of *rightness* contained in the last card, I had almost forgotten the rest of the layout. I resonated so completely with that image. I could not say why, exactly.

I sat back and waited for Brenna to speak, gazing now at the first card, *The High Priestess* – that swirl of wildness. Brenna leant forwards and touched that card.

"Now," she said, "this card represents the unconscious force within you, the essence of yourself. It suggests that you are drawn to the unknown; that your life will find true expression through the Esoteric. It represents hidden wisdom; a latent power to achieve things beyond a material level. There is that in you which aches to understand the invisible world, the world within - to change things. This is your driving force and motivation".

It struck a chord, that card. I always had a thirst for knowledge, a curiosity for the inexplicable. This had expressed itself through academia; my profession - although lately the knowledge I'd gained seemed mere intellectual, devoid of any true meaning. I nodded slowly, biting my lip as I did so - I liked what the card suggested. I waited as Brenna reached to point at the card on the left of the first.

"This *Satiety*, is an interesting card. It suggests, as is obvious, that your lusts and desires have been sated on one level; and it implies the kind of stasis, and complacency which follows. What used to be fulfilling now produces boredom, and dissatisfaction, This is on the left hand side which usually indicates a more negative or disturbing interpretation, than if the card had fallen on the right hand side; thus, my given diagnosis." She looked across at me, her eyes glistening with a degree of humour. She seemed to delight in turning my own terminology onto myself. But this was not done in an unkind way - indeed it was more the sharing of a mutual joke.

I looked at the *Satiety* card, and at the one adjacent to it, *Futility*. I pursed my lips and said nothing. Brenna touched the *Futility* card. "This really confirms what is expressed in the preceding card. It suggests a lack of connection with things that move you, that matter to you most. It suggests emptiness and lack of fulfilment on a deep level. But it is on the right hand side, which indicates a resolution, and ultimately favourable outcome to the situation." She scarcely looked at me for confirmation of her words. It was as if she knew their import and

could hear the gongs striking inside of me. Strange how those two cards completely summed up my recent past, merged to become conscious awareness of that present reflection. Eerie, eerie...

Brenna squinted her eyes slightly, looking at me with piercing intent. She reached to the middle card. *Death*. The word struck my psyche once more and I was conscious of a slight racing of the heart, an increase in tension.

"This card, *Death*," said Brenna, "reflects on your present situation. It indicates a reckoning; a stripping away of masks and images to get to the self, and a higher fulfilment of the essence beyond the constraints of the ego. In essence, a time of destruction in order to create the new - that is the implication".

Brenna looked at me. I was leaning forwards. With her words had come a sense of both relief and a strange release; confirmation of a decision that was becoming clear to me, as I breathed in my mystical surroundings. I'd feared - I had dared not think... yet now the card also whispered of new tomorrows, of stronger possibilities. It was the whisper of that, which compelled me rather than the implied the symbol, like placing a bet on the luck it could bring me. Rather than the implied destruction. That whisper of higher achievements ... I glanced up at the wall-hanging and connected with the symbol, like placing a bet on the luck it could bring me.

Again Brenna very slightly narrowed her eyes, and pointed to the strange brooding card of the German soldier, with the stone circle casting a charm upon the scene. In the corner of the image, the sky split to reveal a chasm - a nexion of blackness.

"*Wyrd*," said Brenna, "hmmm, *Wyrd*. This card usually means finding your purpose, your path in life. But it also suggests a destiny which is tied or linked to something greater than itself. Something you will be part of that is beyond you, on a material and spiritual level - yet it is part of you. A realisation of your purpose - a purpose which lies in the realm of the acausal, that invisible reflection of the material world, the causal. There will obviously be some amount of upheaval and turbulence implied in such a future - the near future - which is what this card represents. Do you understand what I am saying Joanna; do you follow?"

There was a flush on my cheeks. Brenna's words were lightly, logically spoken, but their enticed and thrilled me. In that moment, the past dropped away from me. I was already beyond it, free to achieve a more ultimate expression of myself - stepping from the dross of uniforms and masks I wore, towards something more numinous and unrestrained. What that was, I still couldn't quite conceive. I looked again at the sigil upon the wall-hanging, and my empathy towards it, grew. Perhaps I was effected by the sparse simplicity of my surrounds, the rustic elegance of comfort; the music, the incense, the fire - not least Brenna herself and the cruel yet fascinating cards. It all cast a spell which drew me to intensify my attentions on the symbol upon the wall.

Brenna leant to touch the card depicting fire and the darkly beautiful woman; she who was sinister, yet not devoid of compassion. She who wore a the look of cruel simplicity as she cradled the dying soldier. *Holocaust; war* ... but the word at the bottom was *Aeon*. Brenna lightly picked the card up, waving it up and down gently for a moment, holding it before me.

"Now this card is very interesting. Joanna Fox; very interesting indeed. *Aeon* is the practical expression of this adjacent card, *Wyrd*. It implies changes - changes on a large scale. It suggests a power to implement change, but contained within that is the necessity for those changes to occur inside, as well as outside yourself. It implies again, that it is in your destiny to effect change in the acausal realm as well as through practical manifestation on a causal level ... What this card suggests, Joanna, is a destiny which will have an effect on many lives. A destiny that by its very expression produces change. Again, this is linked to something greater than yourself - beyond your causal, material self if you like. Rather interesting don't you think Jo? Very interesting indeed."

"Very," I said, completely intrigued - fired, yet also confused. I couldn't imagine what could produce those changes. I couldn't imagine how I could get to that glowing picture of the future the cards seemed to hold up to me. A future that sounded challenging, expansive - something dark and glowing that I longed to touch, yet could not comprehend in words. I looked at Brenna who was looking at me with an expression of profound calm. I turned my attention once more to the wall-hanging.

"Before you tell me the meaning of the last card, would you mind if I asked you what that symbol stands for? I find it strangely compelling - what does it mean?" I asked, wholly intent upon what Brenna might reply. I thought the

symbol was in some way a key. I thought by understanding it, my destiny would be made clear.

"That is the sigil of **Baphomet**. She is a dark goddess from an old Tradition, who beheads her victims and enemies, and washes in a basin of their blood. She is a goddess of war and sacrifice. She represents the brutal necessity of Death on Life's claim. She that strips away in order to renew. She represents the wild brutal aspect of Nature which is necessary in order to fructify, and produce change. She is the darkest Goddess of all."

Brenna spoke softly and yet the words sprang into clarity in my mind. I was moved, half repelled, yet eager to embrace more of what might lie behind such a symbol. There a beautiful starkness behind Brenna's explanation and again, a real power. She was no pseudo-pagan; she was no mere eccentric. She was intelligent, composed, both blunt and subtle, intuitive and incisive. A powerful woman. This made her words, her Baphomet symbol, a potent force which could not easily be dismissed. In truth, I did not want the force dismissed; rather I ran to embrace it, to understand it - to integrate with it in order to achieve access to what lay beyond it. I wanted to touch that which moved inside of Brenna. I wanted it for myself. Something entirely foreign to my intellect, but which drew me, curiously, with a growing arousal of passion and intrigue.

Baphomet I thought and looked into Brenna's grey-green eyes, observing once more with an avid intensity I could barely contain, the scar traced down her cheek, giving her both a savage and exotic air. Brenna had relaxed slightly. Her manner was subtly more open, more confidential. I felt almost a warmth and intimacy between us. I, in my early thirties, she towards twice my own age. Yet I knew this woman would change my life, irrevocably, drastically. I did not understand the 'ins and outs' of this situation, nor how it had come about. I did not know how or why it had but I did know Brenna would change my life: I knew and she knew. It was in the air between us, yet not through the medium of words, but by subliminal perceptions, intuitive inferences, subtleties acknowledged by both of us in answering subtlety.

I waited for Brenna's explanation of the final card. The vibrant, lush, bloody image of the cruel, raven-haired beauty sitting on a heap of skulls, the Baphomet sigil tattooed between her breasts: *Mistress of Earth*.

"*Mistress of Earth*," said Brenna, again inflecting lightness and ease in her tone which only seemed to further enhance the mystery and power of the card. "Mistress of Earth," she repeated, "suggests someone who is control of her life and destiny on all levels. Someone who has attained ascendancy over the internal and external circumstances surrounding her. Someone who is able to flow with the forces of Nature and attain empathy with those things on many levels. Someone who has achieved a full expression of her inner essence with results on both a practical and acausal level. Someone in touch with the power inside themselves and able to manipulate their environment to achieve their own designs. This card, you see is an expression of the original card at the start, *High Priestess*."

This 'Mistress of Earth' is a future manifestation of that inner driving force; something which has yet to attain its full expression - but the cards throw a positive light on that development, don't they? Don't they now Joanna Fox?" She finished with an alluring intonation.

How strange to me was the future before me, yet how intriguing - how it flared within me! For I was conscious that I was close to what I had been struck by as soon as I witnessed Brenna standing by the fire: a breath of the unknown. But a breath that was vital, real, tangible. I saw it about me in Brenna's home, but most of all in Brenna herself; by her bearing, by that stillness, that wisdom, that inner flame.

I relaxed back into the couch. Brenna settled herself back and looked at me over the edge of her glass. "Well, Joanna Fox, what do you think of your future now?"

"I hardly know what to say," I responded. "These two cards are chillingly accurate," I said pointing to the *Satiety* and *Futility* cards, "but as to the future: it's a total enigma to me, a total revelation - a mystery that intrigues me a great deal."

"That is as it should be Joanna Fox. Presently your life is a mess; things have grown stale - you are looking for a means of transformation, you want to change it all, but lack the impetus to do so. That is plain enough, is it not?"

"Yes," I readily agreed. But move forward to what? How? Risk the security of my job? In my mind I had already dispensed with Mark - now my job, my means of subsistence, was the barrier I wanted destroyed. Could I exist on writing papers, or turn to journalism, where I could give credence to newer developments in Psychology, such as 'Psychosynthesis', which recognised the role of spirit - a holistic view of human nature I adhered to fiercely, yet which found no practical manifestation through the conventional channels of the job. The system inhibited such developments. I had not been trained as a journalist, but I could become a free-lance writer, I already had one article printed regarding the male and female stereotypes - how such one-dimensional conditioning produces all kinds of neuroses and repressions which lead to multi-strata psychiatric difficulties. I went on to detail the possible causes for the latent misogyny that seemed to exist in most men. It had been an interesting and challenging project. The article was enthusiastically received and the paper, which was a broad sheet Sunday paper, had suggested regular contributions. I had deliberated and here I was still, deliberating.

And yet, I had now begun to make my decisions. Prior to this and for a long time, I had felt as though I had been wading through porridge; a porridge of pointlessly 'nice' considerations, and a growing self-deception around the whole premise of my life. Yet now everything that had been constricted was loosening, promising to work free like the deluge from a live volcano. A great momentous change was upon me and I couldn't quite believe it was happening.

I would step from the old life, and step from it quickly, ruthlessly and with business-like precision. Cut the connections, create a new place, a new style of living. Through writing articles and my music, I would be Mistress of my own life; Mistress of myself, beholden to nobody but myself for a change. At least it was one plan. There were others that filtered through my mind, But I felt there was more to it than that. The Baphomet symbol, the magick behind it, was also part of my destiny. I would change my life; I had the courage and the means to do so, but I knew also Brenna would have a hand in that. I knew she would be a bridge to a further understanding of the force within. Brenna observed my inner reflections, waiting. What now ? I thought.

"So what do you propose to do with this knowledge and your present Situation, Joanna Fox?" Brenna's storm-green eyes glinted at me with some fore-knowledge that placed her on a lofty level in an arena I knew nothing about, but which I longed to entrance - whatever it was.

"It fascinates me,' I said, responding finally to her question amidst my reveries. "But there is much I do not understand, particularly with regard to Baphomet. Where does she come from? Which culture? Which tradition'?"

"An old Tradition - our ancestral root," said Brenna, with quite deliberate brevity I thought.

"Where does the Tradition come from? What is it, this Tradition?" I asked, barely able to contain my frustration with Brenna's elusive insistence.

"Something spawned during the civilisation of Albion, some five thousand years before the birth of the bible's putrid christ; spawned through the architects of Stonehenge and Calanais, those worshippers of the sun and watchers of the stars ... It is, obviously, an ancient Tradition."

"But what does it stand for? What kind of Tradition is it?" I continued, still dissatisfied with Brenna's responses.

"An essentially Pagan one, from a time when there existed communion with the stars and Nature in a way that is still fathomless to this present, purblind society. Do not say you do not know of the race - your ancestors - who created the stone-circles, and what this knowledge now intimates, within the context of this whole fortuitous evening." Brenna's face had suddenly become intense in a way that thrilled my sensitivities. The scar on her cheek was lit to a lurid degree by the dancing flames, inducing an almost hypnotic effect. But then Brenna's whole presence was hypnotic.

Of course I knew of the stone-circle period, but it had not struck such a knell of significance as on the note of the moment. Somehow there was poetry in her words and it inspired me; again some deep primal connection was thrummed. Again I was struck to reflection, and there followed a short spell of silence, with Brenna, all the while in easy composure, waiting.

When I could find my voice, I replied: "Yes, I've been aware of all that, but what little history that now exists, seemed something obscure and unimportant - as far as the Present is concerned. But I don't know; I don't know anything any more... It seems what is important is that which lies behind that connection, or beside it if you will. Surely, the stone-circle time is but a beginning ... It would be interesting to know if there are any other links in the chain. Would you tell me more about the Baphomet Tradition, and how you came to learn of it?"

"Now, now Joanna Fox," Brenna's eyes twinkled with their almost unearthly vivid green light. "What would you like, some enlightening reading matter, or my life story?"

I flushed and laughed as I stammered, "Well both actually... but I would particularly like to hear..."

"About myself?" quizzed Brenna. "My own path in life?" She raised her eye brows, smiling archly. "Now then Joanna, my friend; it's getting late and I don't know about you, but I am starting to feel a little tired. I usually retire earlier than this, but exceptional circumstances have altered my routine tonight. I've enjoyed your company Joanna, but you must excuse me now for chivvying you off to bed, for tomorrow you also have a long walk ahead of you, do you not?"

I nodded, disappointment lodged in my throat. I burned with a desire to know more. I did not want to go to bed, but courtesy bade me contain myself. However, as Brenna moved to place a fireguard before the fire, she continued: "I'll tell you what I'll do," she said, as if reading my disappointment. "I'll give you some reading matter and you can take my phone number. Perhaps while you're down here you will get chance to call again. I'd be pleased to renew our acquaintance; as I've said, I've enjoyed our evening. Besides it's interesting being in the company of one who is a changer of the face of fortune!" Her tone was disarmingly light and warm.

"Oh well, I just want to say thank you. It's been incredibly good of you and entirely fascinating. I will come and see you again - once I've consulted with my friend Margaret, who I'll be staying with." My words tumbled out, eager to grasp the connection.

"Do, and at your leisure, my dear. You will be welcome whenever - I give my assurance." The sincere elegance of her tone humbled me.

I stood around, shuffled my feet, and half shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know what to say..." I began, but Brenna held up her hand and smiled me into silence. She moved across the room and blew the candle out. She went to the back of the room, and I followed her.

"I'll just dig something out for you now," she said bending to a shelf on the bookcase, a strand of grey hair escaping across her cheek which she brushed back, as she reached for two large bound volumes. The covers were dark, non-descript and the titles I could not read - for there were none.

"Have a look at these when you've the time - see what you think. Come back to me with any questions or responses you care to offer, when conducive. It's entirely up to you. Don't consider anything too much though now, specially not on three glasses of mead!" She quipped.

I flashed her a smile, as she turned the music system off and motioned me the way forward, turning the lights off. Within the darkness, she carried a small oil lamp before her to light the way.

"Fetch your rucksack and I'll show you your room," said Brenna indicating the kitchen door by which I had left my belongings, as we stood in the passage way that heralded the stairs. I fetched my rucksack and Brenna led the way up. I did not even question the lack of use of mains lighting. The oil lamp seemed somehow so fitting, so entirely appropriate after such an extraordinary evening. There was a door next to the bathroom which she opened and led me into a simple tasteful haven. She turned on the bedside light. A bed with a wooden bedstead was revealed. A patchwork quilt of creams, reds, pinks and deep blue. A big dark wooden chest was against one wall, looking as if it had arrived fresh from a pirate's cavern. A bedside tressal with a lamp upon it: I noticed the lampshade was made of some creamy parchment with dried, pressed flowers worked upon it somehow. It was exquisite. "It's lovely," I said, "how charming." Brenna smiled appreciatively in response.

"You can see the bathroom next door," she said, "use it as you need or want. You're quite welcome to have a bath in the morning if you wish. I'm usually out and about early, so you may not come across me - don't wait around for me, will you? As for breakfast: I'll leave everything out for you to help yourself. I'm a great believer in breakfast - it must be done. But as I've said, don't expect to see me in the morning, for I like to embrace the dew of dawn, and probably won't return till much later." She held the light higher, and stood upright a little more as if in salutation.

"So Joanna Fox, well met and good night. I hope our paths will cross again, and in the not too distant future."

"Oh most certainly," I agreed, conscious of the inadequacy of words.

"Good night then:" Brenna whispered, withdrawing, the pool of light spotlighting her movement across the dark landing til she opened a door across from my room, on the opposite side of the stairs, and disappeared behind it. I stared after her for a while, reliving all of it in one resounding surge. Still stunned, I performed my ablutions and fetched a glass of water. I undressed and got into bed but I still did not feel tired; rather, too charged up to sleep, despite my long and arduous day. I reached for the first volume she had given me to read. Regardless of the time, I turned the cover. The words that greeted me, dripped darkly down into my mind like spreading pools of blood, and just as potent:

The Black Book of Satan



I sit on this hillside, with only the rocks and the trees below as my companions. The night is clear; the moon a full geometric potency above me. The wind denudes my face, sharpens my sense of timelessness. For two and a half months I have been alone, in this terrain, in this wilderness, without human contact, without material distractions and entertainments. Tonight the moon's luminous presence drew me to recall that first meeting with Brenna - raven-made, I learned the name meant: an appropriate name for one such as she.

I am not what I was. Oh no: I am much more, much less than ever I imagined I could be. I sit with the galaxy aglow above me, embracing this silvered darkness, the star-filled ecstasy of outer space. I feel clothed in cosmic tides, part of the force which flows from before, from beyond. There is only this numinous night and the spark within me which reflects that numinosity.

I think of those tarot cards; how shocking, lurid, and fascinating they seemed - how little I knew of my future then. Now my destiny has become clear to me. These months I have spent alone have bridged a gap in my consciousness. I know my role, my path, will take me further still, to attain an ultimate understanding of the *sinister* ... That is my way, and I know I am to be heir of that Tradition, as Brenna was before me. My crystal has revealed images, pictures to me. Magickal energies fructify my awareness and the invisible, acausal world is become an imprint on my soul; a stretch to master my universe.

I sit here on this hilltop beneath the perfect moon and the incandescent stars with the wind buffeting my cheeks and chilling my hands, and think of that first meeting - of my naivety, trapped as I was within the conditioning and morality I'd been subjected to. I think of that and I smile. I smile in this dark, lonely night and I no longer feel alone. I flow with Nature's expressions, I listen to her silence and thus have I come to know her, a little.

Like an autumn tree, stripped bare by the winter wind, so did I become, before the green buds of spring made their appearance. So has it continued, this seasonal transition, this growth of blossoming and destruction and so shall it still do. That is the essence of my life.

I have touched profundities: a goddess within me has arisen. I smile – I smile in this stillness as I remember what I was, and what I shall be. I smile and raise my hands to the moon in acknowledgement of an awful bond. I smile.

Whilst single raven
all ebony-gloss
and clever eye
and crafted beak so jet
lifts its shape

to coast another settling place
on the rock face
before the crashing waves

A gift of obsidian velvet
for all our stormy skies.

^^^^^^

Annia Ashlet,
Seven Stones Coven (ONA)
1996eh



Self-Initiation to Satanism

Self-Initiation from the Codex Saerus

Two rituals will be given - one for an indoor location, and one for an outdoor one. Choose the one you feel is most suitable for you.

I - Indoor

Set aside an area for the performance of the ritual and in this erect an altar and cover it with a black cloth. (The altar may be a table,). Obtain some black candles, some candleholders, some hazel incense, a quartz crystal or crystals. You will also need two small squares of parchment (or expensive woven paper), a quill type pen, a sharp knife, some sea salt, a handful of graveyard earth (obtained on a night of the new moon) and a chalice which you should fill with wine. All of these items should be placed on the altar.

Should you wish, you may also obtain a black robe of suitable design. If not, you should dress all in black for the ritual.

An hour before sunset, enter your Temple area, face east and chant the Sanctus Satanas twice. Then say, loudly,

To you, Satan, Prince of Darkness and Lord of the Earth,

I dedicate this Temple: let it become, like my body,

A vessel for your power and an expression of your glory!

Then vibrate 'Agios o Satanas' nine times. After this, take up the salt and sprinkle it over the altar and around the room, saying:

With this salt I seal the power of Satan in!

Take the earth and cast it likewise, saying:

***With this earth I dedicate my Temple. Satanas - venire!
Satanas venire! Agios 0 Baphomet! I am god imbued with
your glory!***

Then light the candles on the altar, burn plentiful incense and leave the Temple. Take a bath, and then return to the Temple.

Once in the Temple, do the 'Sinister Blessing' (see Appendix), then facing the altar, lightly prick your left forefinger with the knife. With the blood and using the pen inscribe on one parchment the Occult name you have chosen (see Appendix III for some suggestions regarding names). On the other inscribe an inverted pentagram. Hold both parchments up to the East saying:

With my blood I dedicate the Temple of my life!

Then turn counter sunwise three times, saying:

I (state the Occult name you have chosen) am here to begin my sinister quest! Prince of Darkness, hear my oath! Baphomet, Mistress of Earth, hear me! Hear me, you Dark Gods waiting beyond the Abyss!

Burn the parchments in the candles. (Note: it is often more practical to fill a vessel with spirit and place the parchments in this and then set the spirit alight. However if you have chosen woven paper, this method will not be necessary.) As they burn, say:

Satan, may your power mingle with mine as my blood now mingles with fire!

Take up the chalice, raise it to the East, saying:

With this drink I seal my oath. I am yours and shall do works to the glory of your name!

Drain the chalice, extinguish the candles and then depart from the Temple. The Initiation is then complete.



II - Outdoor

Find a suitable outdoor area. It should be near a stream, lake or river. The ritual should be conducted on the night of the full moon at a time half way between sunset and sunrise.

You will need: ambergris oil, black candles (in lanterns if possible), two squares of parchment or woven paper, sharp knife or silver pen, quill-type pen, black robe or clothes. Chalice full of wine.

Begin the ritual by bathing naked in the stream, lake or river. After, rub the ambergris oil into the body, saying as you do '**Agios o Satan**'. Then change into the robe/clothes and proceed to where the candles etc have been lain out on the ground. Light the candles. Then facing East, conduct a Satanic Blessing (see Appendix). After, chant the Sanctus Satanas.

Then prick your left forefinger with the knife/pin and inscribe one parchment with your chosen Occult name. Inscribe an inverted pentagram on the other. Hold both parchments up to the East, saying: 'With my blood I dedicate the Temple of my life.'

Then turn counter sunwise and three times saying:

'I (state your Occult name) am here to begin my sinister quest. Prince of Darkness, hear me! Hear me, you Dark Gods waiting beyond the Abyss.'

Burn the parchments in the candles. (If parchment, use the method given in I above.) As they burn, say:

'Satan, may your power mingle with mine as my blood now mingles with fire!'

Take up the chalice and say:

'With this drink I seal my oath. I am yours and shall do works to the glory of your name.'

Drain the chalice, extinguish the candles, collect all the items you have used and depart from the area. The Initiation is then complete.

Editor of this manuscript Hagur after having pronounced the words of dedication to Satanas (Satanic Philosophy), the pledge was immediately responded by one thunder break in winter at a most unexpected time. The next day I met a friend living the neighbourhood said, "Did you hear that thunder break last night?" (It was after midnight.)

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